

## 29<sup>th</sup> March 2020 10 am. Andrew Attwood: “Watching and Waiting”

[Revd. Andrew Attwood:]

Hi good morning, welcome again. It's an opportunity for us to share time together a slightly different format in a slightly different location on the web this time, but in many respects we still want to do church as normal, so you might want to have a Bible to hand. It'd be useful if you have pen and paper together. We've emailed out some resources for children during this time so there may be some sheets of paper and some colouring and things like that, that they can enjoy, but before we get any further into our time together here's a question: if you're either on your own or if you're with others as we watch, what TV series do you most enjoy at the moment? Or maybe do you have a favourite TV series from the past that you've watched and followed all the way through? What have you been attentive to on TV? And if you're not into that kind of thing do you have any kind of hobby that you give your attention to? So just have a conversation with those near to you, or maybe just write it down if you're on your own. What kind of things do you love to watch? We'll start in a moment.

[Music]

So as is our pattern now that we've settled into time around our screens, I just wanted to update you with just a couple of notices. Thank you to those people who have helped deliver letters and information packs to various members of our church congregation who aren't online. It's very much appreciated. Denise is very keen to help spread that information around as far as we can, so thank you for those who are helping with that.

I did want to draw your attention to something that was emailed out this week. There is a letter from the wardens and the treasurer that was attached to the update from this week that just gives you some kind of insight into where we are in terms of finances and giving, and how this new circumstance might affect that. So do please read that letter. And I also want to say at this point that after today's morning talk there's going to be an evening talk as well, that's going to be at 6:00 p.m., again on YouTube. The link will be in the notices and that's going to be taking hold of some of the principles that we learned from last 6:00 p.m. to do with how we engage with the Bible and apply it to a particular topic, and the topic is “what the Bible says about women in ministry”. It'd be really good to dive into Scripture and see what the Bible says about women in ministry. So that's just a handful of notices to begin with.

We'll begin now with a gathered time of worship. So let's just have a time of quiet and there'll be some words to follow on the screen for you. So I'm going to read from Psalm 103 and there'll be words on the screen. It would be good if you could follow with me.

- <sup>1</sup> Praise the LORD, my soul;  
all my inmost being, praise his holy name.
- <sup>2</sup> Praise the LORD, my soul,  
and forget not all his benefits—
- <sup>3</sup> who forgives all your sins  
and heals all your diseases,
- <sup>4</sup> who redeems your life from the pit  
and crowns you with love and compassion,
- <sup>5</sup> who satisfies your desires with good things

so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

<sup>6</sup> The LORD works righteousness  
and justice for all the oppressed.

<sup>7</sup> He made known his ways to Moses,  
his deeds to the people of Israel:

<sup>8</sup> The LORD is compassionate and gracious,  
slow to anger, abounding in love.

<sup>9</sup> He will not always accuse,  
nor will he harbor his anger forever;

<sup>10</sup> he does not treat us as our sins deserve  
or repay us according to our iniquities.

<sup>11</sup> For as high as the heavens are above the earth,  
so great is his love for those who fear him;

<sup>12</sup> as far as the east is from the west,  
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

<sup>13</sup> As a father has compassion on his children,  
so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him;

<sup>14</sup> for he knows how we are formed,  
he remembers that we are dust.

<sup>15</sup> The life of mortals is like grass,  
they flourish like a flower of the field;

<sup>16</sup> the wind blows over it and it is gone,  
and its place remembers it no more.

<sup>17</sup> But from everlasting to everlasting  
the LORD's love is with those who fear him,  
and his righteousness with their children's children—

<sup>18</sup> with those who keep his covenant  
and remember to obey his precepts.

<sup>19</sup> The LORD has established his throne in heaven,  
and his kingdom rules over all.

<sup>20</sup> Praise the LORD, you his angels,  
you mighty ones who do his bidding,  
who obey his word.

<sup>21</sup> Praise the LORD, all his heavenly hosts,  
you his servants who do his will.

<sup>22</sup> Praise the LORD, all his works  
everywhere in his dominion.

Praise the LORD, my soul.

