

25th October 2020 6 pm Where is God in this Pandemic?

Service led by Gill Palmer, Talk by Phil Swards

This transcript is only of the reading and the talk

Reading: Psalm 67

- 1 May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face shine on us –
- 2 so that your ways may be known on earth,
your salvation among all nations.
- 3 May the peoples praise you, God;
may all the peoples praise you.
- 4 May the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you rule the peoples with equity
and guide the nations of the earth.
- 5 May the peoples praise you, God;
may all the peoples praise you.
- 6 The land yields its harvest;
God, our God, blesses us.
- 7 May God bless us still,
so that all the ends of the earth will fear him.

Amen.

Talk

So now it's over to Phil for the talk.

[Phil:]

Thank you very much, Gill. Good evening, everybody. Couple of reasons that I asked Gill to read that particular psalm this evening: first of all, because it is part of the liturgy from Evening Prayer, but also because I think it's a useful prayer for us at this time. We ask God to be gracious to us and to bless us and to make his face to shine upon us and I think I certainly think we need that, as a nation, as a world at the moment. So where is God in the pandemic? I'm going to offer a perspective on this which I hope people will find useful. It's quite a difficult subject, this, for a number of reasons. First of all, the news on the COVID-19 changes from day to day, and often from hour to hour. So, I'm going to try and step back and take a bit of a perspective on this, but I'm also aware that it's not simply an academic exercise, it's not simply a question of talking about something which is theoretical. COVID-19 is with us, and behind every statistic, there's an illness or a death. You may know somebody who's died or has been ill. You may know somebody who's suffering some of the other consequences of COVID-19 at the moment. And I'm going to try and tread carefully because of these sensitivities, but at the same time, to try and make some observations which may lead to questions and to ask some questions that might lead to observations.

I want to start with a short prayer for those who are affected by COVID-19, so a moment of silence:

Let's bring to the Lord anybody that we know who is affected in whatever way at the moment.
Maybe somebody who's bereaved.

Maybe somebody who is ill in hospital.
Somebody who's lonely, anxious, frightened of going out.
Somebody who is concerned for their livelihood and their employment.
Somebody who is now unemployed because of this situation.

Lord Jesus, we ask you to be gracious to us and to bless us. We pray that your ways may be known upon Earth, and your saving power amongst all nations, particularly at this time, and particularly as we meet together this evening, for our nation.
Amen.

So having started this on a serious note, quite properly, I want to move on and look at something a bit light-hearted. COVID-19, the current pandemic, has raised all sorts of emotions. And for me, there have been a couple of emotions of frustration and annoyance, and in particular at one thing, and that is when I hear people on television talking about the current situation, and the COVID-19 pandemic, and what infuriates me is that the only adjective that people use to describe the situation is 'unprecedented'. And that really does annoy me for two reasons.

- First of all, do people not have a thesaurus these days? unprecedented is not the only word you can use to explain the situation. For example, you could use aberrant, abnormal, anomalous, odd, unparalleled, outlandish, unexampled, out-of-the-way, outré, remarkable, unique, unusual, singular, freakish or unrivalled, and I'm sure there are many more. So next time you hear somebody on television talking about the unprecedented situation, do me a favour: shake your fist. And so that person will scream and feel my pain.
- The second point I want to make about the use of the word 'unprecedented' is this: COVID-19 is serious. People are real, people are dying, people are losing their jobs. It's a serious situation. But it isn't unprecedented. It really isn't. Let me give you some examples. If/when we next go into lockdown, which, who knows, may be soon, with all that spare time on your hands you might try and build yourself a time machine, and go back in time and go back to the year 1350 in the middle of the Black Death, perhaps, 1348 to 1350, the mortality rate in England during the Black Death was between 40% and 60%. Now the population of England at that time was about 6 million people. So, between 2.4 and 3.6 million people lost their lives.
- And again, what about Spanish flu? 1919 to 1920 across the globe, 500 million people were affected: that's a third of what was then the global population, and 50 to 100 million people died during that outbreak. A terrible, terrible outbreak. And like the Black Death, not quite as bad as the Black Death, terrible and much worse than COVID-19.

