

## **SERMON FOR TRINITY 3 | 28.06.2020**

Jeremiah 28: 5-9; Romans 6: 12-end; St Matthew 10: 40-42

**What, I wonder, will we remember from the lockdown, this time next year? Standing on our doorsteps banging a saucepan in support of NHS and other key workers; stopping ourselves from shaking people's hands and keeping two metres apart in queues; spending a lot more time with children who also needed home-schooling; re-arranging family events – even weddings; not being able to go to the hairdresser or a restaurant; getting used to zoom meetings; wondering if your job was safe...?**

**It is easy to imagine that these things aren't that important in the grand scheme of things but, actually, they have all played their part in changing our usual routines and making the last three or four months seem like half a life-time. We have forgotten, very quickly, what it was like to have the freedom to go anywhere and do whatever we liked. And as for face-coverings, well they have been a steep learning curve all their own.**

**Yet it is only too obvious that the pandemic has not affected people equally. Here in relatively affluent Islington many people have been able to work from home – and many have quite liked it and have vowed never to work a full five-day week again. But their neighbours on zero-hour contracts, those in the hospitality and entertainment industries, pub workers, musicians and actors, have suddenly found themselves without any work at all.**

**What has been positive in the middle of all this has been a new openness, a greater awareness of the issues that other people are confronting. In our family our ballerina niece, due to take up a place in a west end show in March, has instead spent the last month applying for degree courses in physiotherapy; Chris Carter from the congregation, an expert in high end retail lettings in places like Regent Street and Meadowhall in Sheffield, talked openly of the way rental income in these areas has all but dried up.**

**What has been so interesting is that the little ‘bubbles’ we used to live in, where we could largely forget how other people lived and worked, have all expanded as we begin to realise just how fragile our society has become. This is way beyond the scale of the financial crash of 2008; this is even bigger than the Great Depression of the 1920s and 30s and may even match the debt we incurred after the Second World War.**

**So is it any wonder that the BBC has commissioned some serious commentators to contribute to a series called ‘Re-think’? As the blurb says: *as the world moves beyond the pandemic, this project asks a wide range of thinkers to consider what they want to happen next. It will explore everything from the way we travel to how we assess individual health risks, how we look after the elderly and look out for the young, what it means to live a good life, and who we most value and reward in our society.* The range of topic being opened up is astonishing: *Pope Francis has chosen to challenge ‘hypocritical’ political leaders about inequality; Emma Dabiri wants to find ways to build a greater sense of belonging; Lady Hale, former president of the UK Supreme Court talks about reforms to trial by jury while Samantha Power, President Obama’s Ambassador to the United Nations, wonders if the world can ever trust the United States again...* And there is plenty more where they came from.**

**But where is the Church in the middle of all this? We can read the prophets of the Old Testament: Amos with his image of the plumb line and Jeremiah in our first reading, all speak of God being deeply interested in social justice, politics and international affairs: God clearly cared when individuals and nations went off the rails.**

**In fact making links between current events and crises in the Bible did not survive after the New Testament period, except perhaps in the writings of St Augustine of Hippo after the fall of Rome in 410ad. As Alan Richardson, the former Dean of York has written: *comments by the Churches about events in our day tend to be vague generalisations, platitudinous and cautious - trailing well behind what secular thinkers are saying.***

**That was written some years ago. Perhaps Coronavirus is beginning to change that? Perhaps at least some are taking the risk of linking God with the current challenges?**

**There seem to be three areas which have received most attention during the pandemic. They are class, race and climate change.**

**There can be little doubt that health care workers, those in the NHS but also those working in and out of residential homes and as carers to relatives and friends, have received a huge amount of long overdue attention. At last there have been calls for wages and benefits to reflect the sacrificial way so many care for others. In a period where kindness has certainly been much more obvious, the way this sector has been neglected has finally been recognised. And what is most encouraging is an end to the excuse ‘there isn’t any money available’. The willingness of the government to borrow billions of pounds in a time of almost nil interest rates has been the result of national pressure to end a major wrong.**

**And that new wave of energy and concern for the more deprived has been powerfully seen in a range of other areas too: in a call for better rights for women who have borne the brunt of child care and home learning while schools have been closed, in a movement to highlight a whole range of BAME issues – from better health care for those most susceptible to Covid, to a renewed attention to Black History and to the antislavery movement – and also the lack of leaders of colour in any of the mainline churches. The quarantine rules which have hit our airlines so hard has focused attention on the parallel improvement in the level of greenhouse gases. Cities are cleaner too because of the reduction in work related travel. All this is good.**

**But by and large it has not been religiously motivated. This new respect for one another, for our planet and for those in need and the delight in having a bit more time, has been a universal feeling – as has the realisation that it has been the poor and those in hospitality, entertainment and the creative arts who have taken the greatest hit. People haven’t needed a sermon to point out the blatantly obvious. Today’s prophets have all been secular.**

**Does that matter? As more than one person has said recently, the underlying Christian principles which demand we care for the poorest are so deeply ingrained in British society that the words of Jesus are now being spoken by almost everybody! The crucial question is not where these ideas came from but whether they will translate into real change?**

**But the churches cannot escape scrutiny too. How have we done since March? Have we been prophetic – even to ourselves?**

**I have said before that I believe the closing of our churches during the pandemic was ‘unfortunate’ to say the least. We appeared to have turned our backs on the world and retreated into our own safe bubble. On the other hand, the locked doors do seem to have resulted in 66% of a recent poll of church members saying that their local parish Church was central to ministry. We have also been forced into new forms of technology going, as one person said, from the 1960s Odeon format (one film, take it or leave it) to Netflix! The choice of on-line Services has been phenomenal - though the age of the most frequent viewers has, interestingly, been those in their 40s and 50s. Only a tiny handful of respondents thought that virtual services would ever replace live worship.**

**But has the debate yet moved on from how we ‘do’ Church to asking what kind of Church we should be? Bishop Philip North says he hopes this experience will kick-start some more radical conversations about a whole number of things – not least in our willingness to take risks, the number of churches we have open and the way most of the money in the CofE remains in the south.**

**And at St James’? What have we learned? I hope our priorities since the lockdown have been to build on strengths built up over the years – keeping in touch with our far-flung, all age and diverse community so that ‘out of sight, out of mind’ doesn’t apply here! We have tried to be what Bishop Philip expects: flexible in the development of streamed services, Sunday School resources and the Arena newsletter; we have been open to new opportunities through Zoom and FaceTime and tried to respond generously to the host of pastoral enquiries that continue to come our way.**

**But radically prophetic? Probably not. Why is that? Because, difficult though the pandemic has been, we at St James’ have not been forced to talk about the direction of our parish life since the 1970s (in the time of Fr Jack) when the Church very nearly closed. Indeed we don’t talk strategy very much at all. Somehow we hope that things will flow quite comfortably in the right direction without too much intervention. So perhaps we can use these final few weeks to ‘re-think’: what is God asking of us in the future? How can we adapt so that his prophetic voice is better heard?**