

Greenways Benefice Weekly Devotional (No 6)

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On disaster, judgement and prayer

Is God using the Covid-19 virus and the ensuing crisis to punish people and bring them to repentance?

Even in the Book of Common Prayer, petitioning God in times of disaster is linked with sin, judgment and punishment.

It says of such disasters are something that “we for our iniquities have worthily deserved” and that “we do most justly suffer for our iniquity.” They are instruments of a God of “wrath” through which we are “for our sins punished” and “justly humbled.”

The God portrayed in the Bible is a God who is absolutely and totally sovereign over everything. Not a sparrow falls to the ground without His knowledge and His say-so. Weather is completely under His control, as is disease and sickness.

In the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918–19, the Bishop of Zamora in Spain called people to defy health warnings and pray and attend mass for nine days ‘to placate God’s legitimate anger’. This included kissing a relic of Saint Rocco (the saint of plague and pestilence) leading to massive cross-infection, and it resulted in the highest mortality rate in Spain. Was this God’s will?

These are age-old questions, and they defy a simplistic answer.

Not unusually, it is uniformly the poor who are always affected more by these disasters—even if the rich perceive themselves to be the most affected, simply because they focus on their own concerns. There is no doubt that those who rushed to the supermarkets and hoarded food will be the last to run out if there are food shortages.

There is a massive theme within the bible texts that wrestles with the questions of why the world *is not* the way God intends it to be:

In Psalm 37, we are offered an answer—but the answer is *not* that God exercises meticulous control over all events, it is that God exercises *ultimate* control. His intention *will* be exercised and fulfilled, at some point in the future, and human mortality ultimately brings judgement to us all. Thus our response to this disparity is to wait in patience for God’s will to be revealed.

I think ultimately, we can’t fully fathom the mystery, because we are “in time” and of limited and finite minds whereas God is outside time and of infinite mind... So I’m happy to come to a point where I say “This much I know...” and trust that is all I need to know for now, from God’s point of view – because he hasn’t told us everything...

Scripture does tell us some things quite clearly, but that doesn’t mean it offers us packaged answers to these difficult questions. Jesus reminds us that God ‘makes the sun rise on the evil and the good,

and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust'. In other words, you cannot measure sin and righteousness by the events of life!

Jesus does not deny sin has consequences, nor does he deny that sin leads to judgement; instead, he rejects the theory that those who encounter calamity have necessarily been marked out by God as more deserving of judgement than those who do not.

As Paul says in Romans 8, like creation we will be released from the slavery of corruption when God also transforms his people into complete image-bearers that manifest his rule. Until then, creation groans and suffers pain. And we do, too.

God came into his world, took sin and death into himself and broke their enslaving grip over his world. And God has promised that he is bringing about a future new creation that will be completely free of devastation and chaos. All those who call upon God in Christ will inhabit that future world and enjoy a reality characterised by peace and blessing.

We do not have guarantees in this world, except that God will one day transform his creation. There are no guarantees that everything will work out as we want it to. We will experience suffering, pain and loss.

But in Christ, God has provided a future hope. The future world is one that is purified because Christ is already ruling over it.

It is our daily prayer that 'Your name be honoured, your kingdom come, your will be done'. This future alignment to the reign of God, present in our lives, but not yet manifest in the world, is central to Christian discipleship.

God's wrath *is* being revealed in our reaping the consequences of our decisions. The coronavirus raises the question of our own delicacy and mortality so that we might consider what is truly important. When life does return to 'normal', we will do well to have evaluated which parts of 'normal' are worth retaining.

More than 520,000 people die each year in the UK, which is nearly 1,500 a day—and yet we mostly ignore this reality. With the reporting of Coronavirus deaths (which are very small by comparison), we are being made more aware of our mortality. Would that this will make us think about 'the things that do matter most'—and even come to trust in the one who has triumphed over death by his resurrection?

In the UK, the virus is forcing us to confront the reality of how much we have valued our health service—and how much we have valued those who provide our essential services of basic medical provision and food supply.

In the West more widely, the pandemic is bringing judgement on our self-centred culture, where our decisions are based on what we want, rather than on social solidarity.

Ironically, it will force us to adopt the measure that climate campaigners have been urging on us which we have listened to with reluctance.

We would do well to listen and pray more now.