

DIGITAL CHURCH SERVICE
SUNDAY 17TH JANUARY 2021

(BILL BARRY)

WELCOME & INTRODUCTION

HYMN

Sing We the King

TIME OF PRAISE

Psalms 148 and 91

HYMN

A Mighty Fortress is our God

BIBLE READING

1 Peter 1 v1 – 2 v3

REFLECTION

Where is God in this pandemic?

I have been asking the question that I feel that many others have asked in our present circumstances.:

“Where is God in this pandemic?”

I know the answer to that question, because Jesus has already told us. Matthew’s Gospel, chapter 28, verse 20: Jesus said: “Behold, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

God right here with us, in the midst of this pandemic. If you want confirmation of that, read Psalm 139, which says that God is wherever I go, I cannot escape from Him, because He is everywhere. He is always with me.

End of sermon? Well, no, because there is another question.

This question arises out of a conviction that I share with many of the bible writers, and with many others throughout history – the Early Church Fathers, the Reformers, John Wesley, and even down to the present day – which is, that God is Sovereign. He is King of kings and Lord of lords, ruler of the rulers of Earth, Lord of all Creation – which includes this coronavirus.

So, out of that conviction, then, there arises another question: “What is God doing in this pandemic; what are His purposes in allowing it?”

So, I ask God directly – but if He is answering I can’t hear. Perhaps I am deaf to what He is trying to say to me. So I don’t know the answer to the question; but I can arrive at some kind of response by reading the Bible.

But surely, you ask, there is nothing in the Bible that specifically says that such and such a thing is going to happen in such and such a year? Well, no there isn’t.

But we do know that it tells us about God.

So what does the Bible, which was finished, completed, about 2000 years ago have to say to us today about our present circumstances?

Well the Bible tells us about God – it is His self-revelation of Himself to us. Reading the Bible, we see how God reacted to situations in the past – what He did in terms of the chaos and the mess that humanity, in our rebellion against Him, in our sin, and in our folly, managed to get ourselves into.

God is our rock; He is trustworthy, reliable – even perhaps at times predictable. He does not change.

But history repeats itself. It is said that those who fail to learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat it’s mistakes.

When God encounters a situation today which is similar to a situation which He encountered in the past, it is likely that He will respond in pretty much the same way. So, are the situations in the Bible which are similar to what we are experiencing today?

The answer to that is “Yes” – for those who have eyes to see.

Let’s shift tack slightly, and think about the world situation pre-covid. Are there any parallels with any Biblical situations? Yes.

We have a world in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer;
There is virulent and murderous anti-Semitism, getting worse all the time;
Christians are being persecuted worldwide like never before – even in Britain;
Millions are starving because of unfair trading systems which rob the poor to line the pockets of the rich;
God is widely hated, His ways reviled, His people persecuted, oppressed, killed.
The prophet Habakkuk complained to God “Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore the law is paralysed and justice never prevails.” 1 v3

I won't go into detail about further conversations between God and Habakkuk on that particular occasion – you can read the book for yourself to find out. The only thing I would say is that God did directly answer Habakkuk on that occasion, telling him what He intended to do in the face of the particular situation, historical and political that Habakkuk encountered at the time.

But Habakkuk protested again, saying, in effect, that God's proposed cure was worse than the disease. 1 v12
So the question for Habakkuk was “What do you want? Do you want to see God deal with unrighteousness, or do you want to have a comfortable life?”

Habakkuk was not the first to make those complaints, and he certainly won't be the last. God's actions in dealing with injustice are always painful: most especially for the perpetrators of injustice.

The story of the Exodus of God's people from slavery in Egypt is illustrative of this. There is a long and detailed story about the ten plagues sent against Egypt. The purpose of the plagues is explained to Moses by God, and in learning about the purposes of those plagues, we might be able – there's no guarantee – but we might be able to learn something about what God might be doing through this plague today.

