

Post Script

Mothering Sunday, Lent IV, 22nd March 2020

Praying with the scriptures

Our enforced lack of activity and increased time alone might give us time to ponder and pray with the scriptures, seeing where they lead us. Here is an illustration of how this Sunday's readings might work on our hearts in prayer. Of course, prayer is idiosyncratic, but sometimes over hearing each other's can set us off finding our own voice in prayer. If you have something that you find helpful, sustaining your hope in a difficult season, share it with others in and beyond your church.

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Isn't it delightful the way this passage says "looks don't matter" (v 7) but then tells us how good looking David is (v12) "Oh, all right then, they do a bit"? Wittily, we are called to check our quick judgements and underlying assumptions. When it comes to leadership, though, it is a very serious matter. With this passage we might pray something like this:

As Samuel approaches, he is afraid of Saul's violence and the people fear he has not come peaceably. We pray for places where religious identity is more a source of conflict than admiration. In devotion to you, show us a peaceable unity. In a common effort to overcome a virus, we pray that people of all faiths and cultures find ourselves closer, not further apart. Saul and Samuel's conflict moves us to pray for places such as Russia, where church and state are dangerously close; places such as Myanmar, where the state persecutes religious minorities with impunity; and places such as Britain, where carelessness, apathy and lazy prejudice towards faith is more subtly destructive.

Your chosen one, David is almost forgotten, as the youngest and as the shepherd, yet his youthful energy and shepherd's skill will soon sustain the older brothers in battle and slay Goliath. His bright eyes will look with compassion on his persecutor, Saul. He will become a great overseer for the nation. God forgive our wilful ignorance of the gifts of the young. We pray for all working in education, adjusting to teaching on line, keeping schools open in challenging circumstances and attempting to hold and allay the fears of the young. Help us to treasure them as we ask them to treasure our young people in their care

God, who called a shepherd to be king, forgive the way we look away, embarrassed, from those whose work is unglamorous but essential. We pray at the moment for all who maintain our utilities, whatever crisis is in the air. We pray for the wellbeing of those working in broadcasting and the telecoms industry. We pray for ever deeper respect and gratitude for cleaners everywhere. We pray for manufacturers and food producers, delivery drivers and warehouse managers whose vocations we rarely pause to honour.

Picturing David being anointed, we feel the pain of not being able to touch, to anoint, to bless with the laying on of hands. Let your Holy Spirit “come mightily” on all who need affirmation, tender touch, or a sense of calling and direction just now. We pray for those who do still touch and anoint, working in healthcare and, especially, the district nurses and health visitors still calling, still dressing wounds, still helping with the most intimate care. As masks are distributed, then taken back because of a shortage, we pray for their protection as they protect us.

Psalm 23

It is delightful to picture God as a woman setting the table, so eager to welcome us, her guests, that she lets the wine pour over the edge of the cup. Yet at this much anticipated feast, the shadow of death is named. Reciting this familiar psalm at home, perhaps we too can name our fear of the social, economic and health crisis, while determinedly counting every meal a meal with God, a gift from God, every simple dish a feast if eaten with thanksgiving.

The Psalm is in the first person singular. It is a good prayer for anyone eating alone. If we are fortunate to have company in our confinement at home, it could be a shared grace. Friends could say it together over the phone before eating in their separate places.

A young couple I know had to spend some months apart in different countries. One day they worked out the time difference, each prepared the same dish at home, dressed up in something nice and made it a date, eating together via skype. Perhaps there is someone you could eat with, or pray with, or make a simple special occasion with this week.

Screen time may be very important to all generations in the coming weeks. Consider how to make screen time generous and hopeful for those you are in touch with.

Ephesians 5:8-14

It is striking that Paul speaks of people awakened from sleep, with a fresh perspective on a world seen in the light of Christ. He then goes on to describe a society of such people as radically equalised, men and women, children and adults, even slaves and masters putting each other's needs first. If this accursed virus were treated as a wake up call, it might reveal the absurdity of many of our assumptions and prejudices. This thought shapes the last part of a prayer of lament and resistance below.

John 9

I shudder reading this story at my own clumsiness and ignorance of life for people with disabilities. Yet one in five of us lives with disability of some kind. Noticing our feelings stirred by each turn of this long conversation, we might then pray:

We see a blind man begging, and are aghast at the religious authorities' heartlessness, unable to rejoice at his healing, but then you turn us to look at our own behaviour and society. God, you move us to pray for all whose disability is enough to live with, without the hurtful criticism, the poisonous

blaming, the prejudiced sneers, the economic disadvantages and the intrusive, suspicious scrutiny of the Department of Work and Pensions adding insult to injury. Unnerved by the disciples' question and the Pharisees' clear answer that the blind man is to blame for his condition, we pray for all who are dependent on benefits and have to bear the sneering accusation that it is all their fault. Heal in us the dark pleasure at the thought that it is.

When the blind man is healed, his acute theology, articulate wit and lively mind are wonderfully displayed. His faith and wit were honed before he was healed, while observing the world from his beggar's place on the pavement. Before he could see, he could perceive more than most. Forgive us, then, O God, when we patronise or underestimate each other. Teach us to listen to the wisdom of the most disadvantaged among us. Humble us to expect insight from people on the fringe.