[Music]

[Colossians 1:15-20, read by Lindsey Attwood:]

<sup>15</sup>The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. <sup>16</sup>For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup>He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup>And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. <sup>19</sup>For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, <sup>20</sup>and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

[Andrew:]

So are you watching God and waiting on God? Are you watching God and waiting on God? What should Christians do in times of crisis? Like everybody else we've got some practical adjustments to make. We've got to get used to the new routines now, but as we adjust, what should our spiritual response be to this time? How should we respond and how can we be attentive, waiting on God?

Now the Bible tells us that God is active in real time in real history. God is not elsewhere, he's present. According to the Bible he's present with humanity and he's influencing things, but of course when crises happen people often say, "Well, where is God, particularly when bad or alarming things are happening? Where is God at these times? Well we can be assured of his care and his love because that's already spelled out by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He is clearly with us in everything that happens, but what about these particular times? What is God doing right now and how can we watch God? How can we be attentive to God in these days? I think it would be good to look into the Bible to help us to discern the signs of these times. It's better to do that rather than leap wildly to simplistic conclusions. We need to read the scripture and be open to his spirit.

Now just as a preface to that, it's worth mentioning that the pattern of the early church (this is records after the writing of the New Testament was finished) we contract that when the early church was faced with national or international plagues in the Roman Empire they had a habit of staying and helping, not running away from it. In fact it was one of the hallmarks of the Christian faith was that it grew because they showed love to people in need and in suffering. So I would, in the spirit of that, commend to you engaging with local support, local help activity that is helping those most vulnerable. Again there's a link in the notices that would take you to the COVID-19 support Kenilworth group if you want to be a street champion or help in different kinds of ways.

But we need to recognize first the need to step back - that there's something very normal about this time of difficulty and suffering. Tim Keller said this: "Human suffering is inevitable, so we should not be shocked by suffering. Modern Western people are more traumatized by it than others. We have too much faith in our technology, in democratic institutions, and we are conditioned by our secular materialistic culture to seek most happiness in fragile things like good looks or wealth and pleasure. In fact even many Christians believe that God won't really let bad things happen to them but of course the story of Jesus disproves that." Let me give you some examples through the story of the whole of scripture to illustrate my point. Think of Joseph in the Old Testament, all the way back to Genesis, a young lad, thrown down a well by his jealous and annoyed brothers, sold into slavery, falsely imprisoned and kept in prison for a number of years, and only after that level of suffering was catapulted into being the Prime Minister of Egypt, because of his interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams. We can see in that real historical situation, that in fact zooming out from Joseph

personally, God used a time of severe famine, a natural disaster, to reveal himself to Joseph and Joseph's family, and indeed to all of Egypt. There's a famous line in Genesis 50 verse 20 where Joseph says this to his brothers at the end of the story: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." So we can see from Joseph's story that a bad situation led to something remarkable and good.

In fact the story of Exodus again, beginning in Egypt, begins a repeating pattern of suffering and redemption for the story of Israel. Israel was often exiled or enslaved, often due to rebellion against God. "My name began in Egypt." They were just captives to an oppressive Pharaoh and so they cried out to God for help. And we see through Moses that God responds and rescues his people and sets his people free. So even though through the story of the Old Testament, all the way through for the story of Israel, we can see that God allows exile and captivity. His heart is always to bring people into freedom, he wants people fundamentally to know him and to be dependent on him. That's something that we can learn from the Old Testament. In terms of the New, we've even got little glimpses of this with the Apostle Paul. It says in 2 Corinthians 12:7-9 that he was afflicted with his thorn in the flesh. Now we don't absolutely know what that was. Some people have said it was a physical illness, more scholars are more inclined to say that it was Jewish persecution, that wherever he went he got hassled from his fellow Israelites and that was something that just upset him so much and Paul prayed to God multiple times that this thorn in the flesh would be taken away, this suffering would go, but God said no. God said instead, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." God didn't just remove the suffering, he used it. God modelled in Paul, then, a vulnerable faith, so that the glory went to God and not to the Apostle.

Perhaps most significantly in the story of Scripture we have the story of God choosing to allow wicked leaders to conspire against his Son Jesus Christ, where they were colluding with the ruling powers of Rome, letting them abuse, torture and kill the Son of God. God allowed something very bad to bring about something very good indeed: the saving power and forgiveness of God. So we can see from multiple examples in the Bible that God sometimes does allow difficult or bad things to happen, but eventually brings greater or even amazing good out of them. All of this demonstrates a clear point: God is entirely in control all the time, working his own purposes out, even if we can't at first see what is going on, even when things look bad.

