

Brief Sermon Thoughts from Sunday  
Service: 5<sup>th</sup> July:

‘The Presence of God’s Presence’..

...As I said welcome to you this morning...



It has been for some a long and challenging  
104 days since the lockdown began...perhaps some 14 weeks or so...

**Not sure that anyone saw this ‘coming’**, and for many people there does not seem any end... we have a negativity that is very apparent in the press in particular... **Many people had an inclination that the world and the church would not be the same at the end of this 2020 year**, *but no one foresaw what we have been through so far...* and it has not been pleasant...many of us have suffered from the virus...hopefully mildly...but we perhaps know someone who has been in hospital, or even has succumbed to the virus...and have left their families and friends before their time.

And no one has any answers to date...well not in human terms anyway...

But people are blaming someone....anyone.. God whoever...even those who do not acknowledge him.

**I was reminded of the ironic quote from *Pastor Martin Niemoller*.**

There are several versions of what he may have said, but the point is the same. Speaking about 1930s Germany, he said:

‘First, they came for the Jews; but I did nothing because I am not a Jew. Then they came for the socialists, but I did nothing because I am not a socialist. Then they came for the Catholics, but I did nothing because I am not a Catholic. Finally, they came for me, but by then there was no-one left to help me.’

So, it has been, I thought, with the British and American reaction to the coronavirus.

**First it hit the Chinese, but we aren’t Chinese, and anyway China is far away, and strange things happen there.**

**Then it hit Iran, but we didn’t worry because Iran, too, is far away, and anyway it’s such a very different place.** There are mostly Islamic there...and that does not count... **Then it struck Italy, but we thought**, Well, the Italians are sociable, tactile people of God and the pandemic of course it will spread there, but we’ll be all right.

**And then it arrived in London.** And New York... And suddenly there was no safe space on the planet.

**There is no neutral zone.** No medical equivalent of wartime Switzerland, where you could escape for a while, relax, and ponder what ought to be done.

**So, does anybody know what’s going on?**

**Why is this happening?**

**Is someone trying to tell us something?**

**What are we supposed to do about it?**

**In most of the ancient world, and many parts of the modern world too, major disasters (earthquakes, volcanoes, fires, plagues) are regularly associated with angry gods. Has something bad happened? (Then) Must be because 'someone' has it in for you.** In the old pagan world of Greece and Rome, the assumption was that you hadn't offered the right sacrifices; or you hadn't said the right prayers; **or you did something so truly dreadful**, that even the old amoral gods on Mount Olympus felt it was time to crack down on you.

**But the high-minded philosophers didn't think much of that....**

**They came up with three alternatives.**

**First, the Stoics.** Everything is programmed to turn out the way it does. You can't change it; just learn to fit in.

**Alternatively, the Epicureans.** Everything is random. You can't do anything about it. Make yourself as comfortable as you can.

**Then the Platonists.** The present life is just a shadow of reality. Bad things happen here but we are destined for a different world.

**We have our modern equivalents.**

**Some just want to tough it out. If the bullet's got your name on it, so be it.**

**Most of the modern West is implicitly Epicurean.** Stuff happens, but we want to scramble for comfort, so settle down, self-isolate, plenty of Netflix. This too will pass.

**Some — including some Christians - opt for Plato.** Death isn't the worst that can happen. We're heading somewhere else anyway. All right let's be sensible, but please don't shut down the churches. *Or the golf clubs.*

Meanwhile, in the refugee camps, in the multi-storey tower- blocks, in the slums the suffering gets worse.

**So, faced with the rapid spread of the coronavirus, many people in churches have reached for 'Christian' equivalents of the ancient knee-jerk reactions.**

**The world is full of conspiracy theories anyway:** some in America think it's all China's fault, some in China have said it's all America's fault, and no doubt there are a thousand other ideas running around, spreading themselves as easily as the virus itself and in some ways just as dangerously.

**The blame game is easy - especially when it's always someone else's fault.**

Those who have become accustomed to seeing all issues in terms of today's low-grade but powerful 'culture wars' will simply go for easy answers that reflect that irrelevant stand-off.

**The COVID-19 crisis has, in fact, done to the whole world what Hurricane Katrina did in 2005 for New Orleans:** in its devastating impact, it shows that the **political and social timbers** (whichever side you lean politically) have already been rotting away.

**And then there are specifically (would-be) 'Christian' conspiracy theories.**

Some people think they know exactly what's gone wrong and what God is trying to say through it all.

**Some are saying, eagerly, that this is the sign of the End.** The 'End-Times' industry has been massive in America over the last couple of generations.

**Spin-off versions are popular in most other countries, too.** Former highlights include Hal Lindsey's famous **The Late Great Planet Earth**, and the **Left Behind** series by **Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins**.

