

Pandemic Patchwork: An Introduction to the Eaton Crafting Group's Quilts of Kindness.

As I write this introduction to the Quilt of Kindness book, so beautifully put together by Kathy and John at Christ Church, the radio announces that today is the eve of the anniversary of the first lockdown, introduced by the British Government on the 23rd of March 2020. As a result of the global pandemic, the British people have experienced three lockdowns and a raft of restrictions, that have waxed and waned according to the progress of this devastating virus and the resulting scientific research. With over 126,000 people having died of Covid-19 in the United Kingdom, Tuesday the 23rd of March will be a national day of reflection, remembering all those who have lost their lives to date.

This book reproduces an image of each textile square created by individual parishioners that make up two quilts – a stitched quilt made up of embroidered and printed fabric squares and a blanket made up of knitted squares. Each image is accompanied by some text that explains the meaning or story behind the square, written by the person who stitched, knitted, painted, drew, chose and wrote the printed words that make up these uniquely beautiful and meaningful objects. Created out of adversity by a group of people brought together by the Eaton Crafters Group, this has been a collaborative project, bringing together a diverse group of people with a wide range of talents and expertise.

The group assembling the fabric quilt have taken turns in stitching the fifty-six patches, made by members of the Eaton Parishes' community, onto the large piece of dark blue fabric and once this was done, they embroidered uplifting words about the groups' experience of making the quilt in red thread onto a strip of material, which has been stitched around the edge of the quilt, '...making a circle round the community's work'. We have worked through the design, making and interpretation of the quilts together with great care and patience, learning together along the way, striving to produce a handmade object that represents our shared experience of living through this pandemic.

Vivien Humber's first email at the start of May 2020 about a Craft and Chat group on Zoom suggested a Quilt of Kindness as a possible project, intending to include anyone that might need human contact (albeit virtual) and something to take part in that might help them get through the forthcoming period of isolation. She wrote that '...participants don't have to be involved in a craft activity - they might just want to chat. We want to make a Quilt or Cloth of Kindness, a wonderful, finished product, a constructive output at a very unusual time to celebrate hope over adversity.' The project had kindness at its heart and the group planned to provide a supportive, safe and uplifting space for those of us who might struggle with being shut away from our friends and family for long periods of time by giving us a prayerful, meditative and therapeutic activity which would help support our mental health and well-being with our Christian faith at its heart.

This idea reminded me of other block quilts from the past that had been stitched by people held captive against their will, in particular the three quilts made by the women and children interred by the Japanese at the Changi Prisoner of War camp in Singapore during World War II. The Changi Quilt is made out of sixty-six, six-inch squares of fabric cut from rice sacks and the idea was that the finished quilt would be handed over to the women's husbands, held in a military hospital by the Japanese, as a way of reassuring their loved ones that the women were alive. Each woman embroidered motifs and text that represented herself and could be interpreted by her husband. The quilt is held at the Red Cross Museum in London and is

described as being ‘packed with secret messages and hidden meanings’. The Changi Quilt offers up representations of the women’s experience of internment and the ways in which they remained optimistic. The floral motifs and stitch techniques are typical of embroidery from the interwar and Second World War period.

Similarly, we planned that the squares that made up our Quilts of Kindness were to reflect our experience of life during the pandemic, with a positive focus on what we had been doing to help pass the time, how we were supporting our mental health, how we were helping others in need or to represent events in the Christian calendar such as Easter and Advent. Several of us created motifs that represented our longing for physical contact...to hug or hold hands with our loved ones again. Some of us worked together to produce a square, bringing our sharing of strengths and friendship to the project. Leisa’s ‘new normal’ square showed concern for the impact the pandemic would have on our young people and the children in our community produced lovely drawings, representing their feelings about what it was like to be in lockdown or produced from one of the Christ Church activity packs sent out during the first weeks of lockdown.

