

God's first priority: 'I love you'

Angela and I are coming near the end of the long process of getting rid of stuff as we move to a smaller house next month. Many of you also will have had the experience of letting go: downsizing and getting rid of books that have been important to us, furniture that has memories, or a house where God has seemed close to us both in family times and in quiet contentment. As human beings we are continually letting go: children leave home, much-loved cats fall ill and die, the family grandfather clock can no longer be repaired, our church congregation shrinks and can no longer sustain the kind of worship and prayer that has sustained our faith for many years, we let go of the house that's so much part of us.

The other side of the coin of letting go is – obviously – hanging on. What is it we hang on to as we go into the next stage of our lives, where life will be different and will bring up new challenges and new pleasant surprises? What is the thing we really mustn't let go of? What are – or should be – the priorities for the next stage of my life?

Two things have struck me. The first is that it is actually God who hangs on to us, and never lets us go, even more than us hanging on to God. As Christian people in a faith community, we know that God never lets us go. And our response to God's loving embrace is to let ourselves be held, to be warmed by his warmth, to be encouraged and inspired by the energy and love that flows through him. This is like the mutual hug between parents and children, between good friends. God's embrace is the Gospel priority, whereas we read in the New Testament the words of both Jesus and Paul about not allowing our possessions to dominate our lives, about not building bigger and better barns to accumulate more stuff, about 'the love of money being the root of all evil.' God's priority is that he loves us.

The other thing we can't let go of is hope. It is something we hold on to, not in desperation or in any unrealistic way, but because God is the god of the positive. In a recent article, Claire Gilbert wrote about the two Hebrew words for hope. One (*Tikvah*) is waiting anxiously for a phone call from the doctor or gas engineer, hoping they will come and help, or hoping someone in our family gets a good exam result. It's a fingers-crossed-hope-for-a-particular-outcome. The other kind of hope in Hebrew is *Yachel* – which Claire Gilbert describes as a patient hope that trusts in God's purposes, whatever they may be. That's a hope that is more permanent, founded on the permanent truth that 'God is love', and everything that flows from that.

Contemplative prayer is where we engage with that patient long-term hope. Whether it's on Monday evenings engaging with others, or on our own, the prayer of stillness links us with the spiritual energy of God, which is forward-looking, and enables the unfailing love of God to fill us, so we know deep-down that he is holding us firmly and will never let us go.

To lead us into silence, a couple of sentences from Cynthia Bourgeault's book, *Mystical Hope*.

Hope is a quality of aliveness. Hope fills us with the strength to stay present, to abide in the flow of [God's] mercy, no matter what outer storms assail us ... through a willingness to let go of everything we are presently clinging to. Hope fills us with its own life – a quiet strength beyond anything we have ever known.

Leading from the silence

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 15:13

