

A Pastoral Letter to the faithful of the Diocese of St Asaph



We live in unprecedented times for most of us. Maybe some will remember the Second World War, and the demands made of society then, although none now will remember the outbreak of “Spanish Flu” which came a hundred years ago in the wake of the end of the First World War, and which is the nearest historical parallel. Our governments and the Church have had to make difficult decisions in the light of the crisis that we all face in society. The virus is no respecter of age, faith, gender or background, and, unless we take government guidelines extremely seriously, we are all at risk.

At times like this, what should be our response? The verse that I am drawn to is in 1Peter 5.7:

Cast all your anxieties upon him, for he cares for you.

God does not offer us any special favours or exemption clauses as Christians, but he does make several promises. As Christians we believe that Christ shares in our every pain, sorrow and failing. “We do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin” wrote the apostle in the Letter to the Hebrews (4.15), and Jesus’ life among us is God’s sign and proof that he is committed to this world, and willing to take on his shoulders all the grief and pain that we might have to face.

There is a strange story in the Old Testament, where the Israelites are afflicted by a plague. Moses is told by God to build a bronze statue of a serpent on a cross. Those afflicted who look at this statue are promised healing. I don’t entirely understand what was going on here, but Jesus said something very interesting. “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” (John 3.14) In other words, Jesus is saying that his being lifted up on the cross makes him a sign of healing, just like the bronze serpent of Moses.

What is the healing we might expect from Him? I read a very special piece about prayer the other day. It went something like this: In my life I have prayed for many things, and God has given some, and not others; but I thank God, not only for what he has given, but for what he has taken away: guilt and sin, fear, anxiety, worry.” Scripture says: “You keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed upon you.” (Isaiah 26.3)

Be assured today of God's love for you. There may be bad news, and worse to follow, but I believe that God can be a source of strength, hope and resilience. I believe that we can bring our worries before God, and share them passionately and openly, and that he looks, not for polite behaviour, but for an open heart, on which he can work the miracle of his blessing.

"Come unto me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" says the Lord. (Matthew 11.28)

By now, you'll have realised that I'm all over the place with my Scriptures: Peter, Hebrews, John, Isaiah, and Matthew. I don't apologise for this, because wherever I look in the Scriptures, there is one consistent message. Like the prodigal son, we are called to return to our father, and throw ourselves into his care. Now that's the Gospel according to St Luke (Chapter 15).

We may have had to pause public worship. We may have had to put strict parameters around our pastoral offices like baptisms, marriages and funerals. The vicar might not be able to call personally. However, while the Church tries to do its best, God is the still point that cannot be touched by this crisis, and he makes himself available to you, to me, to us all.

"Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." We're back now to the Letter to the Hebrews. (Hebrews 4.16)

Do visit our diocesan website with its dedicated information and resources at www.dioceseofstasaph.org.uk/coronavirus or contact any of the clergy by telephone. There are many resources made available that we can use to help us pray and approach God. And try to be generous, stockpiling not the toilet roll treasures of this world, but the treasure in heaven which is active love, "where neither moth or rust destroy, nor thieves break in and steal" (Matthew 6.20), and one might add "and where the power of the coronavirus does not run."

Peace be with you.

+Gregory Llanelwy