They construct a horror-movie scenario out of bits and pieces of the Bible, strung together with the string of fundamentalist piety.

**It's basically Platonic: 'going to heaven' is the aim,** leaving the world behind to its Armageddon, *and the world can go somewhere in a hand basket...* *And now the coronavirus is hailed as the sign that it's all about to happen.*

**For other Christians, this is simply a way of saying: This is a moment of opportunity!** Now that everybody is thinking about death rather than wondering which cupcake to buy, perhaps there will be a **massive turning to God**.

*Perhaps we can use this moment to tell our friends about Jesus and how he can take them to heaven. Perhaps this time they'll listen.* (and if you are, I hope they do listen)

**Others quote the Old Testament prophets to produce a version of the ancient pagan theories.**

When bad things happen, it must be God that's done it (because he's responsible for everything), so that must mean that he is angry with us for some reason. The prophet Amos comes to mind: 'Does disaster befall a city, he asked (Amos 3.6), 'unless the Lord has done it?' Famine, blight and pestilence - all of them were meant to lead God's people to repent of their evil ways (4.6-11).

**But it didn't work.** So now even worse things will happen.

*So, we turn to our reading this morning: (Psalm 50) I could have shared many a scripture with you...which in many ways say the same thing...*

*But in Context: In Psalm 50 and 52, David and Asaph continue to make the distinction between those who follow God and those who don't.*

[Psalm 51](#) is the well-known passage in which David acknowledges his sin with Bathsheba, repents before God, and asks for restoration.

No matter what we've done, no matter how far we've fallen, no matter what is happening in our world...certain truths are true...

God is always ready to forgive and welcome us once again into his presence. You will never go where God is not. Envision the next few hours of your life.

**Where will you find yourself?** In home, having lunch...(café open) God indwells with you as you share his provision.

On the highways/road? His presence lingers among the traffic. In the hospital operating room, the executive boardroom, the in-laws' living room, (not the in-laws..!) the funeral home. God will be there. **"He is not far from any one of us"** ([Ac 17:27](#)).

Any one of us, or each of us.

**God does not play favourites.** From the masses on the city /town avenues to the isolated villagers in valleys and jungles, all people can enjoy God's presence.

**But many don't.** *They plod through life as if there were no God to love them.* As if their only strength was their own.

**As if the only solution comes from within, not above.** *They live God-less lives.*

But there are **Josephs among us:** *people who sense, see, and hear the presence of God.* **People who pursue God as Moses did.**

When suddenly tasked with the care of two million ex-slaves, the liberator began to wonder...

*How am I going to provide for these people?*

*How will we defend ourselves against enemies?*

*How can we survive?*

Moses needed supplies, managers, equipment, and experience.

But when Moses prayed for help, he declared, **"If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here"** ([Ex 33:15](#)).

Moses preferred to go nowhere with God than anywhere without him.

**As did David. The king ended up in an Egypt of his own making.**

He seduced the wife of a soldier and covered up his sin with murder and deceit. He hid from God for a year, but he could not hide forever.

When he finally confessed his immorality, he made only one request of God: **"Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me"** ([Ps 51:11](#)).

David did not pray, **"Do not take my crown from me. Do not take my kingdom from me. Do not take my army from me."**

David knew what mattered most.

*The presence of God. He begged God for it.*

Do likewise. **Make God's presence your passion.**

As you focus more on seeing God's presence throughout the day, make it a point to share his presence—**his hope, his joy, his peace**—with those around you.

**Do I have an answer to this world's virus situation...well probably not.**

**But I am not here to offer you a social commentary. Just to proclaim Gods word as truth...**

**What I do know however is that God's Word does not change...**His word and his promises have not changed just because of the Virus...in fact the opposite is true...

I would say that God's word is more 'truer' (?) than ever before...

**What we still need more than ever is God's presence... we cannot dare not live our lives without seeking His presence...**

**Paul says the same thing:**

**People of faith who know Paul's writings know that Romans 8 is full of faith, hope and love.** It begins with a great declaration that there is no condemnation for those who believe in the Messiah Jesus.

<sup>37</sup> No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

**The Spirit gives supporting witness to what our own Spirit is saying, that we are God's children.**

*And if we're children, we are also heirs: heirs of God, and fellow heirs with the Messiah, as long as we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.*

**Here we return to the theme of the way God wants to run his world.**

Therefore, if something strange happens in the world, we assume that this must be what God intended, or at least what he chose to permit. We then try to draw inferences from this ('if God allowed this to happen, it must be because he was trying to tell us something').

