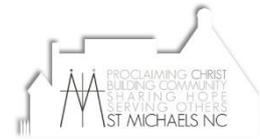


Viral – good news spreads fast

#10 The Long Road Ahead

Acts 18:1-17



INTRO – IT IS NOT GOOD TO BE ALONE (FOR TOO LONG)

Nobody likes to be alone for too long. Even the most introverted among us are sick of pandemic isolation. As one French writer put it:

“Solitude is fine but you need someone to tell that solitude is fine.” — Honoré de Balzac (19th century realist)

One of the great joys of the Gospel of Jesus, is that by their very nature Christians are welcomed into God’s new community, the Church. The Letter to the Hebrews warns us:

“Don’t neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another...”
(Hebrews 10:25)¹

In today’s passage from Acts 18, the apostle Paul is alone, worn and weary, arriving in a big city. Corinth was a multicultural market hub for traders East and West, North and South.

Paul left Athens, walked about 70kms, across the narrow isthmus, onto the Peloponnesian peninsula, into the capital of Achaia, a city 20 times the population of Athens.²

Paul admits in *1 Corinthians* (2:3) that he entered Corinth in “trembling and fear.” It was home to the sex cult of Aphrodite, and widely known for its hedonistic excesses.³

How *did* God strengthen Paul for the next part of his journey?



How does God strengthen *you* in life to keep the faith and to endure?

Our passage in Acts 18 offers us answers under three headings today...

1. Trials and joys are better done together 1-8
2. God’s strength is always near 9-11
3. God is with us for the long haul 12-16

¹ Baptism into Christ signifies our incorporation into “the people of God”. The liturgy for baptism in *A Prayer Book for Australia* 1995 includes the response, “We therefore receive and welcome you as a member with us of the body of Christ, as a child of the one heavenly Father, and as an inheritor of the kingdom of God.”

² Estimated at around 200,000

³ To “corinthianize” was to participate in excessive sexual and hedonistic pleasures. The city was renowned for its 1000 sex-workers associated with temples at Acro-Corinth overlooking the city. The sex-trade was openly visible in the marketplace, and the cities many travellers created high demand.

1. TRIALS AND JOYS ARE BETTER DONE TOGETHER - ACTS:18:1-8

Paul's torrid run of opposition, hostility, ejection from cities, separation from his friends, and even ridicule from academics, could have ended him. But God strengthened him with friends both new and old. In verses 1-5 we read...

Then Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he became acquainted with a Jewish man named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently arrived from Italy with his wife, Priscilla. They had left Italy when Claudius Caesar deported all Jews from Rome. Paul lived and worked with them, for they were tentmakers just as he was. Each Sabbath found Paul at the synagogue, trying to convince the Jews and Greeks alike. And after Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul spent all his time preaching the word.

What's the best remedy when you're down, when you're a misfit, a loner, outta money, rejected on your road trip? New besties!

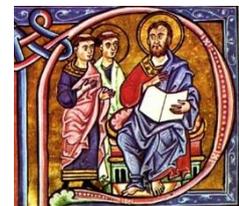
Meet Aquila and Priscilla.

- They had a trade in common with Paul (tentmaking v3),⁴
- Aquila originated from a place near Paul's home country,⁵
- They too were exiles (v2) and had been expelled from Rome,
- They probably knew about Jesus. The Jews chased out of Rome had been caught up in a controversy about a figure named "Chrestus".⁶



There's nothing quite like new friends who get you! Aquila and Priscilla soon became co-workers in sharing the Good News of Jesus (Romans 16:3-4).

Now meet Silas and Timothy. We last saw these co-workers in Chapter 17 (v15). They remained in Berea, strengthening the persecuted church there (5a; 1 Thes 3:6-10) while Paul was escorted to Athens. When these two arrived finally in Corinth Paul's spirit was so buoyed and he "became all the more devoted" to testifying to Jesus as the true Messiah of God (5b).⁷



- Take a moment to think of how much friendship means to you (whether new or old friends) during this pandemic? Pause right now to give thanks to God for friendship.

Just as well Paul had friends now, because the opposition to his Gospel once again got fierce. In verses 5b-6 we read...

⁴ Paul lived and worked with them as tentmakers. The great Isthmian Games happened not far from Corinth around this time and many awnings were needed on the road to the site for markets. Archaeology shows how workshops had a loft or 1st floor. A and P slept upstairs while Paul stayed in the workshop downstairs at night.

