



Read Archbishop Justin's article for Premier Christianity magazine:

By the waters of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.” (Psalm 137:1, NRSV).

In exile, in a strange, unrecognisable land, the Israelites longed to return to the familiar home they knew and loved. They looked forward to the day they could go back to the land God had promised them.

How many of us have wept this past year as we remembered our normal lives, which now seem so distant? How many people have suffered loss, grief or the pain of separation?

But the Israelites also knew that, when they returned, things couldn't go back to 'normal'. They couldn't go on as they had been. The prophets had warned them of the greed, the lack of faithfulness, the sin that had led to their separation from God.

The way we were living was not working. We are not being faithful to God or one another when our societies are characterised by greed, cruelty and selfishness. Vices and false gods have too often dominated our vision, and we have built systems and structures that ignore the poor, turn away the stranger and do not help the orphan or the widow. The way we lived before the pandemic worked only for a select few.

Now, as we too look towards returning 'home', towards a future after Covid-19, we need to reimagine that future. We cannot build back, relying on the old inequalities and unfair structures, we must build forward – together. It is a choice; choose something new or just let the old re-establish. Not to choose is still a choice.

How are we going to rebuild a society that honours those we have lost, cherishes the most vulnerable and is faithful to the God who has guided us throughout the pandemic?

The past year has seen rising inequality. The pandemic has affected the poorest and most marginalised among us the most seriously. We have had to face up to legacies of injustice and entrenched division. Almost six out of ten people who died from Covid-19 last year had a disability. People from UK ethnic minority backgrounds have been disproportionately affected. It is a damning indictment on who we value as a society.

The light in the midst of the darkness over the past year has been those small hints of what a new society might look like; one characterised by neighbourly love, based in service and care for one another.

In 2018, I published a book called Reimagining Britain: Foundations for Hope (second edition updated and available now). We had seen a period of turmoil and division, from the financial crash of 2008 to the Brexit referendum. I saw it as an opportunity, akin to that of 1945, when a group of

people (many of whom, like Beveridge, Tawney and my predecessor William Temple, were Christians) came together in the ruins of the Second World War to reimagine the heart of the nation for a brighter common future.

Little did I know how seriously and thoroughly the routines of our lives, our long-held assumptions and even the very fabric of our society, were about to be torn down. The Covid-19 virus thrust us into an entirely new reality, where we no longer had the luxury of primarily identifying as left or right, leave or remain; we were all humans, in all of our frailty, fighting a global disease about which we knew very little.

But the opportunity still remains: when things are torn down, there is the chance to rebuild them in a way that looks more like the world God hopes for us.

Before we think about the future, we must acknowledge the past. Very few of us have been unscathed by grief and loss over the past year, in one way or another. Lament is a huge part of the biblical tradition: God is big enough to hear our anger and stand with us in our sorrow. In taking on our deepest despair and sin on the cross, he knows intimately what it is to suffer. We are never alone, never without what in the Old Testament is called a *goel*, a kinsman redeemer, to rescue us, purchase our future and secure God's purposes for us.

There is much to reflect on about sacrifice, loss and distance. It is only after the most profound desolation that there is victory. The cross offers hope.

That hope can blossom into a positive vision for our country, for a society that is deeply rooted in our heritage, our story and our values but that celebrates our diversity; one that is willing to be bold and take risks. With Jesus at the heart of our lives we are offered the chance of renewal – restored relationships with God and then one another, from our closest loved ones right through to our worst enemies.

At the heart of Christ's life and ministry is his final public prayer in John 17:21: "that they may all be one. As you, Father are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe you have sent me" (NRSV). We may be many individuals, many communities, many countries, but we are united under one holy kingdom, one word of God and one saviour.

The pandemic has confronted us with our deep interdependence. As we rebuild, we must think of the words of 1 Peter 2:5: "like living stones, let yourself be built into a spiritual house" (NRSV). Each of us is essential, none of us alone in the building of God's glory. If, in the power of the Spirit, we bear one another's weight, lift one another up and stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us, we will begin to build community.

We have seen the sparks of community throughout the pandemic. Neighbours have looked after each other, friends have checked in. New bonds have been created and the possibility of stronger communities glimpsed.

There will be no strong communities, however, without building good housing, which is the architecture of community. The National Housing Federation estimates that 8 million people live in unsuitable, unaffordable or insecure homes – and that number is likely to have increased during the pandemic. The last year has shown us how important our homes are to our flourishing. They need to be sustainable, safe, secure, sociable and satisfying. They must be truly affordable, not just affordable relative to market rates. To build the sort of housing we deserve will require sacrifice. It will require those of us who are strong to lift the burden off the poorest and most vulnerable in our society, who are bearing the brunt of this crisis. We will need to challenge our attitudes about NIMBYism, profit and our neighbours.

