

Sometimes a Light Surprises

By John P. Wilson

Cowper's 18th century song rings true: when comforts are declining, God grants to the soul a season of light to cheer us again.

Our Prime Minister has said, more than once, that we're facing significant deprivation of comforts and such hardship that we've not seen for generations – even as far back as the two world wars. Not that our present rogue-virus crisis is equivalent to wartime carnage, but the restriction on our freedoms and the loss of livelihoods and way of life bears the analogy.

This raises the question: how did we cope with the dark days of war and what opportunities for gospel service opened up? Which is exactly what I asked my father. Dad, as part of London's much-valued National Fire Service, was stationed at St Paul's Cathedral during the war and helped protect it from bomb damage, sleeping up in the dome at night. He often reflected on living the nightmare that was London during World War 2, and what it was like as a son of the village vicar of Long Ditton.

Though the war took its toll on his parents, and wore them out, in parish work there were unprecedented opportunities to serve Christ. Dad remembered serving Christ during Luftwaffe air raids with his Daddy and a church elder Colonel Thompson. This little band of mercy would visit each air raid shelter near their Surrey parish to greet the people huddled there. To the weary and fearful gathering, the Colonel would say a few words from the Scriptures about the hope of the Gospel and the way of salvation in Christ, the three of them would sing a hymn and then his Daddy would close in prayer.

This was their ministry of hope and comfort. Dad writes: "We would then proceed to the next shelter, offer hope and comfort,

then again and again, dodging shrapnel falling around us. Exhilarating nights."

Let Dad continue the story: "On Sunday nights, we would visit one of the large houses which provided emergency accommodation for old ladies who had been bombed out of London, and hold a service of Christian worship there. Further, we met at the church for special prayer once a week, something that never happened before the war. Adversity kindled a spiritual vitality.

I was mowing the lawn in the rectory garden when a flying bomb suddenly appeared overhead, quite low, and making a terrible noise. It cleared the rectory and then cut its engine, diving right into a housing area a few streets away. Daddy, Mummy and I went for our bicycles and rode to the scene of the disaster to see what we could do to help. A direct hit on a house had killed a mother and daughter.

Damage to all other houses was severe, and an elderly woman returning to her house and seeing the damage collapsed into a fit, foaming at the mouth. Fortunately, a doctor was near, and all we needed to do was to comfort her.

The man who'd lost his home and family came back from work broken and distraught, so we took him in and he stayed with us that night. On Sunday, in order to encourage the congregation to keep the faith and not give way, the Bishop came to preach at Long Ditton.

While the analogy is not perfect, the message is clear. Life has been turned on its head for us in 2020. So, in this turmoil, can we find innovative and appropriate ways to serve Christ as little bands of mercy, dodging 'shrapnel,' offering words and deeds

from the light of Christ?

Even if we can't do this in person, our amazing 21st century digital and electronic technology has brought us together in so many clever alternative ways. Let's use them, so that while on the one hand our comforts are declining, seasons of refreshing can multiply.

*Sometimes a light surprises
the Christian while he sings;
It is the Lord who rises*

*with healing in his wings.
When comforts are declining
he grants the soul again
a season of clear shining
to cheer it after rain.*

*John P Wilson was the former Moderator-General of the
Presbyterian Church of Australia.*