

**Sermon**

Sunday 29 March 2020

Lessons

Ezekiel 37: 1 – 14

St John 11: 1 – 45

At the time of writing, the number of deaths arising from the coronavirus pandemic stands at over 25, 000 people from across the world. In this past week, we have witnessed remarkable events: our freedom of movement has been curtailed; on Thursday evening, the nation applauded the staff of the NHS; the Duke of Rothesay and the Prime Minister among those to catch the infection; and, with every passing day, more and more people knowing someone - relative, a neighbour - who has contracted COVID-19. However, the spread of the highly contagious virus has not kept pace with the spread of love, friendship and good wishes which have reached all corners of the world. Modern technology – texts, tweets, Facebook, WhatsApp and now Zoom – bring people

together: families and loved ones draw immense strength from seeing one another and virtual wine parties are a new craze! Of course, older technology, such as using a telephone, still works perfectly well!

Over these past few weeks, humanity has learned again of its vulnerability and fragility. Our planet is indifferent to our presence. We are subject to forces beyond ourselves, including earthquakes, tsunamis and viruses, such as Ebola, SARS and coronaviruses. We can take steps to protect ourselves from these dangers – and I hope a vaccine for COVID-19 is found soon – but these naturally occurring dangers are a central feature of life in God’s world. It is important that our thinking about God and the virus is rooted in reality.

I have read some unfortunate theology online of the virus being a punishment sent by God: ridiculous and embarrassing! One of the challenges for the Church, for all of us, is to ensure that our theological reflections keep pace with the modern worldview. We are indebted to medical research and advances in information technology which have abounded over the past 150 years but, sometimes, theology and the Church have lagged behind. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, religions are still prone to be antagonistic to one another; some religion is 'sheer bunk' though people believe it passionately, and some is highly damaging and dangerous. What can we say of God and the nature of God's world?

Pain, suffering and death are intrinsic parts of evolution.

Research suggests that 98% of all previously existing species have become extinct. Over the course of time, evolution

removes species less adapted to their changing environment and creates opportunities for more complex forms of life to emerge. 'Orcas chase a sea lion, flipping it playfully into the air before devouring it.....the sea lion species gains speed and agility as a result of the orcas' hunt.' It is said, 'the cougar's fang has carved the limbs of the fleet-footed deer, and vice versa'. As far as we can tell, the more sensitivity in a species, the greater its consciousness, the more it will experience pain and suffering. Death is part of the creative process of our planet. The nature of our world has always been like this; there was never a time when it was not.

Viruses are not 'sent by God'; they are morally neutral. This is the nature of God's world but what can we say in response to pain and suffering, and our anxiety at this time?

The psalmist cried, ‘Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord. I wait for the LORD, my soul doth wait, and in his word do I hope. My soul waiteth for the Lord more than they that waiteth for the morning’. Like many over the course of a lifetime, the psalmist knew distress, fear and hardship. The psalmist found hope in God’s word. The Bible is eternally fruitful; we are to let it nourish us spiritually. We are to read it carefully, and inwardly digest it; in stillness, we are to let our souls be soothed by the medicine of meditation. What of our fear and anxiety in the face of the virus?

In the *Tanakh* (Old Testament), the Eternal, the Holy One of Israel, the One whom Jesus called ‘Father’, spoke to Moses out of the burning bush. God said, ‘I have heard the cry of My people. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them’. God’s knowing is the knowing of intimate

knowledge. In Isaiah, God wept for the suffering of God's people: 'I drench you with My tears'. In Jeremiah, God's heart moaned as God's people suffered.

In the Christian tradition, according to the first chapter of John's Gospel, the Word became flesh. 'Flesh' does not mean 'merely' the man Jesus, nor even all humanity. 'Flesh' means matter: the incarnation or deep incarnation is God's union with all creation, all living things. From a modern perspective, Jesus was not only born of a woman and a Hebrew gene pool but, like the rest of us, 'carried within himself the signature of the supernovas and the geology and life history of the Earth. The atoms comprising his body were once part of other creatures. The genetic structure of the cells of his body were kin to the flowers, the fish, the whole community of life that descended from common

ancestors in the ancient seas'. God's knowledge of us is the most intimate; God dwells within us, in the very fabric of our being. The gospel, surely, is that when we are in pain and suffering, the Eternal suffers with us, alongside us, our truest companion.

In the majestic poetry of Ezekiel, in the mystical vision of the prophet, we learn that the breath or Spirit of God is a divine force, a great, refreshing, enlivening wind, that brings new life out of death. In Ezekiel's vision, the bones of the slain 'rose' to their feet. Early Jewish and Christian writers saw in this vision the symbolic image of resurrection. The bones twitched and snapped together, flesh and sinew were added, and the breath of God gave them life. In the spiritual story of Lazarus, a friend of Jesus who had lain dead four days was raised to new life. Like the God of Isaiah and Jeremiah, Jesus

wept at the death of His friend, wept at the suffering of those He loved and who had loved Lazarus. The gospel is that God is with us in our suffering, has pitched His tent in our soul, and suffers as we suffer; indeed, suffers as all creation suffers. In the story of Lazarus we are twice told that Mary ‘rose’ quickly, ‘rose’ up, to meet Jesus. In our meditative reading of these spiritual stories, we are to ‘feel’ that sense of ‘rising’, of being raised to new life, ‘feel’ the breath of God within us, even in the midst of our distress.

Creation is cruciform. Death is integral. Like Jesus, we are to work tirelessly to alleviate pain and suffering and injustice but, whatever is the story of our lives, whatever the hardships we endure, the Intimate Eternal, the Divine Tenderness, is with us, within us, at one with us. Jesus said, ‘Lazarus, come forth’. Let Jesus speak words of Life to you. Often it is

through our own experiences of being broken-hearted that we see the brokenness of the world. God will suffer as long as creation suffers, to the end of time. Jesus wept: draw strength from this. God is in our DNA: draw strength from this. God dwells in your soul: draw strength from this.

Amen.

### Prayer

Almighty God, Creator:  
 the morning is Yours, rising into fullness.  
 The summer is Yours, dipping into autumn.  
 Eternity is Yours, dipping into time.  
 The vibrant grasses, the scent of flowers, the lichen on the  
     rocks, the tang of seaweed.  
 All are Yours.  
 Gladly we live in this garden of Your creating.

But creation is not enough.  
 Always in the beauty, the foreshadowing of decay.  
 The lambs frolicking careless: so soon to be led to  
     slaughter.  
 Nature red and scarred as well as lush and green.  
 In the garden also:  
 always the thorn.  
 Creation is not enough.

Almighty God, Redeemer:  
 the sap of life in our bones and being is Yours,  
 lifting us to ecstasy.  
 But always in the beauty: the tang of sin, in our consciences.  
 The dry lichen of sins long dead, but scarred upon our minds.

In the garden that is each of us, always the thorn.....

Holy Spirit, Enlivener:  
breathe on us, fill us with life anew.  
In Your new creation, already upon us, breaking through,  
    groaning and travailing,  
but already breaking through,  
breathe on us.....

*Very Revd Dr George MacLeod  
Iona Abbey*

Be still,  
relax,  
slip into easeful with the Eternal,  
the Intimate, the Holy One.

Let Shalom soothe the anxiety of your soul.  
Breathe in the breath of God, life-giving,  
nourishing.

Let the Holy Spirit rise within you.  
May deep, dark Stillness  
encircle, enfold and embrace you.  
Wait on the LORD.