Good housing will enable families to flourish. Our families – in all their many different forms, shapes and sizes – are the places where we might experience our most profound happiness and comfort but also where we can experience deep grief and conflict. In Luke 15:11-32, the parable of the prodigal son tells the story of a family in all its complexity: a father who is principled but flexible. A son who has done wrong but is welcomed back. A brother who is told that he and his work are treasured but who feels wronged. There is no neat answer, any more than in our normal lives, but the idea that God only deals with ‘good’ people is challenged. In turn, we are challenged to see ourselves in each character. God sees and honours our families in all their flexibility, complexity and contingency.

The pandemic has made clear to us the importance of household care, including adult social care. We must have a social care system that honours the dignity of each person, recognises the gifts of those who need care and sees the value of the elderly. Nobody should have to fear the loneliness and isolation that all too often comes with ageing. The pandemic has also shone a spotlight on mental health, which needs to be treated just as seriously as physical health. People with mental health issues need to be welcomed in the community, able to access the treatment they need, accepted for who they are and not stigmatised or excluded.

Our healthcare system was one of the post-1945 innovations that spoke to the dignity and worth of every person. Covid-19 has shown us just how vital it is that we can all, regardless of wealth, access high-quality medical care and that we need to invest in the resources necessary to prevent disaster, not just react well to it.

In the parable of the sheep and goats, Jesus told those who fed him when he was hungry, welcomed him when he was a stranger, visited him when he was a prisoner and clothed him when he was naked that they would receive the kingdom of heaven. They were confused – when did we do those things for you, Lord? We all know the answer: “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40). Jesus summed up community in this parable. We serve every person, seeing in them the image of God.

Serving every person requires financial systems and economic structures that work for the common good, not just the elite. As we have seen foodbank use hit record highs and inequality exacerbated over the past year, we must fight for a system that enables the poorest among us to grow. Markets cannot be ‘free’ for only the most powerful; inequality leads to an asymmetry of power, which only leads to further inequality. Our

financial systems must leave space for compassion and generosity.

Our economy is bound up in our global relationships. Disease damages economies, causing instability and conflict. The first thing we must do is make sure everyone around the world has access to the vaccine, because it is living out Christ's call to love our neighbour when we protect one another and because no one is safe until everyone is safe. Living in a community means sharing risks and sharing resources.

Closer to home, living in community also means learning how to live together amidst disagreement. The past few years have seen divisions over Brexit and how to handle the pandemic. We face intergenerational divides and divisions between class, race and wealth. We will need to form a society that can hold together our many differences – not at the expense of justice, but hearing and valuing every person. At Lambeth Palace every Friday we pray the Coventry Litany of Reconciliation, recognising where division, jealousy and hatred can bloom in our own hearts and minds:

“The hatred which divides nation from nation, race from race, class from class, Father, forgive.”

We will also need an education system that prepares children for the unknown vistas of the future and equips them to deal with the moral questions that come alongside such complex and difficult issues. We will have to recognise different gifts and different types of intelligence, teach children to think rigorously for themselves and to challenge one another but, most of all, to maintain relationships across difference and conflict.

None of this will matter in a few generations if we do not tackle the next looming disaster, climate change, which is already affecting people around the world who are facing food scarcity, displacement and poverty. From the Garden of Eden, God appoints us as stewards of the earth. We need to urgently heed this call and look after our precious planet.

Living together, reimagining, reconciling and building towards a new vision requires great courage. As we look towards a 'new' normal, radically different from the way we used to live, we will have to have the imagination to turn all our old ideas of power, success and value on their heads.

Courage is difficult in such a time of uncertainty and death. Bishop Michael Beasley, chair of the Anglican Health Network spoke about fear in relation to the pandemic: “What churches identified was that they could be really helpful in building trust and hope within that situation and countering fear.”

Faith is the opposite of fear. It is trust, hope and expectation of better things to come. As Christians, we are called to be a people who show what being faithful, rather than fearful, might look like in the world.

For every nation on the planet, this is a time of extraordinary change. Technological developments that we expected within a decade have

happened in six months. These changes will be revolutionary for most of us. They'll change the way we live, work and learn. With change comes tension between the old and new. Both are essential. We need to draw on and respect our past but not get stuck in it. We need to look boldly and courageously to the world ahead.

We will need to be anchored in constant, flexible values and our deep faith in the Lord. We have faced turmoil before and come out of it stronger – and by the grace of God, we'll do it again – but it cannot happen by accident. This is a moment of choice. God calls for a holy Church and a prophetic voice so that there may be the proclamation of the good news of Jesus and the turning of many to his saving love. Not to choose renewal is to choose the old ways.

Above all, look for signs of God at work in the world and get stuck in. There are hints of hope everywhere, signals of God's love for us. If Christians are there – where God is – restoring relationships, assuring love and working towards justice, mercy and peace, we might rebuild a post-Covid world that looks more like the kingdom of heaven.

Read Archbishop Justin's original article in Premier Christianity magazine [here](#).

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