Do you remember, when you learned to drive, how they had dual control cars to help learners? I can remember panicking in my first driving lessons, thinking, "How on earth am I going to control this great hunk of metal heading down the road?" And feeling like, "I don't know which pedal to press" and gradually feeling a bit more reassured, because the instructor had the controls too; in fact they would override me if I was going to make any mistake. We need to kind of like lean into God in that respect and remember, even when things feel out of control, he actually has his feet on the pedals. It's in his hands still.

So in this current situation that we're in, we're faced with effectively a natural or even semi-natural man-made problem. It's a dangerous virus potentially nurtured by poor conditions for animals in China, now naturally spreading internationally through ordinary human activity. Now that's just what happens, that's just what happens in a broken world. In a general sense all bad things that happen in the world can be attributed to what we call the Fall, the rebellion of human beings against God. The world doesn't work properly - that means bad things happen in the world, and they happen indiscriminately pretty much to everyone. That coronavirus is indiscriminate: Christians are just as likely to catch it as unbelieving people, because we all share in this fallen world, and we suffer in similar ways. We are all in this tricky context together. The world is broken and it affects everyone, but what does that say

about God, and what Christians should be doing in response to this?

I just wanted you to look with me at another passage of Scripture from the New Testament where we can learn the difference of perspective between Jesus and his follower Peter. When we look in Matthew 16 verses 21-23 - let me read it to you:

<sup>21</sup> From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

<sup>22</sup> Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

<sup>23</sup> Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

Now Peter recoiled from the news Jesus was telling him: he naturally recoiled from the impending crisis that was happening or going to happen to Jesus. It upset him and it made him want to change things, he made it want to stop. But Jesus actually rebuked Peter for his lack of understanding: he said, "You do not have in mind the concerns of God but merely human concerns." Jesus knew more than Peter did. He could see wider and broader and further.

Now at this time we will be filled with some very natural human concerns: how are we going to cope with being housebound? What about our children? What about our work? What about our income and the bills we have to pay? All these concerns are understandable, and thank God that we are in a nation where the government is attempting to address a number of these issues. At this time some of you may be actually frightened by the virus. I was thinking the other day I mean I've got mild asthma so I have not a very serious level but an underlying condition that makes me a little bit more vulnerable to this particular disease. Some of you will be much older than I or maybe you'll have a really serious illness that makes you very sensitive and vulnerable to this particular illness. So I understand your fears: some fears are entirely rational, some aren't.

I'm sure you've heard the story of the guy who was really racked with fear because he kept having such bad nightmares and he had a nightmare that had reoccurred since he was a kid that there was a monster under the bed, and so he signed up to see a psychiatrist who would charge him about a hundred pounds a session, and he had multiple sessions about this fear of the monster under the bed, and it just didn't work; the psychiatrist couldn't make any kind of progress with him. Anyway this guy went to the pub and had a chat with this complete stranger at the bar, who said, "Oh, I can sort out your problem, maybe just for 50 quid, no problem at all." And he did! And this guy happened to bump into the psychiatrist later, who was confused as to why he hadn't come back, and he says, "Oh! This guy sorted it out for me!" And the psychiatrist said, "Well, what did he do?" And he says, "Well, this guy was a carpenter: he just cut the legs off the bottom of the bed. Problem solved!"

So at some point we have to lift our eyes off ourselves, away from our limited understanding, and look again to Jesus Christ. We need to watch Jesus again. That's like watching God. Now, think about it: this is a man who faced down the worst death contrived by humanity, and he overcame it. According to Hebrews 7:16 it says, "He possessed the power of an indestructible life." Even death could not hold Jesus. As I said previously, Jesus is the one who can speak to storms and they obey Him. Jesus is the one who routinely casts out oppressive evil and heals thousands of sick people. Jesus is the one who we should fix our eyes on at a time of national crisis. Think about it: from the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus spoke words like no other and revealed what God is really like.