And what about World War II? If you're over 80, in your mid 80s, perhaps you'll remember something about that. But World War II was a very difficult time. A few years ago I did a bit of an exercise: I went and talked to a number of people I know who were alive at the time and could remember some of the events of the war, and I talked to people and it brought home to me how difficult that period of time was in our nation's history. People would go to bed at night, hoping and praying that the enemy bombers would be spotted and the air-raid alarms would go off, and then they would have to go out to the Anderson shelter in the garden, and probably spend the night there. And people wondered if they were going to wake up when they went to bed at night. There were stories of people coming back to their houses in the morning and finding that the house two doors down the road had been bombed in the night and maybe the people had been killed.

So, we're not quite there as COVID-19. And I think to call the current situation unprecedented frankly is a little bit lazy.

In fact if anything, it's not the current situation that's unprecedented, it's the previous 75 years of our nation's history. On the 20th of July, 1957, at a meeting in Bedford, the then Prime Minister Harold Macmillan gave a speech, and he said some words which have often been misquoted, so here's the real quote¹, and he said about Britain in the post-war years,

You will see a state of prosperity such as we have never had in my lifetime – nor indeed in the history of this country. Indeed let us be frank about it – most of our people have never had it so good.

And I think those words were quite prophetic for what was to come in the following 63 years. We have lived through a time of unprecedented prosperity. We've had, for example, peace in the United Kingdom and Western Europe for 75 years. Now you may think that's normal, but, far from it, it's completely abnormal. If you were to go back and look at the last time that there was unbroken peace in the United Kingdom and Western Europe for 75 years, you'd have to go back to the 4th century AD when the Romans were here. The normal course of events in the last 1500 years has been for there to be war of some sort in the UK or Western Europe. And what about other things that we've experienced and enjoyed over the last 75 years? Well, antibiotics. The first penicillin, penicillin G, was purified in 1942, and it became widely available outside the Allied military after 1945. Well, now we take antibiotics for granted. I mean very, very soon, we may be in a situation where that isn't the case, because of how we misuse them. For the last 75 years, very, very simple infections can be treated by going to Boots or to the pharmacist and getting some cream to put on a scratch that's become infected; that wasn't the case before 1945: people could die from very simple things. And what about sanitation? It was only after World War II, with the clearance of slums, that indoor sanitation became common, that the outhouse was still prevalent after World War II. And what about household goods? It was only in the decade of the 1970s that the majority of homes in the UK had a refrigerator. And now, well, we wouldn't think of doing without them. In fact over the last 75 years, we've enjoyed, and maybe suffered from our prosperity.

In the same way in the 18th and 19th century, people in the enlightenment fancied that there was no more need for God: science and philosophy could explain everything, could give them the meaning of life. Or maybe in the last 75 years we've experienced the same thing with our prosperity. We've perhaps thought that we could do without God because, really, everything was sorted. We were living longer, we enjoyed such great prosperity, generally speaking. Maybe we thought we could do without God. If God wanted to get our attention, a pandemic wasn't a bad way to go about it. And we can debate whether God sent the pandemic. And He has done similar things in the past, if we look at 2 Chronicles chapter 7 verse 14, for example. Or maybe He just allowed it to happen. Why would He do that? Well, Romans 8:28 says this,

28 and we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

The obvious example of that in the Bible is Joseph and you can read about that in Genesis chapters 37 to 50. But it's worth noting that Joseph wasn't squeaky clean, he wasn't totally innocent. And to an extent he was responsible for the suffering he endured before it all turned out right for him through God's agency. And in chapter 37, Joseph isn't the nicest of brothers to his brothers. He's a bit arrogant, a bit headstrong. He wants to rule over them, he wants to lord it over them, that is their experience.

1 http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/july/20/newsid_3728000/3728225.stm

So in this pandemic, a bit like Joseph, are we partly to blame? Are we not totally innocent? We're all very keen to get the latest technology, the latest gadgets, many of them come from China, where working conditions and wages are not great. Many people as a result have to go to get their food in wet markets. And that is where it's currently believed that the virus jumped species and made its way into humans. And yet, we still want our technology, we still want our gadgets from China at low cost, so we can afford [them]. So perhaps we're not totally innocent. And then because we want the cheapest and the nicest things from all around the world, we want our avocados, we want our fruit, we want our spices, we want our clothing from all around the world. And the way to get those is by air freight. Well, air freight is one of the ways that the virus spreads so quickly from nation to nation. We all like to go on foreign holidays. And again, air travel is a way that many people brought back the virus from overseas. So we really have been to an extent, the architects of the way that the virus has spread very quickly, and maybe even the way it arose in the first place and jumped to the human species.

