



How long, O Lord, how long?

A Pastoral Letter to the Teulu Asaph from Bishop Gregory
Wednesday, 27th May, 2020

One of the persistent features of Scripture is waiting. The people of Israel wait in Egypt for God to free them, they wait in the wilderness for the Promised Land, they wait for God to send the Messiah. In the book of Psalms, the psalmist often asks “How long, O Lord?” as in the title of this letter - taken from Psalm 6, but one reference among many. At the Ascension, Jesus instructs his disciples to wait afterwards until the coming of the Holy Spirit. So, with Ascension Day last Thursday, and Pentecost this coming Sunday, we too wait, in liturgical time, for the coming of the Spirit.

The biggest wait of all, at the moment however, must be the wait for the end of lockdown. Britain took to the lockdown remarkably well, I think: I suppose we had the example of Italy and others ahead of us, and there was almost a stirring of the wartime spirit, especially as we also had VE75 Day to mark. “We will meet again” Her Majesty assured us, echoing Vera Lynn. Yet, in our prayers now, we’re probably beginning to join the psalmists, and wonder “How long?” The answers we pick up in the media do not inspire confidence. Even when the English government tells the schools that they can go back, there are many that don’t want them to, and we remain in a sort of indecision: we want to see the end of lockdown, but we aren’t quite sure that it is safe to go out yet.

The apostle Paul encouraged the early Christians who suffered for their faith, and who were waiting for the return of the Lord in glory. “We can take courage when under pressure,” he writes in Romans 5.3,4, “knowing that such pressures produce endurance. Endurance produces constancy, and constancy, hope. Hope will not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the gift of the Holy Spirit.” I understand this to mean, in other words, that God’s action comes first, and the fact that God’s love has been poured out upon us in Jesus and in the Holy Spirit, means that God is already at work in us, seeking to bring us through endurance to hope.

In a strange way, the busyness of life and ministry *before* lockdown may have stopped us languishing. The empty days of lockdown have presented us with the space of opportunity: but we have to generate our own energy, and we find ourselves getting weary. Yet God seeks to transform this cycle. He wants to edge us out of self-reliance into a greater communion with him, to open us to the renewing of the Holy Spirit in order to guide us upwards in the journey of life. “I have arrived at the door,” says the risen Jesus in Revelation Chapter 3 (verse 20), “and I knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, then I will come in to dine with them, and they with me.”

I am interested that the living Jesus of the book of Revelation uses the imagery of the dinner party. ‘What shall we do when you let me in? We’re going to feast’ he seems to be saying. I’m sure that we have had the experience at some time of life of pushing the last guests out

of the door after a party, and them saying “We’ve had a great time, thank you.” This is what time spent with God should feel like. Perhaps we should see the lockdown as some sort of pitstop, in which God wishes to refresh us, and nourish us with spiritual bread for the journey. Now I know that a Formula One pitstop is only 16 seconds at most, and lockdown will be a lot longer, but every moment used for spiritual refreshment can help us on our way.

Invest in the ways in which you find God refreshes you. It may be silent prayer, or reading the Bible, investing in those you love, or finding inspiration in art, or poetry or music or the garden. Goodness me, it might just be all of them.

These thoughts seem to be a tale of two halves. One the one side, the acknowledgement of the weariness that can fall on us; on the other the refreshment that God wants to offer. Keep the faith, dear friends. Seek new strength from God. Look for the joy. May God bless you richly,

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