⁵ Pontus was north of Cilicia

⁶ One passage in the biography of the Emperor Claudius Divus Claudius 25, refers to agitations in the Roman Jewish community and the expulsion of Jews from Rome during his reign (AD 41 to AD 54), which may be the expulsion here (Acts 18:2). "Chresto" is mentioned, and may refer to "Christus" (Latin), "Christ" in koine Greek.

⁷ Most commentators think Silas and Timothy brought money with them to support Paul as well 2 Cor. 11:8-9; Phil. 4:15-16).

He testified to the [Jewish synagogue] that Jesus was the Messiah. But when they opposed and insulted him, Paul shook the dust from his clothes and said, “Your blood is upon your own heads—I am innocent. From now on I will go preach to the Gentiles.”

This time Paul spat the dummy, picked up his mat and shawl and left the building!⁸ Paul’s parting words in verse 6 come from the prophet Ezekiel indicating how far from God this synagogue had drifted.⁹



What happened next, from the point of view of the synagogue, must have had them calling *A Corinthian Current Affair*. In verses 7 & 8 we read...

... he left and went to the home of Titius Justus, a Gentile who worshiped God and lived next door to the synagogue. Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, and everyone in his household believed in the Lord. Many others in Corinth also heard Paul, became believers, and were baptized.

Mr. T’s house next door must have seemed like the neighbours from hell!



- loud live worship music,
- Women in attendance¹⁰,
- Sharing food that might have been offered to idols¹¹,
- Dubious types coming and going to listen to Paul’s teaching.¹²
- Even the former leader of the synagogue, Crispus, among them (v8)
- Worse still, they looked to others like a sect of the synagogue.¹³

But from Paul’s point of view, God’s grace was abounding; trials were turning to great joy. With new friends, old colleagues, and a bunch of new converts (v8), he received great encouragement!

- Pause and think for a moment how much strength and encouragement you receive from being part of a community of faith?

2. GOD’S STRENGTH IS ALWAYS NEAR - ACTS 18:9-11

Paul was strengthened in his trials and encouraged in his joys through fellowship. Yet, God had more strength to grant to Paul. In verses 9-11 we read...

⁸ Shaking off the dust reminds us Jesus’ instructions to his disciples when no hospitality was shown to the news of the Messiah Luke 9:5

⁹ They suggest just how far away from God these Jews were (Ezek. 33:1ff). Jewish priests of the prophets days were indifferent to God, blind to their own injustice and the poverty it caused, distorting Scripture to their own ends.

¹⁰ Women could not be members of a synagogue (compare with Gal. 3:28)

¹¹ Jews and Gentiles did this in Antioch, and in Corinth (see Gal 2:12; 1 Cor. 8:7)

¹² 1 Corinthians reveals a range of social and sexual challenges the apostle had to address. In 1 Cor. 6:9-11 Paul lists the backgrounds of new converts as including: the sexually immoral, idolators, adulterers, male and female sex-workers, thieves, greedy people, drunkards, abusers, cheats, and says “some of you were once like that”... but are now “cleansed”.

¹³ Trashing the synagogue’s brand. Roman authorities saw Christians as a subset of Judaism.

One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision and told him, “Don’t be afraid! Speak out! Don’t be silent! For I am with you, and no one will attack and harm you, for many people in this city belong to me.” So Paul stayed there [in Corinth] for the next year and a half, teaching the word of God.

Paul often preached about the nearness of the living God.¹⁴ Here, during his evening prayers, Paul was re-assured personally.¹⁵ The same voice he heard at his conversion confirmed – “I am with you”.¹⁶

I often hear Christians say, “I just wish God would speak to me like this.”

But we should remember that Paul didn’t have a written New Testament in his hands. In fact, he was writing a big slab of Scripture for us at the time!¹⁷

Instead, the news that the risen Christ re-assured Paul by a spoken word, offers us assurance as we study the Bible today. The Spirit of God assures us within, through God’s written word, that Christ is with us always.¹⁸



- Have you taken time to study the written word of God during iso?
Have you received hope and encouragement by the Spirit of God?

3. GOD IS WITH US FOR THE LONG HAUL - ACTS 18:12-16

Paul knew that trials and joys are better done together. Paul learned that God is always near. Thirdly, he was encouraged by God’s circumstantial providence.

