

SERMON

at the time of the coronavirus epidemic

Psalm 33:8-22

Matthew 25:31-40

In the space of a few days something has changed, something fundamental. It's as though the world has silently shifted on its axis. Roads are eerily quiet, the odd person who passes seems to scurry away avoiding any chance of contact. In the old days lepers had to ring a bell, now we are all potential lepers. Suddenly we feel very vulnerable, facing an invisible, unknown enemy which may strike at random and unpredictably, but with the elderly and weak particularly at risk. Anxiety, helplessness, uncertainty and fear are in the air. This is exactly the time our churches should be open as places of sanctuary and prayer, if not for services.

Isolating yourself not only keeps you safe, it helps others too. It is right for us to try to take care of ourselves, but that easily turns to selfishness – panic buying and hoarding, pushing and elbowing, hundreds in Italy running away to the south to avoid the lock down in the north and so spreading the infection, the U.S. seeking exclusive rights to a new vaccine being developed in Germany. Yet we also see remarkable instances of the human spirit and altruism – communities responding to the needs of the elderly and the self-isolating, the dedication of medics, Italians singing defiantly on their balconies.

The heroic story of the village of Eyham in Derbyshire in 1665 makes us think. Faced with the bubonic plague they chose to self-isolate, led by the Anglican rector. The squire had left. Services were held in the open air, families buried their own dead, three-quarters of them died, but the plague was contained. People brought food to the boundary wall from outside, where villagers had left coins soaked in vinegar in the hope of killing the virus. It lasted fourteen months.

This crisis is already reminding us what it means to be a human being in this world. There is no such thing as an "isolated individual". There is no "self-made man". Some rich people are vainly hiring planes to try to escape the virus. Each of us depends upon wider society, upon the much talked-about social infrastructure, upon our neighbour who may be in China. And not just for material things – for everyday kindnesses and cooperation. We need the touch of another human, not one that infects or abuses, but one that shows affection and welcome. When this is over, sharing the peace in church may have new meaning.

The virus knows no boundaries. Each nation tries to beat it by itself, but we can only do it together. If we did not know that from climate change, we know it now. The virus is a great leveller- it makes no distinctions between nation, race or religion, though it highlights that some are more vulnerable than others and our neglect of the elderly, the sick, the homeless, the prisoners and the poor.

Psalms 33 speaks of “The Lord looking down from heaven and seeing all the human race”, everyone -the UK, Europe, the US, China, West and East, North and South, the whole earth. “He spoke and it all came to be”. “He fashions all their hearts and observes all their deeds”. His eyes never close. “His eye is on those who fear him to deliver their souls from death and keep them alive in famine”. His will is to save the world from disease, but it cannot happen if we put all our trust in ourselves, (the psalmist refers to Israel’s trust in its military prowess.) Of course our best efforts are required to combat disease, but in the end we cannot save ourselves. “The Lord brings to nothing the plans of the nations”.

I am sure scientists will find a vaccine for this virus, but this crisis has demonstrated that what matters in the end is respect for creation. The coronavirus lives in animal life which needs to be respected, not just carelessly exploited for food as seems to have happened in China. And respect for one another, the common good as well as my own survival. That respect is rooted in our respect for God, when “the whole earth stands in awe of him”.

In Matthew’s gospel we have another picture of the nations of the earth before God, (“He observes all their deeds”), but this time God is not looking down from above but looking at us in the face of our fellow human beings. “I was sick and you visited me”, “I was a foreigner and you welcomed me”, no boundaries or distinctions, just being kind, caring and humane. But notice, those who showed their care did not in fact see God in the faces of the suffering – they were surprised and amazed to hear it. “When did we see you..?” It was their generous actions that counted not any religious motive. But we have seen God’s face in Jesus and our neighbour and we have no excuse.

Because we have seen Jesus, we do not see God removed and remote from human suffering in some heavenly realm, and not even just sharing it with his creation, but taking it upon himself, giving his own life for his creation, as we are reminded by the sacrifice of the people of Eyham.