

I write this as I am socially isolating in the back garden of the vicarage in Wolstanton. Here the sun shines, the birds sing and peace can be found here.

To choose the jewel of blessings to ornate the crown of priesthood is an impossible task. Yet for the purposes of this reflection I want to suggest one. I am fortunate in speaking to many people who are filled with hope, peace and faith; individuals who have maintained those values in life despite injustice and loss. Somehow knowing people like that exist, real Christian souls resonating themselves with the gentleness of God, the fears of this world are perhaps only temporarily, blunted. One such person reflected on a passage with me when we discussed the Corona virus subject. She simply shared that her thoughts were drawn towards Isaiah 58.

Firstly, I implore you to pick up a bible and read Isaiah 58.

I think it's tricky for some of us to understand the importance of the Jewish prophets outside of our Christian tradition. This is not altogether a regrettable thing as for us Christ is the Head of the Church, the paradigm in which all is connected and completed.

We can therefore approach Christianity in such a way that we keep our Celtic/Saxon/Icelandic Great Halls and simply replace the Ealdorman with Jesus Christ. Much of the furnishings of our backgrounds and culture remain firmly hanging. It is the work of faith to open all windows and doors of that Great Hall to the light of God.

To Isaiah, whose words are so suffused with light that they have become for many a foundational revelation in ones understanding of God. The chapter opens with a declarative "Shout aloud without restraint; lift up your voice like a trumpet". One could be forgiven in thinking this was a start to a Psalm of praise. The next sentence shortly demolishes that notion "Call my people to account for their transgression". This is not a call to celebration but a summons to justice.

Since the earliest days the people of Israel have linked the ravages of this life with the rod of God chastising them for their iniquity. The Babylonian captivity in 597BC was blamed upon the decadence of King Johoiakim. Indeed it was not simply the Israelites that interpreted calamity as Divine justice. The plague that sacked Athens was partially blamed upon the haughtiness of Pericles.

To whom then shall we point our finger at this time? I'm not sure it works quite like that.

I've heard it said that the only winner in this crisis is the environment. I quote from the BBC website "*Researchers in New York told the BBC their early results showed carbon monoxide mainly from cars had been reduced by nearly 50% compared with last year.*"

This is one mega city in one country. Imagine what the drop in emissions is doing across the globe. The planet it would seem is taking a big breath in and slowing down.

This dreaded virus will cause great heart ache and loss and for those that emerge there needs to be a reconsideration of some basic suppositions.

Throughout the Old Testament the House of Israel was restored and destroyed a total of seven times. Seven times the people of Israel made a pact with that which they deemed to be sacred, namely God, that which embodied their highest values of love and hope. They made a covenant with God and again they predictably began to stray. Prophets came to remind them that unless they refocus their goals upon those values with which they had made a covenant, only despair and desolation would follow. If those warnings are ignored and those bearing them driven out- a reckoning will surely come.

We are fortunate as a species to have the science with us to understand this pandemic. We know that

it is a viral strain and we do not look to God to explain how a virus works. We do look to him to help us act on what this isolation is permitting us to glimpse; to return to that place we somehow feel banished from or to open the shutter we've left closed for too long.

Are we going to repeat the cycle and abandon our highest duties and values to keep pace with the spirit of the times? Or can you hear a word being spoken so quietly and it speaks of restoration and hope for the future. The chapter calls us not to offer empty oblations but to *'loose the fetters of injustice, taking the poor into your house, clothing the naked and never evading a duty to your kinsfolk'*. I would think that this pandemic should cause us to sincerely consider how we impact the planet and the ways we continue to ignore critical issues. We ignore them only to squeeze what extra profit we can gain out of a system before its reformation is taken out of our hands with obliteration.

To fight this we must isolate and isolation means for many introspection. By isolating I hope many of us are able to find time for those things one typically can forsake amongst them counting the blessings of life despite the damage and villainy of this world. For many the pace and demands of life have left little time for love and hope. The music and poet Nick Drake put it better than I-

*"Do you feel like a remnant
Of something that's past
Do you find things are moving
Just a little too fast.
Do you hope to find new ways
Of quenching your thirst,
Do you hope to find new ways
Of doing better than your worst."*

For many, things have been moving fast for a long time. Our isolation and Gaia's deep breath at this time has forced us all to stop. To be.

To find oneself back in the garden using this time to notice that which I forgot I find myself ever more agreeing that there is significant grace in what T.S Elliot noted

*"We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, remembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea."*

The end of our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time. I pray that in the isolation of these weeks you may know this to be true.

Amen