



Autumn 2020

### **From the Minister**

by Craig Thompson

We're much accustomed now to catchphrase-observations that we are living in 'extraordinary times', 'unprecedented times', 'strange times' and any number of other ways of speaking about the impact of health-crisis restrictions on what was, a couple of months ago, the 'normal' for most of us.

There has also doubtless been much insightful comment offered around the place as to what we've been experiencing, and there will also likely be much retrospective analysis as we slowly come out of isolation mode and enter into another catchphrase-laden time – the 'new normal'.

For all of this apparent newness about our recent experience, we once knew that 'there is nothing new under the sun'. Presumably the truth about our times lies somewhere between this ancient clarity and our present uncertain attempts to articulate what feels so new in what is going on about us.

Part of Qohelet's 'nothing new' is that we will only fleetingly see what recent experience means, if we come to see at all. It will change us, of course, but in the way that sunburn teaches us to respect the sun, or a motor accident teaches us that we don't know what's around the corner – even as we continue to spend too long in the sun, and plan as if our tomorrows were our own to determine.

Among the new things we might not take to heart is that what was the old normal for many people has been, for a short while, the new normal for most people – isolation, dependency, unemployment, debt, loneliness in the city. Something of the life of the poor and the ignored among us has become the life of most of us, for a while.

Most of us will get over it, of course, but that will be part of the deeper tragedy of our times: that we claim them as ours and don't often see them as God's own – pregnant with opportunity to see others, to give and to love.

Where, then, we have learned a little about that opportunity in reaching out to support those most affected by the impact of the virus, let us commit to maintain the rage of love and concern for each other as 'normal' returns. For normal wasn't ever really good enough, but it might yet be better.

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## **News from Church Council**

by Tim O'Connor, Chair of Church Council

- The pattern of our congregational life continued as usual in the early months of this year, but with the start of social restrictions, Craig led the first of the recorded worship services on Sunday 29 March, which have continued since. Rod has assisted in producing the recordings, in which Donald has played music on harpsichord, and the voices of a weekly scripture reader and cantor have been heard.
- Needless to say, the Congregation's calendar of events has been affected. The AGM of the Congregation scheduled for 29 March has been postponed indefinitely, and we have had to forgo the annual service and congregational lunch to celebrate Mark the Evangelist Day. However the Lenten studies were able to continue online.
- Church Council held its first monthly meeting by video conferencing on 2 April, which followed a special meeting on 19 March. These went smoothly despite the absence of refreshments and each other's gathered bodily presence!
- Although the election of elders could not proceed due to the postponed AGM, we invited Rosemary Wearing, who had been nominated for election as an elder, to join Church Council as a visitor. At our April meeting we received the resignations as elders of Benita Champion, Andrew Gador-Whyte and Gus MacAulay who were not available for a further term of eldership. Benita, Callum and Ambrose welcomed the birth of Edith Maeve on 24 March; Andrew moved to Geelong for a new medical position; and Gus, Jess and their children have been living in South Gippsland since last year. Gus continued to attend worship and Church Council meetings when he could. He contributed as an elder for nine years and as a member of the Finance and Property Committee. We thank Gus, Benita and Andrew warmly for their service.
- Following the changes in membership of Church Council, the elders' pastoral lists have been revised. Elders have contacted members in their pastoral care to let them know of changes.
- At its 5 March meeting Church Council agreed to consider with the Congregation at the AGM its decision that the Mark the Evangelist Futures Project Option 5a+ to build following either a 2- or 8-lot subdivision of the Congregation's North Melbourne site was not feasible, due to projected financial outcomes and anticipated risks. We decided also to present to the Congregation our conclusion that a further option involving partial sale and the renovation and development of Union Memorial Church was not worthy of further examination. And we also wished to advise the Congregation that the sensitivity analysis undertaken in relation to two key project assumptions (reduced building size and allocation to Hotham Mission) provided little encouragement for a sufficiently positive financial and practical outcome by modifying Option 5a+. The MTEFP Update for consideration at the AGM has been uploaded to the Mark the Evangelist website ([marktheevangelist.unitingchurch.org.au/mtefp/](http://marktheevangelist.unitingchurch.org.au/mtefp/)) for Congregational consideration in advance of the AGM to be held when gatherings are again possible.

