

A Wake Up Call

To say we are living in extra-ordinary times is clearly something of an understatement. Most shops and business are closed, as are schools; people are being told to stay at home and go out only for essentials – and of course, even public worship in church has been suspended. All of this has happened in an incredibly short space of time, and all because of COVID-19. No-one really saw this coming - just three weeks ago life here was still relatively normal. Yes, we were all told to wash our hands or use sanitizer, and yes we did start to see the early signs of panic buying, but since then life has altered dramatically and in a way and at a speed that has taken most people by surprise and has shocked many.

Our modern, comfortable and relatively prosperous western life-style - heavily dependent on technology, driven and sustained by a consumer based economy - is fragile indeed, and it doesn't take much to disrupt it. And this current pandemic is proof of that.

The world is going to take a big hit, not just in the loss of life, but financially too. Business will go to the wall and many thousands of jobs will likely be lost, despite government aid. Some economists are saying that the situation will be many times worse than the financial crash of 2008/9.

So then, is this the end of the world? Almost certainly not. Is this the beginning of the end? Well, that's a little more difficult to answer, because the beginning of the end of the world started when Jesus ascended into heaven forty days after His Resurrection. So for the last 2,000 odd years we have been living in "the end times"; and yes, eventually the end will come when Jesus finally returns to earth (see Acts 1:11) but this is probably not it.

Some people might be asking whether this global virus is a sign of God's wrath on a sinful and godless world. Again, there's not a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer to this question. If I were to say "yes, it is", then I would be accused of being a fanatical religious extremist and dismissed as "a loony". If I were to say "no", then that would be to ignore some serious biblical principles and teaching.

Understand that this virus did not catch God off-guard nor take Him by surprise. He knew it was coming, yet God has allowed it to spread and wreak havoc, as nothing happens without His consent. As Jesus said:

“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them falls to the ground apart from the will of your Father.” (Matt 10:29).

And if we learn one thing from the Old Testament, then it is that God cannot be ignored or disobeyed without there being consequences – serious consequences. Again and again we read in the OT how God dealt with Israel when she turned away from Him and His Word. God would warn the people, usually through His prophets, and if they didn’t heed His warnings, then He would act and move against them. For example, in Ezekiel we read the following:

“This is what the Lord Almighty says: You saw the great disaster I brought on Jerusalem and the towns of Judah. Today they lie deserted and in ruins because of the evil they have done... Again and again I sent my servants the prophets, who said, ‘Do not do this detestable thing that I hate!’ But they did not listen or pay attention; they did not turn from their wickedness... Therefore, my fierce anger was poured out; it raged against the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem and made them the desolate ruins they are today.” (Ezk 44:1-6)

Or in Isaiah, we read:

“I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things.” (Isa 45:7).

Now these are just two of many similar verses in the Old Testament where the LORD threatens destruction and disaster on His wayward people who choose to ignore His Word and turn from His ways, doing what is right in their own eyes. Yes, this is the Old Covenant, and yes, we now live under the New Covenant of Jesus Christ. But, as St. Paul said:

“For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us.” (Romans 15:4).

We need to heed the warnings of the past. We may be living under the New Covenant, but know that God does not change - He is the same yesterday, today and forever. That means that no nation can treat God or His Word with contempt. A nation that once embraced God’s Word and

honoured Him in faithful worship, cannot then turn its back on Him and expect there to be no consequences. Abandoning God and His Word will always have consequences – always. And, as a nation, that is exactly what we have done.

The 20th century witnessed a truly catastrophic decline in the Christian Church in the Western world as people abandoned worship in their millions, exchanging it instead for entertainment, leisure and pleasure activities. Europe became a virtual spiritual desert as churches emptied and closed across the continent. God's Word was ignored, forgotten, mocked even; exchanged for secular, man-made values. And woe betide anyone who dared speak up for clear biblical teaching and morality – they were quickly given short shrift.

Now I'm not saying that this current pandemic is a vengeful and angry God pouring out His wrath upon us; but I am saying it's a wake-up call, and should be seen as a warning shot across the bows. Yes, God is loving and patient, but even God's great patience has its limits, as Israel found out to her cost, and the world is certainly pushing at those limits. So I'd like to finish with a quote from Joel:

“Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.”