First: Liberation. God hates injustice. He tells Moses, at the encounter at the burning bush, that you can read about in the book of Exodus, that He has heard the cry of His people, who are groaning under the injustice and cruelty of slavery in Egypt. “Go and say to Pharaoh ‘Set my people free’”

After complaining, Moses goes – and Pharaoh says “No”. So what does God do? Wring his hands in defeat? “Oh dear, oh dear – what do I do now that Pharaoh has defied me and won't do what I tell him to?”
No – He is not going to be defeated – not even by Pharaoh. So He sends plagues. Defy God – and suffer the consequences.

One of the things that God said to Moses was that He was sending the plagues “So that you may know that I am God.” but Moses already knew that. Well yes – but here, God is speaking through Moses to His people Israel.

Perhaps the Israelites were complaining; wondering “is God real, or is he merely imagination?” If He is powerful, why doesn't he do something? Perhaps he is not powerful enough against the gods of Egypt. Perhaps he doesn't care. So God says to Moses “So that you may know that I am God ..” I am going to do these things. And the plagues prove that to the people of Israel.

God also said to Moses that he is sending the plagues so that Pharaoh, and by implication all of Egypt, will know that he is God.

Commentators point out that each of the ten plagues is a direct attack on one or more of the gods of Egypt. For example, Egypt worshipped the river Nile as a god – they called it “The giver of life”. So God turned the Nile to blood, so that instead of bringing life, the Nile brought death. Egypt worshipped the sun, so God sent darkness, blotting out the sun, so that it could not shine.

So through these, and the other plagues, God was saying to Egypt that He is more powerful than the gods of Egypt.

Are there parallels today?

Leaders of nations persecuting the people of God, as Egypt was persecuting Israel. That's one parallel.

Billions crying out for deliverance from cruelty and oppression – as did the Israelites.

People defying God and refusing to live their lives in accordance with His instructions, given to us in the Bible. Again – yes.

People crying out with Habakkuk “Why do you tolerate wrong?” Again – yes.

So what will God do to answer the cries of the oppressed? Nothing? Do you really believe that the God justice will not act to bring that salvation from injustice and cruelty that billions are crying out for?

What do we put our trust in today? What “gods” do we rely on, in place of the One True God?

Let’s think about some of these things for a moment – perhaps you can think of others.

What about money? In this pandemic, the world’s financial systems are being hit hard.

Trade. Again – in the face of this pandemic, many companies, trading companies, are going bankrupt.

Science. We rejoice that they have created vaccines – more than one – against this virus. Salvation! But

wait. Even as the first vaccinations are being done, the virus has mutated, and it may well mutate again.

There are concerns – will these vaccines be effective against the mutated virus? Will they continue to be effective as the virus mutates further? Will science be able to keep up with a continually changing mutation in the virus?

And so, one after another, all the things we rely on most are being broken by this pandemic – proven to be not, after all, the rocks that we thought they were. We find that by standing on those things, rather than trusting in God, and obeying His word, we are, as Jesus said in his parable, standing on sandy ground. This storm has hit us, and we are being knocked sideways.

And so back to Habakkuk again. After further conversations with God, he was then faced with the inevitable disturbance, uncertainty and terror of what God was about to do in bringing the Babylonians against Judah. All he had left was to lean on God.

Habakkuk chapter 3 and verse 19: “The Sovereign Lord is my strength, he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights.”

Back to this second question “What is God doing; what are His purposes?”

Perhaps we are now ready with some sort of answer that makes some sort of sense – bearing in mind that this is only MY thoughts on the subject, and it might not be God’ thoughts.

Perhaps the answer to what is God’s purposes in this pandemic is the same as what God said to Moses as His purpose in sending the plagues against Egypt. “So that you will know that I am God”. So that Israel will take God seriously, and know that God does care, and does have power to deliver – and also so that Egypt, in his context, and in our context, all those who persecute Jews and Christians around the world and pour scorn on those who follow God will also know that there is indeed a God, and that He is taking action; so that we will know that it isn’t money, or science or politics or trade or anything else, but God alone who is the one who can be trusted and relied on in all circumstances.