*Comments, queries and suggestions are invited by the Church Council: Gaye Champion (Chair of Hotham Mission), Rod Mummery (Elder and Treasurer), Tim O'Connor (Elder and Chair), David Radcliffe (Elder), Craig Thompson (Minister), Rosemary Wearing (Visitor) and Alan Wilkinson (MTEFP Coordinator).*

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## **From the Editorial Team – "Time and Distance"**

by Suzanne Yanko

First, thanks to Craig and to Tim for their ongoing support and input in these difficult times.

As you might expect, two of our contributors specifically write about "the Virus" and its effects but from very different angles. For example, who can ever forget Vicki's "Zooming

Ladies"? And the emails from Zhodi and Marlene show that we are not the only people experiencing hardship worldwide.

As so often happens, the theme "Time and Distance" (or "separation") was beginning to suggest itself. The circumstances leading to the current situation of Palestine and Israel (written by Heather) expressed a poignant and potent relevance to our Theme, and then came Bruce! With his borrowing from Bach, he delivered the powerful line "God's time is the right time". Suddenly, we had our Theme confirmed and surprisingly hope was articulated where it had been present in the other contributions as well.

We would like to thank all our contributors for their thoughtful words; and as always there is plenty to think about in this Issue of your Newsletter.

"We", because we are a team.

This month our producer, Rod Mummery, had, in addition to the 100 things he does for the church on a regular basis, had a procedure at the Epworth Hospital several weeks ago. So we give extra thanks to him for getting this Newsletter into shape and making it look good. Rod, you are a star!

Rosemary, our invaluable editorial assistant, did so much more than just sub-edit, negotiating with writers and their efforts illuminating much for the Editor. Thank you and bless you, Rosemary.

I trust you will enjoy reading this Newsletter as much as we have.

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## **Ladies Zoom**

by Vicki Radcliffe

They say necessity is the mother of invention. Surely one of the most striking responses to the necessity for people to remain largely at home and not attend gatherings during the Covid-19 pandemic has been the exponential increase in the use of the online meeting software, Zoom. Indeed, many people are becoming "zoomed out" after just a month of working from home with endless online meetings.

On the other hand, this technology has proven to be invaluable for those who have felt isolated at home and are missing the opportunity to meet and to chat. A group of women (ladies) from the congregation of Mark the Evangelist have embraced this technology enthusiastically, making it their own. Being able to have our usual book group, albeit virtually, as well as being able to share our news, the good and the troubling, to express our anxieties and exchange fun stories in these strange and unusual times has been a tremendous blessing, even life changing.

Zoom was adopted early on by our Church Council for business meetings and later used for a Lenten Study group that was forced to switch from meeting in the round to meeting in 'gallery view' online. A serendipitous by-product of this usage was that households in the congregation became exposed to the potential of Zoom to host gatherings. In late March, our monthly book group, most of whose members are from the church, decided to experiment



with Zoom for their meeting in early April. We were amazed at how well it worked for the book discussions and the relative ease with which we were able to get on top of the technology. The biggest revelation was simply the fact that we could all 'be' together, to 'see' and to 'hear' each other in a surprisingly natural way.

These social, non-book discussion meetings have continued each week since and we are in the process of expanding the meetings beyond the book group and to set up a Zoom group to enable many more of the ladies from Mark the Evangelist to meet up. We see this as a vital way to stay in touch and to care for each other during this period of enforced home stay.

Gathering in this way is especially valuable for those amongst us who are vulnerable and would need to remain in self-imposed isolation due to existing health conditions, even if the current restrictions are eased in coming months. Zoom is fast becoming part of everyday family life. I have recently introduced my 90-year-old mother to Zoom so she was able to join family members from both sides to celebrate the first birthday of our grandson, Leon, who lives in West Footscray. We all hope that his second birthday will be able to be celebrated, in person, without social distancing.