We've all enjoyed the prosperity that these things have brought. We've all enjoyed however many of our 75 years we've lived. So here's a question, are we more aware of God's presence when things are going well? Or when things aren't going so well? Certainly, the experience of the writers of the Bible was that people forgot about God when things were going well. We see that in, for example, Judges, chapter 6, chapter 10, chapter 13. And in 2 Kings 18. Since the start of this pandemic, people have been asking questions and asking questions about the meaning of life. There have been surveys to suggest that 24% of people have sought out those answers by logging on to church services and the equivalent on the internet. So people are looking for answers. Perhaps God really has got people's attention. And maybe as well as a result of our prosperity, there are three things that the pandemic has revealed:

First of all, we're not as resilient as we thought. Is that as a result of our prosperity? Many people are struggling in the crisis, many people have had mental illness, anxiety, depression. As part of what I do, I'm a trustee of a charity which deals with teenagers who have mental issues. And we've seen the demand for our services increase quite considerably over the last few months. Perhaps that's no surprise. We really aren't as resilient as perhaps we thought.

And secondly, we're not as community-minded as we thought. Now, I think here in Kenilworth we are incredibly fortunate. We have the COVID-19 support team who have done a fantastic job, looking after people in all sorts of different ways, in the town and beyond, during the pandemic, and praise God for the COVID-19 support team. But you look at things on the news, you read the papers, and you talk to people, and you experience what people are doing. People don't seem to have a sense of community in the way that perhaps in the past, and certainly during the war, you might have experienced. We've seen people partying, we've seen people desperate to get to the pub before the lockdown happens, and there is a curfew at 10 o'clock. We've see people partying in the streets, people breaking the rules on lockdown, the social distancing, because they think it doesn't matter to them, because they're safe, not being concerned about the wider community. I say this as well on the things that have been very good about, for example, the COVID-19 support team: I wonder what things we've started to do during the pandemic that we ought to carry on doing after the pandemic is finished. Perhaps there are things that we've learned for the better that we ought to be carrying on. And certainly, I'd say we're not as obedient as perhaps we thought, we're not as respectful of authority as maybe we thought as a nation. I'm going to say a bit more about that in a bit.

So where is God in the pandemic? Well, I've asked a similar question, where are we in the pandemic? What are we doing as Christians to help those around us? Christian life consists of being partners in God's work. In 1 Corinthians 3, verse 9 [NIV USA], Paul says, "We are co-workers in God's service." He says a

similar thing in 2 Corinthians 6:1, and in 2 Corinthians 8:23, he talks of his brothers in Christ being representatives of the churches and an honour to Christ. Perhaps that's a question to ask ourselves: are we being representatives of the churches and an honour to Christ?

Well, here are some things we could perhaps do to go down that path.

- And first of all, we could follow the rules.
- And we could encourage people to do the same.
- We could obey the guidelines, we could do what we are required to do, depending on which tier we're in at any one time,
- We can make sure we understand what is expected of us.

Romans 13:1-7 tells us about how respectful we should be for authority. And in Titus 3:1, Paul says this:

1 Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, ...

And people get confused, or so they say, about the rule of six that we had, and of the various rules that keep coming in. Well, here's a rule for you. If you can't remember the rule of 6, here are 6 words that you might remember instead, and the 6 words are this:

Err on the side of caution.

And if you can't remember those 6, here's another 6.

Think about the well-being of others.

Or what about:

Take responsibility for your own actions.

Or:

Use a modicum of common sense.

Or what about:

We are all in this together.

Secondly, we can seek out the vulnerable and the anxious, the ill the old, the infirm, and the bereaved. Paul in 2 Corinthians 1:3-5 says this:

3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, **4** who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. **5** For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.

