

CUTTING EDGE CAMELOT, No 12

Wednesday 15th April 2020

Welcome

Before Easter I asked readers to give me their responses to the question of how they had found God to be at work in their lives during the coronavirus emergency. Below I set out a summary of the responses I received.

A summary of readers' responses

There were three main strands in these responses.

A reshaping of our lives

First there was a realisation that God is reshaping our lives through this emergency in many different ways. We are all being asked to question what really matters and what our priorities are.

For some it may be a wakeup call inviting us to come to Christ and to place all our fears and anxieties in the hands of God.

For others it may be a time where their faith is being tested, where in the wilderness we are spurred on to a greater prayerfulness and recognition of God's protection.

And again it may be a time of growth and healing where past experiences are put into perspective and we can move on with God.

Is God bringing good out of evil?

Another theme which emerged is that God can bring good out of the destructive evil of this pandemic.

This in part depends on our own response to this crisis. It could be a way in which we are released from our own self-centredness. It could be a source of spiritual unity and encouragement and a means by which people turn to God. Perhaps also it is a way in which God can slow down our busy lives.

Love, support and encouragement

And finally many of us are experiencing in these times an outpouring of love, support and encouragement both from fellow Christians and also from the wider community. Many are thankful as they experience the kindness of other people and a greater sense of connection with them.

Faith, hope and love in a time of crisis

All of these topics raise rich material for ongoing spiritual reflection. Below I look at the story of Jonah which Jesus compared with His own death and resurrection. This brings many of these different strands together.

And in future midweek editions of Cutting Edge Camelot I would like to follow up these responses further by looking at how we can see faith, hope and love growing in a time of crisis.

Scripture Passages

Jonah 2: 1-10

Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, saying,

'I called to the LORD out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me.'

Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; how shall I look again upon your holy temple?' The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the Pit, O LORD my God. As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the LORD; and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the LORD!'

Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

Matthew 12:40

For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth.

Reflection

The context of this passage is that Jonah is running away from God's call to preach to the city of Nineveh. In the course of his flight he has boarded a ship going in the opposite direction. But as so often happens when we try to run away, life catches up with us and Jonah has been thrown overboard into the sea by mariners who fear for their own safety in the middle of a storm. God, however, shows mercy towards Jonah by providing a large fish to swallow him up. The prayer above is addressed to God from the belly of the fish.

Jonah describes himself as being in Sheol, a place of death which is cut off from the praise of God. He is also beneath the waters of the sea in the deep. This too is a place of trouble which harbours danger, malevolent evil and chaos.

As we read this perhaps we find that some or indeed all of this description of where Jonah is resonates with the many different facets of the crisis which we ourselves or others around us are now facing.

And yet even in these extreme circumstances Jonah reminds us that we can pray and ask God to rescue us.

And so the belly of the fish, Sheol and the deep also become the place where Jonah's life is reshaped and his priorities are reordered.

Why is Jonah running away from God's command to preach repentance to Nineveh? The reason is that Nineveh is the capital city of Assyria the national enemy. And Jonah did not want Nineveh to respond to this message. Jonah could not share in God's concern for the spiritual state of this city. However, when Jonah is finally spewed out by the fish on to dry land God renews the command to go to Nineveh and this time Jonah obeys.

It is true as we read to the end of the book of Jonah that we find that Jonah's ability to share in God's compassion for Nineveh was still somewhat limited even when he did get out on dry land again. But for us too the process of learning to love our enemies is a difficult one that takes time and different stages to complete.

And yet undoubtedly God does bring good out of the evil of Jonah's predicament. And Jesus in the verse from Matthew's gospel links Jonah's experience with His own death and resurrection. For surely when we ask the question of how God can bring good out of evil it must be to the Cross and Resurrection that we look for our model and inspiration.

Tristram

Points for Prayers

- Thanksgiving for and celebration of Jesus' resurrection
- Different ways in which churches are reaching out to their own congregations and beyond
- Thanksgiving for care, skill and courage of NHS workers
- Need for further largescale testing
- Thanksgiving for Prime Minister's recovery and prayers for the government decisions that need to be taken
- Funerals needing to take place under new restrictions with only family mourners.

Growing as a worshipper, a servant and a family

We pray that 'we might live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us' (Ephesians 5:2)