



ART: WIKIPEDIA

By Matthew Townsend
EDITOR

BLURRED VISIONS

2020 SHATTERED OUR ASSUMPTIONS. WHAT WILL 2021 BRING?

If you've heard someone use the phrase "20/20 vision," you've probably gathered that they meant perfect vision—the ability to see something complex in crystal clarity. To optometrists, however, 20/20 vision merely implies normal visual acuity when tested at a distance of 20 feet. As the American Optometric Association puts it, "If you have 20/20 vision, you can see clearly at 20

feet what should normally be seen at that distance. If you have 20/100 vision, it means that you must be as close as 20 feet to see what a person with normal vision can see at 100 feet."

In other words, 20/20 vision is eyesight that's good enough to see the writing on the wall, when you're more or less in front of the wall. And perhaps that's a good



If one gives answer before hearing, it is folly and shame.

—Proverbs 18:13



way for us to think of the year 2020, too. The writing is on the wall, we're in front of the wall, and our eyesight is decently average.

I don't need to say it, but I will anyway: it's been a long year. For most of us, 2020 has brought unwelcome surprises and challenges across the world, from a deadly pandemic to turbid political elections (and I'm not just talking about Bolivia) to storms and fires and racism and—it just goes on. We have come to see some things in clarity that seemed obscure before; the light now touches the landscape before us, and our eyes are open. We see things that are encouraging—like people working together to ease a pandemic, as Dean Peter Elliott [put it](#) this summer—and we also see things that are not so encouraging. Such is the price of normal vision.

For those possessing extraordinary vision, though—the people who saw the writing on the wall from a mile away—very little about 2020 was surprising. They warned us that we were carrying assumptions about modern life that just weren't so. For example, scientists like Stephen Morse and journalists like Laurie Garrett spent decades warning us that life would change radically upon emergence of a bad bug, and that we'd have to change our lives if it did. And here we are.

In the church, we've adapted quickly to learning that assumptions we carried into 2020 wouldn't make it to 2021. We have collectively participated in an Apollo program that has launched the church far from the comforts of *terra firma* and towards an entirely new way of being—which has completely shifted what we

prioritize in worship. But now, as we peer again into haze before us, what assumptions might we reconsider before stepping into the next year? What questions have gone unasked?

In this issue of *Epiphanies*, we consider a few assumptions that may have underpinned our expectations for this year. As usual, we open our issue with theological reflections from Archbishop Linda Nicholls, primate of the Anglican Church of Canada, and National Indigenous Archbishop Mark MacDonald. In her column Nicholls considers how COVID-19 has challenged our assumptions about life and church—but points out that Jesus also challenged our assumptions, inviting us into new ways of being. MacDonald takes a look at the central role of the Eucharist in the life of the church and wonders how we might, together, work to find new ways to safely practice communion in these times.

We kick off our long-form, journalistic content with a consideration of preaching. At the start of 2020, who amongst us would have imagined a church in which Eucharist, choral and praise music, coffee hour—even just uniting in physical spaces—would be supplanted by an online gathering of the dispersed in which a simple homily often takes centre stage? Yet here we are—and I can't imagine there's ever been a time where more reflections upon the word have been offered online. But what is Anglican preaching, anyway? Is there such a thing as an Anglican way of preaching? What differences do we find in style, length and purpose? What are people

finding when they log on to livestreams? Tali Folkins talks with a sampling of Canadian Anglican preachers to explore these questions.

Indeed, the pandemic has changed more than Sunday worship; it has transformed how we live out common life. In my 25 years on the internet, I can attest that I have seen communities come and go—and divide. I have seen love blossom among complete strangers, and I have seen the closest of friendships utterly destroyed at the touch of a button. I think many of us have assumed that community *just happens* on the internet, but is this so? What draws people together, and what pushes people apart? Joelle Kidd considers our assumptions about the internet with Joanne McNeil, technology essayist and author of *Lurking: How a Person Became a User*.

Avid readers of the *Anglican Journal* may recall that we kicked off 2020 with a deep dive into the church's statistics—considering how and even whether the church would exist beyond the year 2040, given statistical trends. In that issue we featured “20-40 vision,” a series of essays by young Anglican leaders on what they imagined in the years ahead. Since 2020 hasn't played out precisely as expected, Matt Gardner has reconnected with those same leaders for “20-40 hindsight”—to ask how the pandemic has affected their expectations for the church's long-term future.

There are more long-held notions to question before we enter 2021. Among the most important, I think, is the assumption that colonialism is a thing of the past. As we've seen in 2020, though, many of our old demons—like racism and sexism—haven't been as well exorcised as we might have imagined. Is colonialism still with us? If so, what should we do about it? I talk about these questions with the Rev. Graham Singh, priest at St. Jax Anglican Church in Montreal and church transformation consultant. Singh, who has recently published opinion pieces that overtly suggest that shrinking, predominantly white churches should make their buildings available to struggling community organizations and nonprofits, wrote his master's thesis at the London School of Economics on decolonization in British Guiana.



For much of my life, I had assumed that the year 2020 would inaugurate the future, with a serious break between what we think of as past and what we imagine to be a new present. When I was growing up in the '80s, 2020 was often the year in which the future materialized. In those visions, even the terrifying ones, we saw androids indistinguishable from people; exciting missions to Mars; machines capable of destroying civilization and of saving it; and incredible advances in medicine and science. Humans would be starting their expansion into the universe.

These days, the future falls flat, as we lift our eyes not to the stars but turn our ears toward the pronouncements of virologists. Meanwhile, we search for a “new normal,” failing to consider that the “new normal” may be that there is no normalcy to come. This year may have well put an end to the past, to the usual. We may be entering a time that will continue to look very different from what we've seen before. But if I've learned anything this year, it's that it can be incredibly hard to imagine what December might bring when you're still inside of November. Some days, it seems difficult to consider Wednesday when you're trapped within Tuesday evening. It's in this uncertainty that I find hope in Scriptures and in the gospel message of Jesus Christ, who reminds us to abandon worry (Matthew 6). My friends, no matter how much we toil and spin, we are not going to be able to predict tomorrow's events. Next year is as unknown to us as 2040. But what we do know is the cross—we can look to the cross. Through it we can learn from our mistakes, our oversights and our misinterpretations. We can ensure that our attention isn't elsewhere, waiting for God to restore an order that was never holy in the first place.

What may replace that order? That's up to God—and maybe us, too. Let us move forward with our eyes open. Let us open our minds and hearts to God. Let us set aside our assumptions, expectations and worries. Let us walk with Christ into this new year, which will bring new things. ■