

Reflection for Sunday 11 July

During the pandemic I've found it harder than usual to get a clear perspective on things, and I don't think I'm alone. Part of the reason, of course, is that my world has shrunk. At times, it has become bound by my own four walls and the immediate area around them.

Another reason for my loss of perspective is that in concentrating so hard to fight the virus, protect the NHS and save lives, I've been less concerned than I might have otherwise been about wider, deeply pressing problems, like climate change.

I worry that I've begun to look in at my own little world too much. I'm losing the bigger picture. And I'm nervous about the future with the dual prospect of rising levels of infection at the same time as the removal of restrictions.

My problem is that I'm finding it harder than ever to balance what I perceive to be my personal needs with those of the wider community. The lesson for me from this realisation is clear: we all need to see the bigger picture. We need a narrative that helps us to put our stories into a proper context, one that sets us free to get on with life and care for one another better.

This where our faith really should help; but to be honest, sometimes the rather strange, sometimes convoluted language that we find in the Bible gets in the way. Take, for example, today's ecstatic passage from the letter to the Ephesians.

The writer of this wonderful letter, Paul, or perhaps more likely, someone close to him gets carried away. He (let's assume it was a 'he') uses three words where one will do, and it can be hard to follow his drift. It's breathless writing. In the original Greek literally so - it's a single, tumbling sentence, with ideas and images spewing out all over the place. But if you can get just beyond all that, it certainly presents a compellingly big picture.

It has been suggested that it's a kind of blessing, or more simply, a deep wish or prayer that we might be truly, profoundly happy. This may be one reason why it's such a rich pile-up of ideas and images. Prayers can be a bit like poetry. They use words playfully and imaginatively.

To make sense of passages like this we need to accept this and agree to go with the flow. We don't need to try to take each little bit apart to try to discover a deeper meaning hidden in it. The big idea running through is far more important, which is that a relationship with Jesus Christ puts everything else into perspective in such a way that our lives, and even the wider world, can find meaning.

Quite how this is so doesn't matter for now. This is, after all, a huge outpouring of happiness and praise and is certainly not intended to be a closely-argued theological treatise. Instead, the joy of knowing Jesus Christ, first and foremost, is palpable and

deeply affecting, so much so that the author can't help himself but imagine that everything is changed as a result. The whole universe seems different. He's engrossed by a bigger picture.

It might help to know, though, that his big picture is shaped, in part, by another big picture - the Old Testament story of how God brought his people out from slavery in Egypt. This where he finds the imagery of blood, redemption (literally a commercial payment to secure the freedom of a slave or servant) and even forgiveness.

Our author then makes the bold, apparently preposterous claim that this motley bunch of late-comers (the first Christians) has inherited and taken over this earlier story for themselves and has placed Jesus Christ at its centre.

Such a big picture might well seem almost outlandish, but one way to live with it is to act as if it's true, and allow it to fire us up to go on a journey with Christ as our guide – and then see what happens. Remember that the members early church called themselves not 'Christians', but followers of 'The Way'.

To follow 'The Way' we have to be willing to let Jesus's story become our story. Or to put it in the language of Ephesians, we need to agree to become God's 'adoptive children'. This isn't easy. We will very probably find the journey very bumpy at times, but we hope and pray that it can eventually turn out to be as exciting and transformative as the writer of the Letter to the Ephesians discovered. Maybe too, we will then come to glimpse that it has potentially unimaginably profound consequences, not just for us, but for the whole of creation.

I find that the story of Jesus offers me an opportunity to put aside my understandable jitters and worries and invites me to trust in a bigger picture that reassures me that somehow 'all will be well and shall be well and all manner of things will be well' – the words of another ecstatic vision, another big picture, another blessing, written in the late fourteenth century by Mother Julian of Norwich, whose perspective, quite remarkably wasn't constrained in any way by the walls of her small cell.

Her poetry sums up for me the hope of Ephesians perfectly:

'And I saw ... that before God made us he loved us, and this love has never abated nor ever shall. And in this love he has done all his works; and in this love he has made everything for our benefit; and in this love our life is everlasting... and in this love we have our beginning. And all this shall be seen in God, without end, which may Jesus grant us. Amen'

We do have a bigger picture and The Way lies open before us.