**Once again, I insist: God can do whatever God wants, and if he chooses on occasions to do, or permit, certain things for certain purposes, that is entirely his business, not ours.**

Creation itself is on tiptoe with expectation, eagerly awaiting the moment when God's children will be revealed. Creation, you see, was subjected to pointless futility, not of its own volition, but because of the one who placed it in this subjection, in the hope that creation itself would be freed from its slavery to decay, to enjoy the freedom that comes when God's children are glorified.

In other words: God always wanted to rule his world through human beings. That is part of what it means to be made in God's image.

It was gloriously fulfilled in the human being Jesus; and the way creation will at last become what it was always meant to be through the wise, rescuing, restorative rule of renewed, resurrected human beings.

All those indwelt by the Spirit are, like Jesus, to be image-bearers, 'shaped according to the model of the image of his son', as Paul puts it in Romans 8 verse 29.

**So, what does this mean in practice?**

It means that, when the world is going through great convulsions, the followers of Jesus are called to be people of Prayer at the place where the world is in pain.

Paul puts it like this, in a three-stage movement: **first, the groaning of the world; second, the groaning of the Church; third, the groaning of the Spirit - within the Church within the world.**

This is the ultimate answer, I think, to those who want to say that the present Coronavirus crisis is a clear message from God which we can at once decode, either as a sign of the End, a call to repent, or simply an opportunity for a standard kind of evangelism.

**Here's how Paul expresses it:**

We know that the entire creation is groaning together, and going through labour pains together, up until the present time. Not only so: we too, we who have the first fruits of the Spirit's life within us, are groaning within ourselves, as we eagerly await our adoption, the redemption of our body. We were saved, you see, in hope...

In the same way, too, the Spirit comes alongside and helps us in our weakness. We don't know what to pray for as we ought to; but that same Spirit pleads on our behalf, with groanings too deep for words. And the Searcher of Hearts knows what the Spirit is thinking, because the Spirit pleads for God's people according to God's will. (Romans 8.22-27)

Notice that Paul here says more or less the exact opposite of what some followers of Jesus are wanting to say at this time. **Here is the world, groaning in travail: yes, we recognize that picture all right.**

There hasn't been a moment like this in my lifetime.

It is taking its toll not only in many thousands of deaths, but in the stress and distress of millions who are shut in without company or help, or at the mercy of abusive partners, or losing jobs and livelihoods; or simply those whose temperament plunges them into gloom after a few days of being confined to the house. We know all that.

**So where should the Church (and therefore us) be in the middle of it?**

As we've seen, some are saying that the Church should be commenting from the sidelines: it's because you are all sinners! It's because the End is near! We know what's going on and we need to tell you!

**Yet that's not what Paul says.** Paul says that the followers of Jesus are caught up in the same 'groaning'.

**The thing above all which the Church should be doing at the present time is praying. But this is a strange prayer indeed.**

Here we are, at the heart of one of the most glorious chapters in Scripture, and here is Paul saying *'We don't know what to pray for as we ought. We are at a loss! He implies that this isn't something we ought to be ashamed of. It is the natural place to be. It is a kind of exile; a kind of fasting; a moment of not-knowing, not being in 'control', not sharing what we might think of as 'glory' at all.*

At the very moment when we discover that we ourselves are 'groaning' and don't know what to say or do, at that same moment we find that God himself, God the Holy Spirit, is 'groaning' as well, groaning without words. There is a pattern here.

Those who have long pondered the story of Jesus will recognize it. We expect God to be, as we might say, 'in charge' taking control, sorting things out, getting things done.

But the God we see in Jesus is the God who wept at the tomb of his friend.  
The God we see in Jesus is the God-the-Spirit who groans without words.  
The God we see in Jesus is the one who, to demonstrate what his kind of 'being in charge' would look like, did the job of a slave and washed his disciples' feet.

**So, what are we saying? Not only do we, the followers of Jesus, not have any words to say, any great pronouncements on 'what this all means' to trumpet out to the world (the world, of course, isn't waiting eagerly to hear us anyway); but we, the followers of Jesus, find ourselves caught up in the groaning of creation, and we discover that at the same time God the Spirit is groaning within us.**

**That is our vocation: to be in prayer, perhaps wordless prayer, at the point where the world is in pain.**

*At those very moments when we find ourselves weeping with grief at the death of a friend or family member, or at the impossibility of having a proper funeral, or at the horror of millions of the world's poorest being at risk, or simply because being locked down is inherently depressing — at those moments, when any words we try to say come out as sobs or tears, we have to remind ourselves that this is how God the Spirit is present at the heart of the agony of creation.*

**We don't know what to pray for as we ought to; but that same Spirit pleads on our behalf, with groanings too deep for words. And the Searcher of Hearts knows what the Spirit is thinking, because the Spirit pleads for God's people according to God's will.**

**Amen....**