Kathy’s square represented the different ways people have supported NHS workers through ‘acts of kindness’ including the making of facemasks, scrubs bags and the little hearts given to Covid patients and their relatives, unable to be with their loved ones by their bedside. Those who don’t sew or knit, chose bible verses, icons or photographs of found objects which were printed onto material, which were embellished with thread by Michelle. Vivien described Covid-19 as ‘...having left us feeling weary; as though we are in a dry and dusty desert’. She referenced Jeremiah speaking of God being ‘the spring of living water’ refreshing us, even in the driest of places. Valli’s chosen verse suggests we must have faith that God will ‘turn our hardships into opportunities for spiritual growth’. Jacky’s printed image is of a natural wooden cross she found lying on the ground at St Benet’s Abbey as the clouds parted and the sun came out. Shawn chose an Icon of Mary expecting the baby Jesus, given to her by her daughter, which represents Shawn’s work with parents and babies and Mary our Mother as an encouraging example to us all.

Representations of nature, as God’s creation, is a favoured subject, from flowing rivers and seasonal flowers ‘representing the beauty to be found along the way through difficult times’, to a blue silk square representing the rivers and oceans, embroidered with flowers and bees by Mary. As I shielded at Easter, I stitched the view through my window of crab apple blossom and used this motif to frame the Cross of Calvary. God’s creatures are also represented on our quilt, from an endangered Polar bear to ‘No- Collar the Keswick Mill cat’ and a butterfly photographed by Ruth, newly inspired to pursue wildlife photography in her garden.

What became clear in our online meetings was that it was important to use materials we had to hand rather than buy new fabrics and threads. As the craft shops were all closed as ‘non-essential’, not everyone would be able to buy materials online or could afford to do so. This also mirrored the experience of the Changi women, who had to make do with any materials they had brought with them into the camp. The squares are therefore comprised of a wide range of fabrics, some especially meaningful to the person who made them. For example, Jacky contributed two squares of material that came from her daughter’s first tabards made for her to wear as a paediatric nurse thirteen years ago. Vicky used a piece of an embroidered tablecloth, reminiscent of the interwar embroideries used on the Changi Quilt. She re-embroidered the words ‘A new Heaven and a new Earth’ from Revelation 21 1-17 across it,

representing the hope that once out of lockdown the people of the world will emerge with a new, kinder approach to one another and the environment. An old embroidered picture was repurposed as a square, 'linking the past through the process of patient needlework to hope for the future.' Alison's inspiration was a wall hanging and her multi-layered patch is made up of 'fabric I had to hand...mostly batik'. The quilt backing is made from an old sheet.

Also like the women at the Changi camp, we made more than one quilt. Those of us who knit and crochet created thoughtful knitted squares representing, for example, biblical stories such as the five loaves and three fishes knitted by Margaret. This parable representing the Feeding the Five Thousand speaks to the ways in which people have set up foodbanks and delivered food parcels to vulnerable people during the pandemic. Also, the different ways in which people have been able to appreciate nature during lockdown was represented with a knitted kingfisher, spotted beside the River Yare at Eaton Common. A spray of flowers knitted by Margaret represents how people have been appreciating each other's gardens as they go for their daily exercise. Leisa carefully crocheted the squares together. The plan for this blanket, when it is safe to do so, is to use it to cover the knees of someone in church who needs comfort and warmth. For now this blanket will be displayed alongside its stitched sister quilt.

Almost a year on from our first Zoom quilt meeting, we continue to meet according to St. Paul's words on 'the fruit of the Spirit...', with 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control'...to stitch, knit and paint our contributions, safely in our own homes. During the third lockdown, which for most of us has been the most difficult time, Michelle created a series of 'bricks' out of cloth, with words embroidered by a group of people who continued to benefit from the therapeutic value of stitching. These words represent the new language of the pandemic that reflects the extreme challenges faced by the community but also the extraordinary positives, such as 'furlough' and 'vaccination'. These will be stitched onto the reverse of the fabric quilt.

We wait patiently for the time when we can come together to display the quilt, the blanket and this beautiful book, for all to enjoy!

Dr Jane Hattrick.