

Reading: Exodus 7:8-24

It is always a challenge for a preacher to find that the readings for the day speak uncomfortably or unsettlingly into the heart of a current situation.

Given that Mother Alice preached so movingly on forgiveness and the grace of God last week, which continues to be the theme of our reading from Romans today, I might expect to turn this morning to the Old Testament reading, the beginning of the very familiar story of the Ten Plagues of Egypt. But how does one, as a modern, liberal Christian, talk in the middle of a pandemic about a God who appears deliberately to send plagues on the earth and the people of his own creation, to demonstrate his power and to punish the hard-heartedness of human beings?

For the compilers of the Book of Common Prayer, from which our Matins service comes, there was no question about the link between our sins and God's punishment. In the 1662 edition, we find a prayer for a time of any common Plague or Sickness which contains these phrases:

*O Almighty God, who in thy wrath didst send a plague upon thine own people in the wilderness... Have pity upon us miserable sinners, who now are visited with great sickness and mortality; that like as thou didst then accept of an atonement, and didst command the destroying Angel to cease from punishing, so it may now please thee to withdraw from us this plague and grievous sickness.*

Those of us in our tradition of Christianity may flinch at the idea of sickness as punishment and the result of God's wrath, and I do not believe that this message should be applied to individuals, amongst whom some of the kindest and best are seen to face terrible suffering. Early societies, however, thought much less about the individual and more about society as a whole, and stories such as these do perhaps raise questions for us as part of creation.

To what extent should humanity take responsibility for our own suffering and that of the world?

Christian theology teaches us that we are given free will, that we choose whether to follow the teachings of God or not, whether to act in ways which will care for God's creation and for his people, or whether to turn away, look inwards and harden our hearts.

The plagues did not come upon Pharaoh and his Egyptians without warning. God made it quite clear what Pharaoh should do – let the people of Israel go – and he then spelled out in great detail what the effect of his disobedience would be. *The waters shall be turned to blood; and the fish that is in the river shall die and the river shall stink.*

Yet in spite of all this, and regardless of the suffering his disobedience and pride were visiting on the everyday lives of his own people, Pharaoh not only let Moses and Aaron do as the Lord commanded, but he also got his own magicians, in some kind of bizarre one-

upmanship, to make the situation even worse. In the face of so much suffering amongst his own people we are told, *Pharaoh turned and went into his house.*

I would personally never wish to say that the Coronavirus plague is simply a result of God's wrath. The fallen, imperfect world in which we live does contain the seeds of suffering, but as we look back over the past year or more, can we see times when human beings have exercised their free will to act against the teachings of justice and compassion which underpin God's kingdom on earth, thereby contributing to the free rein of the virus?

Animal cruelty, the unbalancing of nature, secrecy, political ambition, greed, selfishness, neglect and the prioritising of individual security over the needs of others have contributing to the rampaging of Covid-19 across so many nations of the world. All of these are matters on which we have received warnings, whether through modern-day scientists or in the pages of Scripture, even in the outspoken words of St Paul in our reading today.

Yet even as humanity has contributed to this situation we also see God's grace and mercy at work. He and he alone has given researchers throughout the world both the skill and experience, and the raw ingredients to create the vaccines and the various treatments which are bringing us hope and healing. Following the example of Christ's self-sacrificial love for the world, we have also seen the heroic efforts of our healing and nursing professions over the past months; of the emergency services, school staff and social services, and last but not least, of neighbours drawn to care for one another in need as we become aware of each other's pain and isolation.

We can see the work of the Holy Spirit everywhere.

Where we can push back against selfishness and self-absorption and use our free will to build peace and justice in the world, rather than, like Pharaoh, "turning and going back into our house," we can share in God's work, uniting against evil and suffering by sharing and giving generously of the gifts we have been given.

Many might say with some reason that it was unfair for the Egyptian people to suffer for the pride and arrogance of their Pharaoh; yet many of them also had Hebrew slaves they were no doubt loath to let go, and probably many colluded against their Hebrew neighbours, refusing help when their babies were being put to death. We should not say that we are unable to act because decisions are made at another level.

Each one of us can speak out for the just sharing of vaccines with countries suffering from poverty and sickness, for international cooperation and an ecological balance which will restore the health and peace of God's whole creation. We can show individual grace and love to those in our community, protecting them from harm or standing beside them in their grief.

We should not lay the blame for the pain of this year at God's feet, but look again at ourselves and at the world, at the light of God's love and grace manifested around us, and use our free will, choosing to build up the world of peace, justice and healing which God intends. **Amen**