It's interesting to observe in the Gospels that his disciples spent the first year or so mostly just watching him in action. He gathered the outcasts, the unclean, the marginalized. He rebuked the religiously controlling people and gave wise counsel to those who wanted to learn, and after three years his disciples then watched him enter Jerusalem. In effect he calmly walked into the mouth of the enemy, allowing evil in the end to do its worst on the cross, standing in our place, while every wicked force was poured down on him. Three days later he stepped out of the tomb still marked by the wounds of the cross but now alive forever. This same Jesus gathered his bewildered followers before his ascension and they watched him again, watching Jesus all the time, and he said,

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”<sup>1</sup>

Just think about that! All authority over everything, including coronavirus. The Bible says that Jesus is the sovereign of the earth as well as heaven so he, according to the Bible, is allowing things to happen for his purposes: everything that happens, both good or bad. Now we may not understand now because sometimes it feels like we're passengers in a stormy boat, like the disciples crossing the lake with Jesus<sup>2</sup>, and they don't know what's going on. But Jesus knows, and Jesus knows what he's doing, and so the call for followers of his is to watch and to wait on him. We need to make sure our attentiveness to watching God, to watching Jesus, lifts our eyes, and takes our attention more than the panic and the fear of the present moment.

So how can we give more focus to Jesus at this time of crisis? What can you do to get a better more God-centred perspective? Now if you're listening today that's great, but we need to be watching God, watching Christ throughout each day, throughout each week. Now some of you may have more spare time because of the lock-down, some of you will be constrained by the task of homeschooling your children, some of you may actually have more work because you have to do everything from home - but all of us will need to fight to find a time to be with God. It is essential, even in a time of crisis, that we find space for prayer and for His Word.

Now let's just have a think about that as we learn together.

[Why do you like to pray and read the Bible?]

[Lindsey Attwood:]

I love reading the Bible because I feel I want to know God more, and over the years my passion for the Bible has really grown. When I was much younger I used to read it because I was told to “do your quiet time”. It was this sort of tick list: “Oh, I've done that, that'll please God,” whereas now I love to do it because actually I see more and I'm actually excited by it more and I want to go a bit deeper and understand what God is like.

[Do you have a prayer/reading pattern?]

[Lindsey:]

Yes I do, and most mornings when we wake up we read the Bible together with myself and Andrew so we have often chosen a book of the Bible to just read together and at the minute we're going through Revelation and we use it as a time to pray just before we read, and also afterwards when we've read it. We'll often discuss what it means and then we'll pray together as well.

[Why pray and read at this time?]

[Lindsey:]

I want to go deeper with the Bible especially at a time when life isn't so

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1 [Matthew 28:18-20](#)

2 [Luke 8:22-25](#)

certain or your routine isn't so certain. I think when you have a routine in life, you can just keep going, and sometimes the Bible becomes a sort of a bit of "Oh, I've just got a bit of a sin", whereas for me at the minute when you're not quite sure what's going on, there's a real sense of wanting to really seek God out and actually start to ask him more and more what we are meant to be doing.

[Our response]

[Andrew:]

So in the light of what we've been sharing, I just want to put it to you as church that this crisis is an opportunity to perhaps learn to pray and read the Bible in a fresh way, an opportunity to read and reread Scripture. Did you know that research shows that people who hear or read scripture maybe one to three times a week, they change very little, but those who hear and/or read scripture maybe four or more times a week are much more likely to grow and change and mature. That's a challenge to hear: this is an opportunity in this crisis to renew and deepen our prayer lives. I want to challenge you and encourage you as church to make a point of putting the TV off, of putting your phone in another room, and choosing to give God a piece of your day. Now with young children this is hard, you might need to wait till children are asleep. With other work challenges this may be a stressful thing to add into the mix, but we need to press in as God's people. I want to ask you to find space for God, to learn to sit quietly, to learn to be still. I want to call you into openness to God and to try and do that every day if you can. God wants to move us on so that we're not necessarily like Peter reacting to Jesus saying, "Just stop the crisis, stop the impending difficulties," but to actually be meek, humble, attentive to Jesus, following him wherever he leads us, mature Christians who seek his face, hear his word, and wait and watch and trust.