It is remarkable that at moments of extreme stress that we read about in the Bible – stress, violence and uncertainty – the repeated refrain from God to His people is: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for I am with you.”

So we learn then, that we must stick to God; take Him seriously; turn away from everything that is not God – everything that leads us away from Him, and return to Him. Humble ourselves; give up our pride of ruling ourselves, and allow Jesus, King of kings and Lord of lords, to rule over our lives – as individuals; as congregations; as church; as a nation. Amen.

INTERCESSIONS

We bring our intercessions, our petitions and requests before God in prayer. I am going to use, as a skeleton, as it were, the prayer that Jesus taught us – the Lord’s Prayer – praying it phrase by phrase and expanding on those phrases. Let us pray.

Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name.

O Lord our God, you are King of kings, the high and holy God who sits enthroned above the heavens. Yet you also delight in calling us your children, and tell us to address you as Father. We know that there are many who hate you, revile you your ways, and pour scorn on all who seek to worship you and obey you. We pray for your enemies, that you will soften hard hearts, open deaf ears and blind eyes, that they will be enabled to see and hear, and understand how very great your love for them truly is. We pray that they will learn to turn away from their rejection of you, and from their rebellion against your ways. We pray that they will humble themselves under your mighty hand, and receive from you the salvation which Jesus accomplished for them by his death on the cross. We pray that they will come to give you honour and praise, that your good name may be glorified in all the Earth.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on Earth as in heaven.

Lord, at her Coronation, Queen Elizabeth was given a copy of your book, the Bible. She was also given the Orb, with a cross on top, signifying that Jesus Christ is lord of all the earth. It was made clear to her that she rules as Queen only under your authority – and that the Bible is your Royal Law by which she must rule. We pray, Lord, for the councillors, for Government, and for all Members of Parliament, that they also, following the faithful example of their sovereign, will recognise your kingly rule, and govern Great Britain according to your ways of truth, justice, peace and love. O Lord, stir up Parliament to turn them all to you, to revoke all ungodly laws, and to replace them with laws that better reflect your will.

We pray for all the governments of the world, especially for those which cruelly persecute your people. We pray that they will turn from their evil ways, that all peoples on earth will be ruled in accordance with your ways.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Give us this day our daily bread.

Lord we confess that in our greed we want more than we need, and thereby deprive others of what they need. Lord, make us content with what you are pleased to give us, without constantly clamouring for more. We pray for those who have less than what is needed to survive. The hungry, the homeless, the rejected, the unloved. You have commanded us, Lord, to house them, feed them, and show them that you care for them. Lead us and guide us, help us to do your will.

We pray for those who are helping. Especially for those in the medical services, who are currently being overwhelmed by a flood of patients going sick with covid-19. Keep them safe from infection, lord, encourage them in their distress at the suffering and death they witness every day. Be close to them, let them know that you are with them – especially in the High-Dependency Units.

Lord, in you mercy, hear our prayer.

Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.

Forgive us, Lord, when we stray from your ways. Forgive us especially when we fail to forgive those who sin against us. Give us grace to forgive those who hurt us, even as you forgave from the cross those who had nailed you there.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Lead us not to the time of trial.

Lord, we ask you to be with us in these difficult times. How can we pray “keep us FROM the time of trial” when we are in the middle of the most difficult trial many of have ever known? Perhaps we can re-phrase the prayer, and ask, Lord, “keep us safe THROUGH this time of trial”. Not just us, Lord, who pray this, but all from whom we pray.

You, Lord Jesus, are our Saviour, our Healer. By your stripes, we are healed. We ask you to fulfil your word, by stretching out your hand in love and mercy – heal all who are sick, forgive all their sins.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Yours is the power to answer or petitions. Let your glory be known, as you answer our requests. Amen

HYMN

God Will Take care of You

BLESSING