In verses 12-16 we see an unexpected agent of God’s grace opening the way for Paul’s life and mission to continue....

But when Gallio became governor of Achaia, [angry members of the synagogue] rose up together against Paul and brought him before the governor for judgment. They accused Paul of “persuading people to worship God in ways that are contrary to our law... just as Paul started to make his defense, Gallio turned to Paul’s accusers and said, “Listen... if this were a case involving some wrongdoing or a serious crime, I would have a reason to accept your case. But since it is merely a question of words and names and your Jewish law, take care of it yourselves. I refuse to judge such matters.” And he threw them out of the courtroom.

¹⁴ Acts 17:27,28

¹⁵ We can list at least 10 intercessory prayers in Paul’s letters. He kept his pattern of Jewish devotions – at least twice a day (1 Thes. 3:10; 2 Tim. 1:3). Acts 18:18 mentions a Nazarene vow Paul took, showing the freedom he had to practice spiritual disciplines that best served his mission and need

¹⁶ Acts 9:5,6

¹⁷ 2 Peter 3:15,16 treats Paul’s writings as “Scripture”.

¹⁸ Jesus assured his first apostles he would be with them always (Matt. 28:20). He pointed to the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit (John 16:13). 2 Peter 1:20,21 explains the inspiration of the Spirit in the written of Scripture.

The governor's full name sounds like a character from the movie Gladiator - Lucius Junius Gallio Annaeanus.



He was the son of Seneca the orator and the older brother of Seneca the philosopher. He was a Roman senator who was good friends with the Emperor Claudius.¹⁹

He was called on by the angry mob to rule on their accusations against Paul. But note how he treated the dispute like a parent would dismiss a petty squabble between siblings.²⁰ Gallio said,

“...take care of it yourselves. I refuse to judge such matters.” And he threw them out of the courtroom.



This was the most important *non*-decision in ancient Roman history!²¹ Christians were still seen by the Romans as a subset of Judaism. They were like a minor variant of a strain of flu virus at this point in history - an irritant in the empire at most.²²

This non-decision bought Christianity 10 years of time. Ten years on, Nero would try to stamp out the Christians, but for now, the Gospel could continue to take root and flourish far and wide across the empire.²³ In verses 18-23 we read...

¹⁸ Paul stayed in Corinth for some time after that, then said good-bye to the brothers and sisters and went to nearby Cenchrea. There he shaved his head according to Jewish custom, marking the end of a vow. Then he set sail for Syria, taking Priscilla and Aquila with him.

¹⁹ They stopped first at the port of Ephesus, where Paul left the others behind. While he was there, he went to the synagogue to reason with the Jews. ²⁰ They asked him to stay longer, but he declined. ²¹ As he left, however, he said, "I will come back later,^[a] God willing." Then he set sail from Ephesus. ²² The next stop was at the port of Caesarea. From there he went up and visited the church at Jerusalem^[b] and then went back to Antioch. ²³ After spending some time in Antioch, Paul went back through Galatia and Phrygia, visiting and strengthening all the believers.^[a]

God strengthened Paul for the spreading of the Good News of Jesus and the growth of the Church:

- He was encouraged and strengthened by being in community
- He was re-assured of God's presence by the Word of God, and

¹⁹ In 51AD he was travelling through Corinth toward Rome, according to an inscription in stone found in Delphi dated 52AD.

²⁰ The irrational anger of the Jews here is evident in verse 18- they grab the new leader of the synagogue and bash him when the government doesn't decide in their favour!

²¹ I would argue that Pilate did decide something in allowing Jesus to be crucified (John 18:39)

²² Christians are explicitly mentioned later in Suetonius' biography of the Emperor Nero (Nero 16) as among those punished during his reign[7] dated to around AD 64, the year of the Great Fire of Rome. Suetonius describes Christianity as excessive religiosity (*superstitio*), so too Tacitus and Pliny.

²³ Both Gallio and Paul lost their lives under Nero

- He was granted, by the providence by God, a huge window of opportunity to endure in his mission.

Paul knew God was with him for the long haul.

He stayed on in Corinth for 18 months. He wrote the Letter to the Romans and 1 and 2 Thessalonians while he was there.