Certainly we can perhaps reassess our priorities as individuals, and as a society. Romans 12:11-13 says this,

11 Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. **12** Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. **13** Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practise hospitality.

Plenty of things there we can do to be the body of Christ in our community, and in our nation. And what about environmentally as well? I mentioned earlier on about the way that we've perhaps tended to rely on our prosperity, and perhaps the way that we've tended to want to have the best, the latest things from overseas, which is probably not a great deal of good for the economy and for the environment. And I know it's all very difficult, because we're so intertwined, interconnected. If we stopped buying stuff from China, what would happen to the people there whose livelihoods are built on that? But I think we can all take

some measure of responsibility for what's going on in our environment, even if it's simply cutting down on the amount of plastic we're using, cutting down on the amount of cardboard we're using. What about going to the shops? They're starting to dispense goods now without packaging. You take along your own container, and you get your rice or your flour, or goods like that, without having to buy a paper bag, or a box that you'll have to throw away as soon as you get home. There are things that we can all do.

And in all of these things, following the rules, and being a good example to people, seeking out the vulnerable, the anxious, the ill, the old, the infirm, reassessing our priorities as individuals.

We can also take time for God. Ephesians 6:18 [NRSV] says,

18 Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication.

Perhaps we could spend more of our time in prayer and supplication for those that we know, for our nation, for the other nations of the world, who are not able to react and to survive in this situation. And we've heard a lot about the mechanism of our faith being affected by the pandemic. We've all experienced the fact that we can't get to church, which is why you're listening to me over Zoom and the internet this evening. But I challenge you on this: this is not a time when our faith should be attenuated. It's a time when our faith should be accentuated. Not attenuated, but accentuated. There is so much more we can do when it's difficult for other people.

So I'll stop just there to pause for breath as we go into the second part of this talk, and I wanted to just bring a psalm to us. We've had one psalm already, here is another: Psalm 27 [NRSV]. And this may be something you want to listen to prayerfully.

1 The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

2 When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh—
my adversaries and foes— they shall stumble and fall.

3 Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.

4 One thing I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple.

5 For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock.

6 Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

7 Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me!

8 "Come," my heart says, "seek his face!" Your face, LORD, do I seek.

9 Do not hide your face from me.

Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help.

Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation!

10 If my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will take me up.

11 Teach me your way, O LORD, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies.

12 Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries, for false witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence.

13 I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.

14 Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!

So that was Psalm 27.

Quite early in lockdown a work colleague of mine died. He wasn't terribly old, and he wasn't particularly overweight, he was perhaps a little bit portly but not particularly overweight and, as far as I'm aware, he didn't have an underlying health condition. The other thing I should say about him is that he didn't die of COVID-19 or indeed, anything to do with COVID-19. He died of a brain haemorrhage – a very sudden death, a great shock for his family and for those of us who worked with him. The point I want to make is this: people are continuing to die from other causes apart from COVID-19. And they're facing other illnesses, facing other challenges and other anxieties. It's not just COVID-19. Death hasn't suddenly been put on hold for other reasons. But God is there in every and each situation, whether it's COVID-19 related or not. I think that's an important point to remember. COVID-19 takes the headlines. But there are plenty of other things going on at the same time. The encouraging thing is this: God is there in every situation. In Luke 12 verses 6-7, Jesus says this,

6 Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God.

7 Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

Later on in that chapter, verses 22-26, Jesus says to His disciples.

22 Then Jesus said to his disciples: 'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. 23 For life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. 24 Consider the ravens: they do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! 25 Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? 26 Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?

Jesus cares about us! In John 11, we get the account of Jesus when His close friend Lazarus died, and in John 11:35, the shortest verse in the Bible says, very simply "Jesus wept." He was overcome with emotion after the death of His friend. And Jesus cares about us. When we're in danger, when we're worried. When we're anxious, when we are sick, when we're at our deathbed, Jesus cares for us, and He is standing with us. Mark chapter 4 verses 35-41. This is the story of Jesus and His disciples in a boat, they're going across Lake Galilee, and the account is this:

35 That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, 'Let us go over to the other side (of the lake).' 36 Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. 37 A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. 38 Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, 'Teacher, don't you care if we drown?'

39 He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, 'Quiet! Be still!' Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.

