

Dear Friend

On this extraordinarily beautiful spring morning, may we all be able to give thanks to God for the wonders of the natural world, and although many of us may be forced to stay indoors, hopefully it's not too cold out there to open the windows and take in some deep breaths of fresh air, wherever you are, from Croydon to Canada and the USA!

Following Richard's interesting foray into the realm of good and evil yesterday, I hope you are ready for a bit more theology as I want to ask another question: "Where is God in all of this?" I saw an email the other day calling on Christians to pray for God's intervention to halt the spread of Covid 19. I found myself wondering whether I could honestly pray that kind of prayer. Although there are times in the Bible when God is portrayed as sending upon people afflictions such as a plague (Exodus 32.35), fire (Numbers 11.1), or poisonous snakes (Numbers 21.6), these are seen as punishment by God for the disobedience of his people as he leads them through the wilderness. Is this virus the same thing, a punishment from God against a sinful world? It is certainly the case that the world is full of sin, and God would be perfectly justified in punishing us by means of this virus. The question is, is this what's happening?

In the story of the Exodus God had revealed his power through the plagues in Egypt - showing that he - the Lord - was mightier than all the gods of Egypt - and supremely at the Red Sea when the people of Israel went through the waters on dry ground. This was the defining act of God's saving his people and again and again throughout the Old Testament God describes himself to his people as "The LORD who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Psalm 81.10 is just one example). So when the people complained and grumbled and disobeyed the Lord's clear instructions, God was mightily displeased! This people had witnessed both his power and his provision, yet they continued to complain and rebel! God was determined to form from this rabble of slaves a people who would be his own, to whom he longed to show his grace and his goodness, so when they refused to obey him, he disciplined them in order that they might learn to obey, trust and follow him - like every good parent who disciplines their children, not to hurt them but to help them (cf Hebrews 12.4-13).

The situation today is very different. There is in the world now a huge amount of ignorance about the nature of God, and his will and purpose for his creation. There is also a great degree of unbelief as secular humanism gains ever greater traction, such that to question it and the values it espouses invites scorn and derision. The majority of people have not witnessed the power of God; in fact a vast number never give God a second thought, although they are quite likely to take his holy name upon their lips as a profanity (now there's an old word!).

So what might God, our loving parent, want? Surely it must be for people to turn to him, to seek him and hopefully to find him, not as a punishing vengeful God but as a God who longs to embrace the world with healing love. So whenever natural disasters occur - and in spite of the conspiracy theorists out there, even if this was caused by human beings eating unclean animals in unclean conditions, this is surely the worst natural disaster to strike this planet for centuries. God allows such things to occur to bring us to our senses, to wake us up out of our complacency, to shake our confidence in worldly systems and powers, such that we open our eyes to the fragility of human life, and to our preciousness, both to God and to each other. To bring out the best in human nature as people such as medical workers, carers and good neighbours, act selflessly and even sacrificially for the sake of others. Sadly of course, it also brings out the worst in people as self-serving and self-centred people try to profit and make gains - often financial - out of pain, suffering and desperation. The loss they will eventually experience far outweighs whatever short term gains they may have made.

So I believe that the Covid 19 virus - however it started - is a wakeup call to the world. God has promised that he will shake the heavens and the earth (Haggai 2.6) which is a prelude to what he describes as the coming of the "Desired of all the nations" v.7. Pretty much everyone wants the same things: peace, security, health, long life, and happiness. What many people don't yet realise that all those things and so much more come to us through Jesus Christ. As Jesus himself said, all the terrible things that have kept on happening in the world since the beginning of time, are just birth pains. Birth pains are acute (or so I'm given to understand!) but what follows is unbridled joy as we welcome the beginning of a new life. So will it be for the world, when Jesus Christ comes back to us. This is where our eyes of faith need to keep focussing.

It often takes a great tragedy and untold suffering for us to see the truth. The truth that God is with us, sharing our pain through the cross of Christ, where the arms of Jesus are stretched out in love for the whole world. May we similarly reach out in a self-sacrificial way to show love to our neighbours, both next door and across the miles. So where is God? Right here, right now.

Verses for today:

I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people – ²for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. ³This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, ⁴who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

1. Timothy 2.1-4



YOUR HOROSCOPE THIS WEEK

 ARIES You'll be spending time in your home	 LIBRA You'll be spending time in your home
 TAURUS You'll be spending time in your home	 SCORPIO You'll be spending time in your home
 GEMINI You'll be spending time in your home	 SAGITTARIUS You'll be spending time in your home
 CANCER You'll be spending time in your home	 CAPRICORN You'll be spending time in your home
 LEO You'll be spending time in your home	 AQUARIUS You'll be spending time in your home
 VIRGO You'll be spending time in your home	 PISCES You'll be spending time in your home

An amusing image sent by Joseph Wasef from a friend in Egypt:

Lesley Mead, who loves cats, sent these to amuse us:



Seen on the internet:

1. Cat meowing furiously into camera - "Oscar DEMANDS I panic buy his favourite treats!"
2. Person working from home dresses their cat in collar and tie "so he will look professional whilst in the office".

Finally, Jan Williams has asked that the following be shared as widely as possible;

LET'S MAKE SOME NOISE!!

With much love and prayer to you, and with thanks for your love and prayers for us!

Simon

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During these unprecedented times they need to know that we are grateful.

Please join us on: **26th of March at 8pm** for a big applause (from front doors, garden, balcony, windows, living rooms, etc) to show all nurses; doctors; gps and carers our appreciation for their ongoing hard work and fight against this virus.

Please share this message, so we can make sure, the word spreads and reaches all to join!



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