After this, he left Corinth with his friends by sea, from the port of Cenchrea²⁴ on the on his next adventures as an apostle of Christ.



WHAT'S IN IT FOR US?

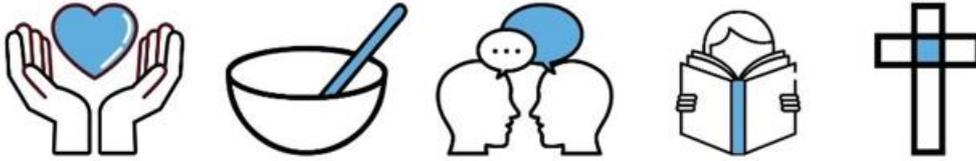
We too can find great strength in community, in the assurance of God's word, and by looking at the blessings of life God grants us as opportunities to thrive and to serve others.

We've been promoting the B.E.L.L.S. missional habits²⁵ during iso for this very reason. We too can learn to attune our lives to the strength God gives us to be a blessing to others, that the Good News of Jesus might keep spreading in word and deed.

Our sermon series has come to an end, but our mission to spread the Gospel of Jesus across the world in word and deed continues. Discussion questions for the ten sermons of this series, along with sermons in video and text format are available on our website. For your convenience, I've reproduced below, a description of the B.E.L.L.S. missional habits mentioned, or you can find them at www.stmichaelsnc.org.au

²⁴ The home of Phoebe in which a church was planted was in this place (Rom. 16:1)

²⁵ From Mike Frost's great book *Surprise the World*



B.E.L.L.S

During the season of Lent in 2018 and 2019, St Michael's North Carlton set up an encouragement to develop five missional habits of spiritual life that are recommended in the abovementioned book, *Surprise the World*. ([Listen to the B.E.L.L.S sermon here](#)).

Using the image of ancient church bells ringing out on Sundays in times past to call the faithful to gather, Frost urges us to see that in our post-Christendom environment today we need different kinds of "bells" that send out a clear message that Jesus extends love to the world. He employs a mnemonic to help us recall five missional habits to develop as disciples who want the Good News of Jesus to be known in word and deed today.

It seems appropriate to refresh these five habits we focussed on in recent years as thoughtful and thankful responses to God's grace to us in Christ at this time of pandemic restrictions. After all, the limitations we face due to government regulations to limit the spread of the virus should not stop Christians from sharing love and grace. Instead, we must adapt and innovate so that grace abounds whatever our circumstances, as was the practice of apostles like Paul.

Even if you are unfamiliar with the book mentioned above, the five missional habits are summarized simply below and refreshed applications are added as suggestions. We should note, before continuing, that you can find a sermon introducing these missional habits on our website. It's vital to appreciate that the following actions and attitudes are recommended as thankful responses to God's grace to us in Christ, not in any sense as a means of persuading God to love us more or as a means of qualifying for acceptance before God. As we know in the Gospel of Jesus, and so well summarized in Ephesians 2:8-10,

"God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago" (NLT).

1. BLESS



Missional Habit: Bless

Missional Value: Generous (e.g. through service, encouragement, contact, etc.)

Action (suggestions) during lockdown: I will bless 3 people each week, at least one of whom is not a member of our church or my family

Meaning: In the history of the Church, to bless has often meant “to speak well of; to praise”, or “to pronounce or make happy.” It is mostly a term related to conferring happiness on another and seeking to encourage the other in word or action.

Also, part of the etymology of the term ‘to bless’ is ‘to add strength to another’s arm’. In other words, to build them up, fill them with encouragement for them to increase in strength.

A prayer of blessing: “I pray that from God’s glorious, unlimited resources He will empower you with inner strength through His Spirit. Then Christ will make His home in your hearts as you trust in Him. Your roots will grow down into God’s love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God’s people should, how wide, how long, how high and how deep God’s love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God. Now all glory to God, who is able, through His mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think.” (from Ephesians 3:16-20)

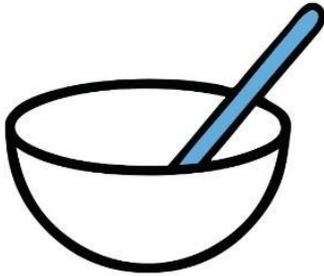
Here are 3 ways we bless others today:

1. Words of affirmation
2. Acts of kindness
3. Gifts

COVID options...