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## **Beacon of Hope**

### *Education Under Occupation: the Work of Bethlehem University in the Holy Land*

Report of a public gathering sponsored by UCA Congregation of Mark the Evangelist, North Melbourne & Wesley Church, Melbourne in collaboration with the Palestine Israel Ecumenical Network,  
by Heather R. Mathew

Hope must be distinguished from optimism, Brother Peter reminded his large and attentive audience at Wesley Church on 24th February. Solidarity with the international community is important in keeping that hope alive for students at Bethlehem University.

Brother Peter sketched the context within which Bethlehem University operates using three maps: the 1947 map showed the UN partition plan dividing historic Palestine into an Arab state (45%) and a Jewish state (55%). In 1948, further losses left Palestine with 22%, then with the war of 1967 Israel occupied this remaining land, creating another wave of refugees. The 1967 map displayed the extent of the occupation and illegal placement of Israeli settlements, culminating in the situation shown in the 2018 map with Israeli settlements scattered throughout the West Bank, puncturing land contiguity and rendering problematic the viability of a Palestinian state. And the world wonders why Palestinians should protest, Brother Peter commented. In addition, the Trump plan leaves just 3% of historic Palestine to the Palestinians. Then there is the issue of refugees: 5M Palestinians are classified as refugees by the UN. The conflict is not between Christians and Muslims, Brother Peter stated: the conflict is about human rights.

Movement is heavily restricted within Palestine and there are numerous physical barriers in place to effect this. Thus, students entering Bethlehem have challenges to get to the campus, and these can be very stressful. A trip that should take 15 minutes can take 1-2 hours. Living under military occupation can mean home invasion at 1am, as it did for a Bethlehem University employee. He was beaten in front of his family that included a seven-year-old child, jailed for three days then released. Mistaken identity. No apology. Not an uncommon event.

For Palestinians, to exist is to resist, Brother Peter says, and there is a responsibility to bear witness, to help students resist the restrictions without violence. Some students resist by climbing the wall, for example. Some young girls who were prevented from attending class, held their classes in the street, under the gaze of Israeli troops. Then by graduating, students can use their minds, not weapons, to challenge occupation, Brother Peter said.

The non-violent resistance negates passivity and helplessness; it is a movement towards faith, hope and love that can overcome darkness and hatred.

Bethlehem University seeks to enact the vision of John's Gospel (10:10) and offer a peaceful, safe and predictable environment with opportunities through which students can live life to the full. That calm, that 'oasis of peace' is palpable to the visitor.

Through the quality education it offers, Bethlehem University offers hope against the turmoil that exists outside. While unemployment is high (approximately 25% youth unemployed, higher for older people), the faculties of nursing and business equip students for employment, and its graduates are highly regarded. The Institute of Hotel Management & Tourism targets sources of employment in the growing pilgrimage and tourism sectors. Education, science and arts faculties complete the University's student options.

Video clip interviews with students were shown and gave impressive witness to the dimension that the University has added to their lives. Brother Peter spoke of one of the students who had asked him how she might go about collecting donations to send towards the bushfire relief fund here. I found this deeply moving.

In closing, Brother Peter emphasised that, while optimism for Israel/ Palestine is difficult, dramatic changes can often occur. Bethlehem University will continue to embrace hope and strive to keep that 'Beacon of hope' alive.

*To learn more about Bethlehem University or donate to its work, visit [www.bethlehem.edu](http://www.bethlehem.edu)*



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## **Messages from India in the midst of lockdown in Jorhat, India, spanning eleven years!**

*Excerpts from three emails from Zhodi, Marlene and Mima Angami who lived in one of Mark the Evangelist's Queensberry Street flats and worshipped at Mark the Evangelist during their stay in Melbourne, (2009-2011) while studying.*

### ***First email sent 24th March, 2020***

Just yesterday, we were looking at two pictures taken in Mark the Evangelist when a prayer was said for our safe return to India.

We are now in lockdown due to coronavirus and we don't know how long it will last. At the moment, we have been informed that it will be for 5 days but the government is monitoring the situation and it is likely that the number of days will be extended. Hope you are staying safe too.

