

I listened with some incredulity to the announcement of an extra bank holiday in 2022 to celebrate The Queen's "Platinum Jubilee". I knew it wasn't going to happen, but I wanted the announcer to say, "God willing". Yes, her mother lived to over 100 and she receives excellent healthcare; but she is 94: there was no acknowledgement of the possibility that she might not live to see it. I suppose these plans do have to be made well ahead; and there will be another set of plans for what happens when she dies – but nobody's allowed to talk about that. I imagine that Her Majesty herself is perfectly accepting of her mortality: nobody attached to the Book of Common Prayer can fail to be. Contrast the cultural denial that the Queen might die one year soon with the closing verse of today's extract from Psalm 90: *Teach us to number our days: that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.*

The psalm strongly emphasises human mortality; as did Isaac's Watts' original hymn version, entitled *Man frail and God eternal*; and which we now sing as *O God our help in ages past*. But some of his verses have been dropped; and the remaining reference to *time ... bearing all its sons away* is often cut for being inappropriate for Remembrance Sunday. What remains of the hymn certainly looks to Eternal God as a source of strength in troubled times, but with less emphasis on the fragility of human beings.

The current pandemic is certainly exposing the vulnerability of humanity. Most of us in the West are not used to it: many are not coping too well. Maybe the Department for Culture, Media and Sport was desperate to have something uplifting to announce, even if it had to reach forward to June 2022. I sense a somewhat desperate pressing-forward towards Christmas this year, looking for familiar comforts which may yet be denied us. I know this pandemic is harder on some people than others, but I wonder whether our culture has lost some of the realism that life includes negative experiences as well as positive and that human beings, our lives and societies, are vulnerable. If we believe that life should always be good and we are entitled to have what we want, then we will find the restrictions of a pandemic hard to cope with – bad, as people say, for our mental health.

One advantage of using a lectionary for our Bible readings is that they don't always say quite what we might want them to say. If you're looking for something uplifting today – well, it is there; but you'll have to wait. Apart from Psalm 90 bidding us to *number our days* and thus *apply our hearts unto wisdom*, we have Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. Far from denying the likelihood of troubled times, the Christians of Paul's time fully expected them, anticipating a time of tribulation to herald the arrival of the end. *When they say, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them ... and there will be no escape!* These early Christians' prayer was not that such a time should never happen, but that they might be preserved through it. An alternative translation of the line *Lead us not into temptation* in the Lord's Prayer is *Save us from the time of trial*.

As we look to God to carry us through this testing time, there is yet wisdom to be gained from it. I ended my reflection for Remembrance Sunday with a desire that, when this conflict is past, we would *rebuild with renewed hope, deeper wisdom, genuine humility – and compassion for all those who have suffered loss*. By *deeper wisdom* I don't just mean better knowledge of how to counter a life-threatening virus. Learning the lesson in humility which this time is attempting to teach us has the potential to make us wiser in confronting other threats which face us – particularly that of climate change – rather than carrying on as though nothing bad was about to happen. It has the potential to make us more resilient when troubles come; and, aware of our own vulnerability, more compassionate towards others. Of course, we may not learn the lesson. We perhaps hoped that Donald Trump's contracting of Coronavirus might have instilled some humility – but he came out declaring that he'd defeated it. Now the reign of Trump is passing, as all things must – like a watch in the night. As children of God, may we seek to gain wisdom from the darkness of our mortality; and then live in the light of God's eternity.

Thanks be to God.

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