- Pray a prayer of blessing for others
- Send a card, write a letter
- Collect someone’s groceries for them and deliver them
- Make a call (e.g. phone, Zoom or FaceTime, etc) and affirm that person’s qualities
- Celebrate their special occasions

2. EAT



Missional Habit: Sharing table community

Missional Value: Hospitality

Action (suggestions) during lockdown: I will eat (virtually) with 3 people each week, at least one of whom is not a member of our church or family

Meaning: As we study the Scriptures we find that the home and table served as a centre for of encouragement and the spread of the Good News about Jesus in the early expansion of Christianity.

During the COVID-19 and the resulting lockdown and social distancing, however, this isn't possible.

Questions we could ask ourselves include:

- How do we respond to Christ's welcome and thus welcome others with grace and openness?
- What does eating together look like in these conditions?
- How do we deepen relationships in our current situation?
- What sort of opportunities might arise if you invite someone to share a meal with you?

A prayer of blessing: *"Give us eyes to see the deepest needs of people. Give us hearts full of love for our neighbours as well as for the strangers we meet. Help us understand what it means to love others as we love ourselves. Fill us with generosity so we feed the hungry, clothe the naked and give drink to the thirsty. Let us be a healing balm to those who are weak and lonely and weary by offering our kindness to them. Inspire us to go out of our way to include those in the margins. Help us to be welcoming and inclusive to all who are nearby. Let us be a sign of God's hospitality in the world. Amen.*

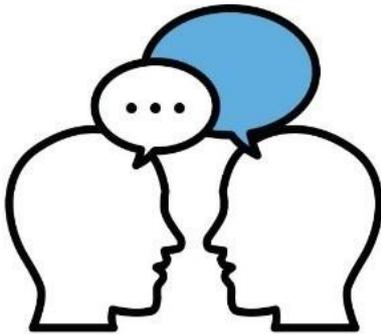
Practical tips:

- Make a mental list of people who would be encouraged by your offer of hospitality
- Pray and set out to invite your first guests soon
- Start simple, this is not a *Masterchef* competition, the emphasis is on sharing
- Pray that our hospitable God will give you joy in demonstrating his character to others
- No ulterior motive—the heart of hospitality sincerely communicates: "It's my honour to be with you, let's do this again"

COVID options...

- An “Agape meal” as a household, or together on Zoom with other households
 - Have a virtual coffee or meal with someone
 - Send a food hamper or croissant to mark an occasion (e.g. birthday) or to encourage
 - Buy 1 meal, donate another through [ASRC \(meals.asrc.org.au/\)](https://meals.asrc.org.au/)
 - Share the bounty from your lemon tree with neighbours
 - Bake a cake and share with neighbours (what’s your specialty & do that)
- Support local businesses by buying take-away nearby
 - Purchase gift cards from a supermarket to give to needy neighbours anonymously

3. LISTEN



Missional Habit: Listen

Missional Value: Spirit-led (i.e. open to God’s wisdom and leading)

Action (suggestions) during lockdown: I will spend at least 1 time per week of Bible reading & prayer and will “listen” to God

Meaning: From the book *Satisfy your soul*, Bruce Demarest writes: “A quieted heart is our best preparation for all this work of God... Meditation refocuses us from ourselves and from the world so that we reflect on God’s Word, God’s nature, God’s abilities, and God’s works... So we prayerfully ponder, muse, and ‘chew’ the words of Scripture... the goal is simply to permit the Holy Spirit to activate the life-giving Word of God.”

Suggested Readings: Matthew 6:6; Romans 8:5; James 3:17

Silence: Use this time to ponder some words of Scripture of your own choice in silence (e.g. Psalms, Matthew 5-7, 1 John 1-2)

A song of petition may be sung at intervals: *O Lord, hear our prayer O Lord, hear our prayer When we call, answer us. O Lord, hear our prayer O Lord, hear our prayer Come and listen to us*

Practical tips:

- Set a quiet environment—for you to read, listen and pray to God. In this noisy, busy life, make a quiet space and time for listening to God (e.g. Matt. 6:6).