When the healed man exposed the leaders' hypocrisy, he was punished by exclusion. All he wanted to do was be thankful. We watch his gradual recognition of Jesus and his eagerness, with each step, to know more. Give us such resilient joy, and kindle our eagerness to grow in knowledge of you. He prompts us to pray, too, for the people who come to church, alive in faith, even though the church has made life difficult for them.

When their anger flares up, the religious leaders display their deep prejudice. We pray in our current confinement that when tempers flare and hurtful words fly, we will be sincere in apology and with the balm of your forgiveness we may heal one another's hurts.

Speaking of forgiveness, Jesus, we remember your astute story about the man forgiven a huge debt, then beating someone up for a small debt. As we worry for countless businesses, mortgages, interrupted wages and redundancies, we pray for our financial institutions, that when a modest debt is set before them, they will remember how much they were bailed out in another crisis and find ways to set people free.

When the leaders of the faith say "give glory to God" but cannot see God in Christ before them, they prompt us to admit, God, that you dwell among us, but too often we do not accept you. When they claimed to be disciples of Moses, but then put furious energy into preserving their own dignity, we contrast Moses, who saw the burning bush, saw the people's needs, saw their error, saw God's glory, yet was the last to see his own face shone. We pray for any leaders tempted to put their dignity first, eager to claim credit or be cruel with their power. With Samuel perception, reveal the people we need, insightful leaders, careless of their own reputation, ready to serve with passion and without prejudice. In the quietness we bring to you those whom we find hardest to trust and those whom we admire.

Remembering the interrogation of the healed man, we pray for any embroiled in legal cases which are now being delayed. We pray this Mothering Sunday for Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe unexpectedly released from prison because of the Corona Virus, staying with her parents, able to be a daughter, but missing her child now in England. We pray for all families separated physically or grieving an absence.

God, Mother to us all, we are upset by the insightful man's parents all but disowning their son. On Mothering Sunday, candidly we bring to you all our flawed family relationships to be healed in the warm light of your love. Show us what it means to honour our mother and father even when they

have let us down. We pray for any parents struggling with their children's life choices. We pray for families divided by regret. We pray for the mental health of children, absorbing anxiety from the adults around them. Give us pause to hear their feelings and be healed by their capacity for play. In our enforced separation, show us how to be there when we can't be there. Deepen our trust that you are there with each and every one.

Prayer of Lament and Resistance

We grieve with the lonely, friendly visits, safe social spaces, lunch club lifelines now out of reach.

We grieve with one another when our mental health feels fragile and the very contact that would help is prohibited.

We lament with those suddenly needing benefits, frustrated by pernicious delays.

We lament with leaders wishing they could solve things, fix things.

We grieve for those who have died because of Corona Virus and other more prevalent, more preventable disease.

We lament any arrogant carelessness that has under resourced health and social care, while praying, too for countries less well served.

We grieve with one another wanting a Mothering Sunday kiss.

We lament with those whose wedding plans are in tatters.

We grieve with those whose bereavement is surely enough to bear without having difficult decisions about funeral gatherings.

We grieve with musicians and sports men and women who so enrich our lives but whose livelihood is threatened.

We long to forget this preoccupation with contagion.

We long to get back to meaningful work.

We long for a pint with a mate, coffee with another new parent, a swim, or a great concert.

We long to go out and play.

We long for carefree hugs.

As we do so, God, deepen our respect and sympathy for the people for whom isolation, poor sanitation, lack of safe space to play, or economic deprivation have been the norm for ever.

Defiant and determined to learn, we dare to thank you that a virus ignores social class, does not notice ethnicity, does not obey national borders. As we put huge energy and ingenuity into making a vaccine, in the meantime may your Spirit begin to heal our prejudices. Work on our hearts to

recalibrate our priorities as a church and as a nation. Match resistance to disease with openness to each other. In the hurt of enforced isolation, in the longing for freedom to interact, in the ache of imposed solitude, reveal to us the foolishness of isolationism and individualism, so little questioned when all seems well.

Refresh our confidence that every human being is your precious child;

Help us to see the brothers and sisters you have given us to care for.

How can you make a film about blindness, for goodness sake?

In the time opened up by confinement, find the film Notes on Blindness, telling the story of the breathtakingly insightful Professor John Hull's journey into blindness. At his funeral, many gave thanks for his sharp insight, yet his childlike eagerness to learn more; his passion for justice, yet his capacity for friendship; his witty disruption of hierarchy, but never as merely fleeting iconoclasm; rather, always with constructive purpose. At the end, the preacher shared a question a child in their church had asked: "Mummy, will John be able to see in heaven?"

"When we hear [it] we are caught up in the momentum of grace and, laughing, realise there is a bigger joy, overwhelming that question: that in heaven we will be able to see more like John."

The Revd David Warbrick is Vicar of All Saints Kings Heath in Birmingham. Pray for his church and family as isolation unfortunately seems to heighten his verbosity.