So with that in mind let's pray, let's respond to this at this moment:

Lord Jesus, we acknowledge that you are the one with all authority over everything in heaven and on earth, including all the nations, including our lives, including our loved ones, and we pray now, Lord, that you would open our eyes to understand that you are in control. You are in control of the big issues and the small details. Would you draw us as people! would you draw us into a place where we commit ourselves to praying! Commit ourselves to reading Scripture! So that then we will begin to understand more. Lead us away from just the tyranny of the urgent, and into a place of peace, where we can be your people. Fill us again with your grace, just like you offered to the Apostle Paul. You said, "My grace is sufficient for you. My strength is perfected in weakness." We bring our weakness to you, Lord. Just as we are, we come to you. Pour your grace into us, as we are, in Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.

[Denise Coomber continues with prayer:]

Father, thank you for those who are still working in difficult circumstances. May we who are inconvenienced remember those who are putting themselves at risk, so that they can educate, care for, keep our infrastructures and economy going, provide us with water, food, energy, sanitation and the things we need. Thank you for those keeping law and order, advising the public, for those entertaining and informing us in the media. We pray for those who are scared but need to keep working so that they are paid. You are a faithful God whose love takes away fear. We pray that your love and peace will be evident in our society and that people will treat others in the way that they would like to be treated. May we be tolerant and show your love to those working for us. We pray that they will be able to rest when their work is done and that you will show them your peace in the midst of their fear. We pray that they will be able to ask for and find

help if they need it, both for their physical and emotional well-being.

We pray for those who know you, that they will be able to find time and space to reflect on your faithfulness, and recover from their challenging days. We pray for inspiration, courage, joy and strength of those working in our communities. Help them to know that you will be with them and that they can trust in you.

Amen.

We pray for the medics and scientists working on a way to stop this virus. Strengthen their resolve and honour their hard work in creating a treatment for COVID-19. For the medics who are on the front-line, for those in ITUs who have seen first-hand the effects of this illness, for nurses and other hospital staff who care for those who are ill and for those caring for their loved ones who are in isolation in their own homes. We pray for protection and that you will keep them safe even while they are being exposed to danger and for the energy to cope with everything they are experiencing. We pray for the patients, those who have already succumbed to the virus that you would take away fear, and we pray for recovery. Help those who make you their refuge know that as you have promised in your Word, no harm will overtake them. We pray that they will be able to claim this promise for themselves and that you will give them your peace. We pray this to for those who love and care for them, for relatives of those who are ill, especially if they cannot be with them at their time of need. Thank you for those who have come out of retirement and for newly qualified doctors who have volunteered to help. We pray that there will be enough people to deal with this crisis and that our health service will not be overwhelmed. We pray that they will look to you and know that their help comes from you. Give them strength and wisdom to perform their tasks well.

Amen.

We pray that you would give our leaders, those in government wisdom, discernment and strength. Keep them healthy, safe and rested, so that they can guide us through this time. We pray for courage, hope, generosity and kindness of all those in authority. Thank you that you have given us these people who have pledged to serve us, and help us to remember that they want the best for us. Help us to encourage and thank them for what they do. We pray that they will be given good advice and heed what has been said, including advice on how they should rest and take care of themselves.

Now we pray that the general public will listen to their advice and do what they have been told, understanding that those in leadership need to make huge changes in the way we live for our own good.

And so, Father, we lift up to you those we know who are ill, those we know who are in leadership, those we know who are caring for others. We know that you are the Lord who heals, and we pray that you will be protecting and guiding us and them. We pray that we will know that you are here with us, guiding us through this valley of the shadow of death, and that we will find comfort in knowing that you have everything in your control.

Amen

[Andrew:]

So as we draw near to the end of our time together today I just want to commend all that's been said and encourage you to keep following the guidelines of what the government is saying, make sure you keep up with social distancing, stay at home as much as you possibly can, and continue to pray, continue to read the Bible, continue to love those that you're in touch with. Once again I encourage you to find out ways of connecting Church-wise, be that be that by the phone or

using Zoom or Whatsapp. Let's remember that we are Church together. Do feel free to provide comments or suggestions as we go forward in terms of how the Sundays are feeling to you, but for now let me just finish with a closing blessing:

Lord Jesus we want to thank you for being with us at this time and we pray that all that we've heard and all that we've learned and all that we felt and connected with from you would make a difference to our lives this week. So be with us now Lord as we go about our days in Jesus name, Amen

God bless you.

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