- Know God’s Word – God’s will is already made known in the Bible, and can be “weighed” and considered in community with other Christians. We should particularly focus on the one who fulfilled all God’s promises—Jesus Christ. Learn to read, meditate on, and pray God’s Word (e.g. James 1:25).
- Listen to your heart – What is it saying? By faith we believe the Holy Spirit is living in us. Examine your heart before the Lord, and ask God for wisdom (e.g. James 1:5).
- Seek the council and prayers of others – If you hear God’s encouragement and leading, test it among other believers and seek their prayers and support (e.g. Romans 15:4-6)

COVID options...

- Set a time for Contemplative Prayer (putting the above into practice)
- On your daily exercise outing, what did you notice? People, environment. How did you feel? Write this down and reflect on your thankfulness and awareness of God’s love and grace.

4. LEARN



Missional Habit: Learn

Missional Value: Christ-like (i.e. knowing for ourselves what God has done for us in Jesus Christ)

Action (suggestions) during lockdown: I will read a chapter (or more) of the Bible each day. For example, you could read the whole of Mark’s Gospel, plus the Book of Acts in the six weeks of the current lockdown.

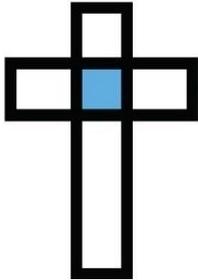
John Stott once wrote, “The Bible isn’t about people trying to discover God, but about God reaching out to find us.” (From *Basic Christianity*)

COVID options...

- Listen to our recorded Sunday weekly sermons
- Join the weekly (free) Ridley certificate course via Zoom
- Join a small group meeting via Zoom that is studying the Scriptures together during the lockdown
- Find a great app for your smart device for daily devotions and set times to read, learn and pray

- Order a book to read about Jesus from an author you've never considered reading (e.g. from a marginalized background, middle eastern perspective, etc). It's helpful to first read a book review of the text before ordering so as to know the author's intent and standing

5. SENT



Missional Habit: Sent

Missional Value: Mission-minded (i.e. understanding we are living as God's "ambassadors")

Action (suggestions) during lockdown: I will journal regularly about the ways I alerted others to the love and grace of God through Christ (including words and actions relating to reconciliation, mercy, justice, beauty, wholeness and encouragement).

Meaning: Identifying oneself as a "sent one" because we are part of the apostolic church that Jesus commissioned to "go and make disciples..."

Readings to consider: Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8; Colossians 4:5-6

- Not about going 'to' people or doing things 'to' people, it's about going deeper 'with' people
- Who are you investing in? Who are you making part of your friendship group?
- We cannot do mission to people from over here with them out there. We need to be in peoples' company and truly care for those around us. Genuinely friendship looks like this
- Who are you willing to bring into your sphere? To spend time with, get to know. To encourage, share a meal, pray for, and go deep with?
- Who do you already know and maybe getting to know during this pandemic? Neighbours? Local takeaway staff?
- What would it mean for you to ask them how they are? And to really stop and listen to their answer?
- Did any of the following topics arise in your conversations today: Relationships? Justice? Beauty? Wholeness or healing? Did anyone ask your opinion or experience? What if they did?

A prayer of blessing: *Go forth into the world in peace; be of good courage; hold fast that which is good; render to no one evil for evil; strengthen the faint-hearted; support the weak; help the afflicted; give honour to all; love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit; and know the blessing of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and always. Amen.* (Adapted from A Prayer Book for Australia, 1995, p.93)

Practical tip:

- Anne Broyles writes, in keeping a journal, “what our mind is thinking and our heart is feeling becomes tangible: ink on paper.” Consider keeping a short record of every day in a book of how God has been close to you in the day’s events. At the end of (lockdown), look back to see how journaling has shaped your thinking about being a “sent one” with other Christians in your ordinary daily living.

COVID options...

- Implement the above for the duration of the lockdown period
- Keep a journal of how you feel, what you are thinking and the ways in which you have acted on the B.E.L.L.S. habits during lockdown
- Note down conversations that went ‘deeper’ asking people how they are, & where they found beauty, reconciliation or justice today
- Where did you exercise today? Journal what you noticed and how you reflected on God’s goodness
- Consider sharing with others, or one other person (you will bless & encourage each other), what you journaled today.

Acknowledgment to Michael Frost whose book Surprise the World has provided the B.E.L.L.S. model for us <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/26486465-surprise-the-world>

www.stmichaelsnc.org.au

Steve Webster & Kim Messieh – July 2020

St Michael’s North Carlton