

CUTTING EDGE CAMELOT, No 26

Wednesday 3rd June 2020

‘Virtually Church but with some way to go...’

Welcome

Welcome to this midweek edition of Cutting Edge Camelot. Anna concludes her series on ‘Why does God allow this pandemic?’ by looking at the challenge of how we can embody God’s love in a suffering world.

Scripture Passage

1 John 4.7-12

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹ God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

Reflection

‘Only a suffering God can help’

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) was a German theologian and pastor who became involved in the resistance against Hitler and the Nazi regime, and was even involved in an attempt to assassinate Hitler. The attempt failed, but Bonhoeffer was caught, imprisoned and ultimately executed just days

before the concentration camp he was being held in was liberated. Bonhoeffer wrote letters and theological reflections throughout his time in prison and these were later published under the title *Letters and Papers from Prison*. In reflecting on where God was in the suffering of the world, especially the horrific events of World War II, Bonhoeffer suggests that the Bible 'directs us to the powerlessness and suffering of God; only a suffering God can help'. What might Bonhoeffer have meant by this? And what might it mean for us?

It might be that the idea of God suffering seems strange, but of course in Jesus, as God the Son, God suffers the humiliation and agony of the crucifixion, and as God the Father, God suffers the death of his Son. In 1 John 4 we read,

God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

In other words, God loves us so much that he was willing to suffer for us and on our behalf. God knows what it is to suffer. And from Bonhoeffer's perspective, it is only a God who knows what it is to suffer who can offer any comfort to a suffering world.

Perhaps more controversially, Bonhoeffer speaks of the powerlessness of God, and to many, it may seem wrong to speak of God's powerlessness. Surely for God to be God, God must not only be powerful, but *all*-powerful? Perhaps it depends what we mean by power...

The power of God that the gospel teaches us about is the power of love, and only the power of love. It is not that God is power, and has chosen love, but that God is love – and any power of God is and can only be the power of that love.

(Mike Higton *Christian Doctrine*, page 247)

In the words of 1 John 4, God is love. First and foremost, God is love, and everything else flows from this. And the ultimate act of love is his death on the cross for us, and while this might appear to be the ultimate act of powerlessness, this act of love opens up new life for all. In the moment when God seems utterly powerless, and when evil and suffering seems to have won, this act of love brings life and goodness out of evil and suffering.

Before Jesus came, the Jews had been anticipating their coming Messiah, who would overthrow the power of the Romans and then restore power to the kingdom of Israel. But this is not what Jesus did. Instead, he created a different kind of kingdom – the Kingdom of God. And in the Kingdom of God, power looks very different. When two of his disciples wanted to be the most powerful in his new kingdom, Jesus’ response was clear:

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20.25-28)

If we want to follow the example of Jesus, then we need to love others as he did: sacrificially. As 1 John 4 says, ‘since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another’. We can choose to use of power to love others as God loves us.

So, how does this help us respond to the suffering we see all around us?

In response to both the belief that God is love and the suffering that exists in the world, Professor Mike Higton asks, ‘Can I see myself as loved, see the world around me as loved, and live in echoing response to that love, in such a world as this?’ (*Christian Doctrine*, page 250) In other words, *how* do we live out our belief that God is love, that we are loved and are to love others, in a world in which there is suffering? This doesn’t have an easy answer,

because each of us has to work out what this looks like in our own context. However, I believe that the question – of how we seek to embody God’s love in a suffering world – helps us to respond to the suffering that we face and that those who we know and love face. In the words of 1 John 4, ‘if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us’.

You might like to respond by...

1. Rereading 1 John 4.7-12, is there a particular verse that especially stands out to you? Why might this be?
2. If you would be interested in reading more of Bonhoeffer’s writings, you could get a copy of *Letters and Papers from Prison* (or one of the other books listed below).
3. As we reach the end of this mini-series, what further thoughts and questions do you have? How might you take these further?
4. You might to pray the following prayer (originally written by Alan Warren) for all those who are facing suffering at this time:
*Lord Jesus Christ, shine upon all those are the darkness of suffering;
that in your light they may receive hope and courage,
and, in your presence they may find their rest and peace;
for your love’s sake. Amen.*

Further reading suggestions

Pete Greig (2007) *God on Mute: Engaging the Silence of Unanswered Prayer*.

Harold Kushner (1981) *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.

John Lennox (2020) *Where is God in a Coronavirus World?*

C. S. Lewis (1940) *The Problem of Pain*.

N. T. Wright (2006) *Evil and the Justice of God*.

Anna

Update on North Cadbury Church of England Primary School

In accordance with government guidelines selected classes have returned to North Cadbury Church of England Primary School from the beginning of this week until the summer holidays in July.

Points for Prayers

- Reflecting on God's love in a suffering world
- Thanksgiving for care, skill and courage of NHS workers and those in care homes
- Those suffering from coronavirus in hospitals, care homes and at home
- Need for further largescale testing
- Prayers for parents, teachers, governors and children of North Cadbury Church of England Primary School as the school is partially reopened (see update above), for the school to be a place of both joy and safety
- Funerals needing to take place under new restrictions with only family mourners. Tristram is taking a funeral today.
- Prayers for those affected economically by the lockdown, for businesses and those who have become unemployed
- Prayers and thanksgiving for contributions to the foodbanks and for those helping to take these to the foodbanks.

Why not try?

- If you have not already done so going to YouTube and listening to the Thy Kingdom Come Pentecost Service 2020.

Church of England Daily Hopeline

The Archbishop of Canterbury has launched a new telephone service, 'Daily Hopeline'. If you ring the free number 0800 804 8044 you can hear a recorded message and can also listen to well-known hymns along with prayers and a reflection based on a hymn.

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)