

Light at the end of the Tunnel



Over the past year we have been bombarded with ‘escapist’ TV – a perceived panacea for our lockdown ‘blues’. I have relished accompanying hikers as they traverse rugged landscapes, farmers as they ‘share’ their working lives or canal-boaters as they navigate their way through tranquil waters. In the case of footpaths and canals, tunnels are approached with a degree of caution & occasionally trepidation. Is it safe/structurally sound? How long is it? How much space will there be to move comfortably? How will I feel when I’m inside? Claustrophobia can be a real concern, even for those of us not usually prone to the ‘phobia’.

A recent programme followed a canal boat through a particularly long and narrow tunnel; you could imagine the canal boat fraternity of the past ‘legging it’ along the ceiling. How much longer? Is there a speck of light ahead yet? The curious thing about some tunnels is that you enter from one kind of landscape and then emerge into quite another. I remember experiencing this as a wide-eyed teenager travelling through the tunnels of the Alps from Switzerland to the Italian lakes. The wonder!

Spring is the season we associate most with emergence. We are emerging from a long, dark tunnel into a landscape that is both familiar and unfamiliar. The media hype about returning to normality is not in fact what most of us will experience. Much has changed, both within ourselves and within society. Take the word ‘carefree’. Interesting word. Life is rarely ‘carefree’, but I’m talking about the

spirit of spontaneity - an atmosphere of 'lightness' which I get when I watch old 1960's films. We will regain our liberty - another word with interesting connotations for the present times – but within this changed landscape which at first glance appears familiar, there will be many unfamiliar facets embedded – one being assaults, however well-meaning, on personal freedoms we have previously taken for granted. BEWARE THE STUMBLING BLOCKS which will be strewn across our path. BE VIGILANT AT ALL TIMES.

Simon Barrington in an on-line article, uses the term 'reverse' culture shock when writing about emergence from lockdown, and he warns 're-entry will be hard'. He illustrates this using his experience of re-entering western culture after a period working in a 3rd world setting:

“What happens when you experience culture shock? Your routines are changed. Your relationships are changed. Things you took for granted are no longer possible”.

Having experienced the culture shock of lockdown and the impact it has had on our relatively predictable lifestyles, we now re-enter a society full of unpredictability, uncertainty, and insecurity predicated by anxiety. In the face of collective PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) we must be kind to ourselves and to others.

There are, and will be, disappointments – crushed hopes and dreams, regrets, mourning for what was or what might have been. Simon Barrington has suggested ways we can process the process of adjustment to the 'new landscape' that we will see as we emerge from the tunnel:

- 1. Recognise that everyone will go through reverse culture shock at different speeds. Our experiences have been different and our re-entry will be different.*
- 2. Allow for different personality types. Those who will want to get on immediately with re-building and partying, and those who need time to process what has happened. Watch out particularly for those who will become marginalized as part of this processing.*

3. *Expect a period of adjustment and a psychological, emotional and cultural response to the rollercoaster of emotions we will experience – from honeymoon periods of joy to depths of despair. Watch out particularly for the temptation to become critical of the new norm.*
4. *Facilitate people being able to reflect on their own journey, tell their story and wrestle with meaning and purpose.*

Julia Samuel, in her book 'This Too Shall Pass: Stories of Change, Crisis and Hopeful Beginning' sagely notes:

“the unlock(ing of society) takes as much psychological energy and is as big a process as it was to shut down”.

It is interesting to note that secular authors and journalists are turning to biblical language to express their ideas and thoughts at this time.

There is some comfort in the knowledge that we walk this untrodden path on a global scale and that, as Christians, we can turn to God and his Word for comfort and solace as we navigate the path out of the tunnel.

Patrick Sookhdeo, International Director of Barnabas Fund (a charity for persecuted Christians), walked a lonely path when faced with trumped up charges designed to silence him and his work. Here is a poem from his book “Lifting the Downcast”:

Walk with me, Jesus.

Walk with me Jesus,
For dark is the night
And hard the road.
Jesus, walk with me.

Walk with me, Jesus,

For great is my suffering
And endless my sorrows.
Jesus, walk with me.

Walk with me, Jesus,
For many are my trials
And with no respite,
Jesus, walk with me,

Walk with me, Jesus,
For I am alone
With none beside me.
Jesus, walk with me.

Walk with me, Jesus,
For You are my Friend.
Hold my hand, Jesus,
Till my journey's end.

Patrick Sookhdeo 2020