40 He said to his disciples, 'Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?'

41 They were [amazed] and asked each other, 'Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!'

Well, this is Jesus on whom we can call when we're anxious, worried, afraid, ill, or upset, because He is with us. 1 Peter 5 verse 7 says,

7 Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

And indeed, He does. And going back to that question I asked earlier on, do we recognise the presence of God more keenly when things are going well or when things are not going so well? I think it's when things are not going so well, that's the very time when we need Jesus alongside us particularly. But of course we shouldn't forget about Him when we're enjoying prosperity.

The second point of this part I want to make is this. The COVID-19 vaccine won't make us immune to death.

Now, if and when the vaccine comes out, if I go along to the Castle Medical Centre and I get my vaccine jab and I walk out of the medical centre and forget to look the right way when I'm crossing Bertie Road, and I get run over by a car, the fact that I've had a vaccine against COVID-19 will do me no good at all. 100% of people die, my good friend Chantal Busby always reminds me this; 100% of people die, end of story. That is a fact. And even if the COVID-19 vaccine works, there'll be plenty of other diseases, other conditions, and other risks remaining. But the Good News is that death is not the end. And Jesus tells us that in the Bible. You see, God loves us so much that He sent Jesus to die for us on the Cross. Mankind had gone its own way. It had been sinful and that simply means that there is something in the way of the relationship between God and man, and whatever mankind tries to do, mankind cannot bridge that gap to God. Sin simply doesn't let us do that. And the only way that God could get rid of that barrier of sin is to send Jesus, His Son, fully God, fully man into the world. And Jesus, without sin, took on His shoulders the sin that separates us from God, our sinful nature, and all the things that we've done that are sinful, and set us apart from God. And Jesus took that sin on His shoulders and died on the Cross, so He could suffer the penalty that we should rightfully suffer. He justified us, it was just as if we had died on the Cross. But by His death on the Cross He's taken away the penalty of sin, and the consequence of that is a new relationship with God, and the promise of eternal life. Mike Dayus put it much better than I did, last week I think it was, in his testimony on the morning service, and he talked about love, joy and peace, three things that he particularly... three emotions that he experiences from his walk with God, love, joy and peace. They happen to be the first three fruits of the Spirit that Paul mentions in Galatians chapter 5 verse 22. The love of God, the love of God that caused Jesus to die on the Cross, so that He could die in our place and save us from our sins and restore that relationship with God to us. And as C.S. Lewis said, "if we were the only person in the world. God would still have sent Jesus to die for us on that cross, He loves us so much." The second thing that Mike mentioned was joy, the joy of knowing that he is forgiven, the joy of knowing that relationship with God. And the third thing was peace, a peace that comes with knowing the presence of God in our lives, peace knowing that we will one day be in Heaven with Him.

The Book of Revelation says this: Revelation chapter 21 talking about heaven:

1 Then I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth,' for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. 2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be

their God. 4 “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death” or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’

And that's a great promise, in which we can have peace. It's a great promise, in which we can have joy. And it's a great promise for each we can give thanks to God, that through Jesus Christ and through the love of Christ, He died in our place so that we could have eternal life, and realise for ourselves that vision in Revelation 21. I love those words from Revelation 21. I also like C.S. Lewis' description of arriving in heaven from a letter² that he wrote in January 1942. And this is a very down-to-earth way of putting it, but I like it all the same. And he compares life to a walk, a long walk. And he says this at the end of the walk. “We shall of course be very muddy and tattered children by the time we reach home. But the bathroom's all ready, the towels are put out, and the clean clothes are in the airing cupboard.” So let me just finish, then, with five observations, or three observations and two questions really.

- First of all, are we more aware of God's presence when things are going well, or when things aren't going so well?
- Secondly, where is God in the pandemic? Well He's with us all the time. But I wonder where are *we* in the pandemic, as the body of Christ.
- Thirdly, perhaps a challenge. Let our faith not be attenuated, but accentuated in the current situation.
- Fourthly, COVID-19 is not the only cause of death, and death won't go away if COVID-19 ever goes away.
- And fifthly, death is not the end.

Amen.

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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² According to <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/faith/discipleship/insight-caring-for-a-neighbors-soul>, to Mary Neylan, 20th January 1942. Another source says it appears