

28 March 2021 (*Palm Sunday*)

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

No long, meandering letter today. My words will be blunt and brief. No weirdo stories. No oblique 'messages'. I'm given to understand that this may disappoint some of you. But many of you will be relieved, I know.

The Session met last week. They decided that the Church building should stay closed for now.

They made this decision with heavy hearts. They looked at every facet of the issue. They held them up to the light and examined them. Some elders had asked for your input too. I witnessed them sifting the 'pros and cons'. They stared the problem in the face. They were the very opposite of negligent in their duty, I assure you.

We're all hungry for more information about the pandemic's progressive waves. We want to know the 'what, when, and where' of those viral variations and the vaccines designed to neutralise them. We want to know when it will all be over, too. Will life *ever* be 'normal' again?

In the meantime, we crave solid advice about how to cope and adapt. We want reassurance about which activities are truly safe, which are reckless and unsafe, and why. The information we have is not consistent.

Still, the largest difficulty we face is not a lack of coherent information, nor the many unanswerable questions, but how best to interpret the patchwork quilt sewn from the information we *do* have.

Government agencies and medical experts, deciphering the same information (but more of it, and with technical expertise), do not speak in one consistent voice. Neither do we. No group or institution can speak with solid certainty right now. *That's just how it is.*

Individuals who shout, "I know best, the rest are *fools*," do so atop an ideological soapbox. They give off a lot of heat, but not much light.

Easter Blues

So, here we are, staring down the tunnel of another Holy Week. For the second year in a row we will not gather in the sanctuary on Easter morning. That's sad. I won't say any more about it than that. Our sorrow is lucid enough.

I plan to send more material this week for you to use in your worship at home on Good Friday and Easter. That's my job. I know many of you have never used these services in the way I advised and intended. You haven't, as it were, done *your* job. If that's you, maybe the time to try is now.

Maybe you *have* tried, though, and it bores the hell out of you. Take it in smaller doses, then. Go slowly. I know, it's a lot of reading, especially if you don't like reading.

Presbyterian worship is top-heavy with *words* to the neglect of silence and our body's senses and emotions. Then when it does pander to our emotions and senses, it turns into *kitsch* instead. Ugh! Some huge ugly problems reveal themselves in Protestant worship, but I can't go into that here. I'm trying to be brief, remember?

So, try your very best. Then try again. Read the services slowly, out loud and with devotion. Ponder the words of scripture. Imagine the Biblical scene in the theatre of your own imagination. Put yourself there. Savour the sound and meaning of the prayers. If you don't mean them, then try *meaning* to mean them instead. But don't give up.

Don't expect fireworks and ecstasy, either. Realise, as well, that the experience of Christian Faith was never meant to be *only* about emotional thrills and coddling consolations. Any Faith worth its salt must make room for boredom and difficulty.

Faith doesn't fear life's 'dry periods', however unpleasant they are. And we *will* have dry periods. That's when it's most important *not* to give up. Promised Lands may be awaiting our arrival at the far end of our long trek through the desert. But not if we never make the journey in the first place. Not if we say, "This is boring" and never do it.

So, saying, "I didn't *feel* it. I didn't *get* anything from this so-called 'worship'" may really be a confession of failure on our part.

If so, the root of that failure may lie in a misconception we've had about worship all along. We may have believed worship ought to be a noisy carnival in which our egos are massaged, and we're entertained and moved and informed by people who are paid to do just that for us. And then we come away emotionally uplifted.

No. That's quite wrong. Believe me, I've nothing against emotional uplift. I love it as much as anyone. Like you, I could use some right now too.

But no. We only begin to get something *genuine* in worship once we're prepared to *give* something of ourselves in worship – the working of our minds, the offering of our hearts, and the effort of our wills.

True worship was never just a passive reception of *God's* self-offering to us; it's the vehicle for *our* self-offering to God. I dare you to try approaching worship as an offering you make to God instead of God's smorgasbord for you.

No one ever asks what hymn God wants to hear, do they? We should. The audience for worship is God first of all and most of all. *Not you*. There, I said it.

Most of us were never told this. We were coddled in the faith instead of being raised in it. We had to find this out on our own. Or not at all. I think that's why there are no 'young people' anymore. One reason, anyway.

Faith holds out the astonishing gift of God's grace, you see? It then exacts our very best efforts to absorb this gift. And effort involves discomfort and difficulty. How else, in Faith and in Life, could we assimilate *any* enormous gift and embed it in our lives? Only with effort. This is why Faith often asks us to carry a cross. Sometimes it doesn't even ask.

Why must Christian faith be like this? Why must it be so hard sometimes? Because life is like this. Life is hard sometimes.

Jesus walked a *via dolorosa* in Holy Week, the way of sorrow. But his whole life was a *via dolorosa*, wasn't it? Faith addresses life, the whole of life. It doesn't run away from difficulty to shield itself in the cocoon of fantasy, the distraction of cheap entertainment, and the false certainty of an ideology.

This shouldn't be news to us.

“When did we see you hungry, Lord?”

Because we haven't been able to have a 'Food Bank Sunday' for many months, Elmwood's cupboard is beginning to look like Old Mother Hubbard's.

Most of the food we've collected in the past has always gone to the central Food Bank. But Karen Russo, our heroic Office Administrator, has always kept some at the Church to offer hungry people who drop by, hoping for some food and a moment of friendship.

If you would like to help replenish the cupboard, or to send food on to the central Food Bank, then you'd be most welcome to do so. Here's a list of frequently desired items:

- canned meat and fish
- peanut butter

- crackers
- bathroom tissue
- canned soups and meals
- instant coffee and tea bags
- boxed cereal
- shampoo and soap
- toothpaste and toothbrushes

You can bring your offering to the side door, at the southwest corner of the Church, between 9 a.m. and noon from Monday to Thursday this week. Just ring the bell and someone will come to receive your gift.

So, it was a longish meander after all. But I'm not sorry. Anyway, I've done worse.

Yours in the faith,
Andrew