Here is a photo of our family. We took it when Mima came home from Shillong during her Christmas break. The small girl is a daughter of a niece of Marlene. When we were in Tura, her mother passed away. And a year later, her father also passed away. So she lives with us now and we are taking care of her as her guardians.

Much love,  
Zhodi and Marlene



***Second email sent 29th April 29, 2020***

Here are a few details of our association with Mark the Evangelist.

We were associated with the church for three years, from 2009 to 2011. We came to Australia to do our PhD studies under the Melbourne College of Divinity, which is now known as the University of Divinity. Our recognised Teaching Institution was the United Faculty of Theology. We came to know about Mark the Evangelist through Marlene's thesis supervisor, Reverend Dr Gwen Ince.

We returned to India in December 2011. Since our return to India, we have been working in a theological college in Jorhat, Assam, known as the Eastern Theological College. We took a two years' break (2016-2018) from our college to help a theological college in Tura, Meghalaya, known as Harding Theological College. At present, Marlene is serving as an Associate Professor of Communication and Zhodi is an Associate Professor of New Testament and Dean of Postgraduate Studies at the Eastern Theological College. The college has 256 Bachelor of Divinity students, 73 Master of Theology students and 14 Doctoral research students. Additionally, we have distance theological programs offering a Bachelor of Christian Studies degree and a distance education program offering an MA degree in Holistic Child Development. Besides these, the college also runs a nursery school which we are upgrading this year. Our daughter Mima is pursuing her BA studies specializing in Geography in a college called St. Edmunds College, which is based in Shillong, Meghalaya. Our ward, Rangkambe who is with us in Jorhat, is starting her class IV this year.

Warm regards, Zhodi and Marlene

***Third email sent 30th April 2020***

Dear Rosemary, we wrote a reply to your email last night. Further we are pleased to share with you that Zhodi's PhD thesis has been rewritten and published in book form in 2017 by Bloomsbury T&T Clark, London, as Tribals, Empire and God: A Tribal Reading of the Birth of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel. He also wrote another book called The Making of the Bible and it was published by Christian Literature Centre, Guwahati, Assam in 2017. Similarly, Marlene has rewritten her PhD thesis and it has been published in 2019 by Christian World Imprints, Delhi, as As One: Telling Stories for Inclusive Worship. In the Acknowledgements of our books, the two which were essentially written when we were in Australia, we have briefly expressed our thanks to the Congregation of Mark the Evangelist and Hotham Mission.

Indeed we are thankful to you all at Mark the Evangelist for helping us in our life's journey.

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## On Having a Good Time in Pandemic Time

A therapeutic sermon for an imaginary congregation in a time of turmoil

by Bruce Barber, Easter 2020

Two texts:

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

*"The appointed time has grown short; from now on let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn **as though** they were not mourning, and those who rejoice **as though** they were not rejoicing, and those who buy **as though** they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world **as though** they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away."*

J.S. Bach: Cantata 106: "God's time is the best time of all"

Although a life-time might have witnessed hundreds of texts as occasion for the sweet turmoil of a preacher's Sunday morning, it is certain that one basic sermon will have been concealed in them all. If that be true, then everything hinges on getting that one right.

In the passage from his letter to the church in Corinth, Paul proposes for both preacher and potential hearers that the one thing needful for everyone is how to manage time. It is likely that most of us most of the time imagine that there are other more pressing problems than those which "time" proposes. Today, we find ourselves manifestly disabused of this assumption, given the pervading anxiety unloosed in these tumultuous days. For the first time in the lives of all of us, we are confronted by a global pandemic as the coronavirus spreads fear and panic across the world. "Time" now is everything, even to the radical question: Am I or my family likely to survive? What will time do to us? Will it kill us, or will it carry us safely across the chasm?

This potential finality of our time may well have eclipsed every other problem that to this point has claimed us, whether as a society or as individuals. It brings home to all of us the likelihood that time may well be the enemy of us all. We have witnessed how for some, and to the detriment of all, the possibility of any secure future requires a compulsion to raid supermarket shelves for more than a fair share of its basic products. An uncertain future, masquerading as a decisive and debilitating "now", appears to be the only time that matters.

