



Third Sunday after Epiphany

Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright



Sunday 24 January 2021

READINGS

Jonah 3:1-5, 10; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

A different time

Greetings friends. In this unprecedented and uncertain time, may the peace of Christ reign in your hearts! The readings for this Sunday are eerily relevant in the current crisis. You may recall that, shortly before the new year, Bishop Steve sent out a video message where, amongst other measures, we were encouraged to observe, in some capacity, a time of prayer and fasting on New Year's Day.

In the reading from Jonah, we see likewise, in response to Jonah's call to the people of Nineveh, the people "proclaiming a fast and putting on sackcloth" (Jonah 3:5). Admittedly, these are two different contexts, and the story of Jonah, at least God's relationship to Nineveh, seems a bit difficult to understand. From v.10 of chapter 3, we see that because of the people's response, because they fast and dress in sackcloth, "God changed his mind about the calamity he would bring upon them." Without discounting the value of fasting, and certainly of repentance in general, the picture we see suggests, as is sometimes the case in other parts of the Old Testament where God is displeased, a picture of God being fickle, upset on not getting his own way, a God who smites those who don't obey rules, and perhaps a God who is easily swayed or whose mind is easily changed.

I'm sure you might have heard at least some of the conspiracy theories floating around as to the origin of the Corona virus, and as to the true intentions of those behind its initial propagation. Probably the most common is that the virus is of human origin, intended to surreptitiously usher in a new world order, or destabilise the global economy, or provide China with an unprecedented advantage over its rivals. Interestingly, some of the speculation I've heard enlists religious and theological reasons – human beings have been guilty of excess and exploitation for far too long, living without concern for their habitat.

The virus is either God's way, or the planet's way of (punishing) culling the human race so as to reset the balance in the ecosystem. And there exist still more speculative theories, or variations of the above, as to the origin and 'purpose' of the virus.

In my personal opinion, unless one undertakes a serious and even academic investigation, conspiracy theories are usually not very helpful. Apart from the direct, practical reasons as to the origins of the virus – the conspicuous consumption of wet market meat in Asia, for example – in broader terms I think few of us can say with certainty why the virus entered our lives at the end of 2019. Having said that, as mentioned already, the lectionary readings, which are set on a three-year cycle entirely independently of any worldly events, are still strangely relevant. We have considered Jonah's call to Nineveh to repent with fasting and sackcloth or, as an alternative, ultimately face destruction.

From 1 Corinthians we read that "the appointed time has grown short" (v.29) and that "the present form of this world is passing away" (v.31). The worldview evinced here, and the ethic within Pauline thinking occasioned by it, was due in the main to the Apostle's belief in an imminent Parousia or, second coming of Christ. The first generation of Christians believed, thanks in part to Paul's teaching, that Jesus would return within their lifetime. But this, of course, did not happen and so we already see, in parts of 1 Corinthians 15 for example, an attempt to justify, or explain the prospect of the delayed Parousia theologically.

Perhaps mapping out divine events in terms of an earthly or human timeframe is unhelpful. It is often said that our conception of time differs markedly from God's, so that the two cannot be compared. Instead of thinking in terms of a *timescale*, in terms of days, weeks, months, years, perhaps we should think (although admittedly these are still references to time) in terms of epochs and eras, for epochs and eras carry not just an association of time, but also of mindset and mentality, of worldview (or, to use that German word, of *Zeitgeist*) – different epochs and eras differ in terms of the view of reality that predominates within them. I suspect that the Greek word *kairos*, a concept related to time appearing in the New Testament (and in fact used today in Mark 1:15), conveys some of the same aspect. Thus, for the disciples, and the first generation of Christians, the advent of God's kingdom, the advent of Christ, was not simply an event in history *but an event which occasioned a changed response and mindset*.

The Gospels function as snap shots, as condensed pictures or synopses of one of the most

powerful and enigmatic figures of history. So the brief encounter between Jesus and Simon and Andrew, and between Jesus and James and John, on the shores of Galilee, while momentary and occasioning an instant response from the disciples, in reality might have been a series of encounters. It is worth keeping in mind the revolutionary, if not apocalyptic, sentiments permeating the society of the time. Jesus was supposed to have died between 30-33AD. Barely 40 years later, the Jewish temple and parts of Jerusalem were razed by the Romans as a result of the First Jewish Revolt. Messianic beliefs, and expectations, abounded, as did many Messianic pretenders. Mark is not at all unintentional in beginning this Sunday's Gospel with the ominous words, "After John was arrested..." (Mark 1:14). We already considered that Jesus was likely an initial disciple of John the Baptist. This is therefore cannot bode well for the ministry of Jesus. If Simon and Andrew, and James and John were around Jesus' age, they would have been young and impressionable, caught up in the Messianic fervour of the day. And so perhaps their instantaneous decision to drop everything and follow Jesus, is not entirely inaccurate.

One thing, however, is certain – the decision was occasioned by an alternate view of reality thrust upon them, a Kairos moment, an alternate view of the future and its potentialities, which would be ushered in by God's kingdom. The Greek word for repentance, leaving aside modern stereotypical associations with our concept of "sin," originally meant to turn around, to turn the other way, to drastically change one's course. The word repentance, therefore, apart from its (perhaps erroneous) associations with "sin" meant to change the course of one's journey.

As a society, as a community, as a Church, perhaps the same is being asked of us now. As we contemplate these things, brothers and sisters in Christ, may God give us all the grace, love and favour necessary to remain his faithful children. Amen