We discover the scope of the forfeiture of the freedom of time, and how it might be reconfigured, in the Corinthian congregation to whom Paul is writing. It had lurched from one crisis to another because it, too, was confused about time. From being a people who previously knew only time's enchanting, even if problematic demands, their eyes had indeed been opened to the new reality of God's gift of true time in Jesus Christ. But they became so swept up into the experienced possibilities of this new time that some said: "We have everything here and now. We are already in heaven while we live on earth, therefore it doesn't matter what we do in the body". Others drew an opposite conclusion: "Because we are already in heaven, we are like the angels, and so we must deny the body". To this twofold confusion, Paul has to carry out a fight on both fronts: to both aberrations he proposes how we must live in our bodies in the face of the new time which has dawned. Furthermore, if it be true that the long-awaited Messiah has indeed come, even in this unexpected incognito, then the logic of the certainty of the inherited Jewish tradition of time's meaning is irrefutable: if the Messiah has come, then the end of all things must be at hand. That expectation anticipates the end as chronological consummation.

But when Paul writes that "the form of this world is passing away", he reconfigures what "the end" means. Jesus proclaimed as "the having come Christ", that is, as Messiah, establishes that from now on the world looks different. Announcing that "the form of this world is passing away" is now not tied to a chronological event that has not happened. It means that some have been wrong about what he meant by its passing away. As a

springboard from addressing the then-current ethical dilemmas with regard to sexuality and marriage posed by his Corinthian congregation, the world that Paul understands as "passing away" means to live now in the spirit of "as if not", that is, in a spirit of detachment.

Misunderstanding what Paul means in that this immediate end to world history did not happen, many down through the ages have dismissed this call to worldly detachment as simply impossible at best and inhuman at worst. Society has long been amused by the solitary street placard bearer proclaiming imminent doom. Who, then, would have imagined now the universal escalating sense of doom in our day as the fires and floods of climate change, not to speak of current pestilence, witness to a form of this world that is indeed passing away? If nothing else, the present fear brings home to all how the stuff of our life is inherently precarious. Individual bodies might be provisional, but inconceivably not a potential mass extinction.

In earlier times this precariousness sometimes, indeed often, was interpreted by Christians and others as implying that life in this world was only a shadow compared to a more real world beyond: "I'm but a stranger here, heaven is my home". Or that what happens to human bodies is not nearly as significant as what happens to their souls. But Paul's contrast is not this. Rather is it that the good news of Christ's word about time means that the activities of our world stand revealed in a new light. If the life of God has indeed already broken into the routines of daily life, then their long-standing human calculations and expectations have been upended.

In other words, what Paul is getting at is that it is not the intrinsic worth of anything that is the issue – it is the context in which we have it, the horizon from which we view it. That context, that horizon, is the lordship of Jesus Christ. What we regard as normal human activity – family life, working life, the range of human emotions, rejoicing or despairing – in short everything, is encompassed in this reorientation. The point is that nothing is withheld from us, but on one condition: "as if not". However paradoxical it may appear to be, "as if not" offers a genuine freedom for living in our time. If we knew how to bring this off, everything would look different – not merely our private worlds but, even more therapeutically, our public worlds as well.

They remain true for us even at this distance. Everything that happens to us, and for us, stands this side of the consummation of all things in the continuing presence of the Christ. To forsake that horizon is to lose everything, literally everything, even while we think that we have it. Conversely, to live from that horizon is to have everything in its fulness in such a way that we are not desolate when what we count dear to us is taken away – as in this life is always the case.

Politicians have won elections by their advocacy of the need for a renewal of time, inevitably incarnated in themselves. How much more, then, are Christians called with this word about true time to the most political revolution of all – simply because, as Bach so beautifully helps us to grasp:

"God's time is the best time of all".



Uniting Church in Australia  
The Congregation of Mark the Evangelist - North Melbourne