

November 15th 2020 Trinity 23

15 th November 2 nd Before Advent Trinity 23	9.30 Holy Communion Cuxton 11.00 Holy Communion Halling	Zephaniah 1 vv 7-18 p944 I Thessalonians 5 vv 1-11 p1188 Matthew 25 vv 14-30 p994
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O GOD, our refuge and strength, who art the author of all godliness; Be ready, we beseech thee, to hear the devout prayers of thy Church; and grant that those things which we ask faithfully we may obtain effectually; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

I will search Jerusalem with candles, and punished the men that are settled on their lees: that say in their heart, The LORD will not do good, neither will he do evil. (Zephaniah 1¹²).

We were all a bit stunned last Spring when it became clear that this corona virus was a serious threat to us and not, unlike say ebola, largely confined to a distant continent, and that it really was more dangerous than the swine flu and SARs which impacted on some people very badly but left most of us unaffected. I don't think that many of us really thought that a modern western country such as ours was, in the twenty-first century, still susceptible to a global pandemic.

We buckled down, however, in the first lockdown and put up with the restrictions. There was a strong community spirit. We were all prepared to do our bit, *stay home, protect the NHS and save lives*. Millions of people volunteered to help in any way they could. I'm not sure that we read the small print, however. We seem to have assumed that three or four months of lockdown would see us through, that a vaccine would come along or something else would happen to make the virus go away. In the Summer, it felt that we were winning. Many of the restrictions were lifted and, for a while, the number of cases did not go up. If we had paid close attention from the beginning, however, we would have known from the very start that no quick fix was guaranteed. If we do develop a successful vaccine (and it is "if") it is likely to be next year before most people have received it. Treatments are much better than they were when we first encountered COVID 19, but it is still a very nasty disease in many people and still fatal to a worryingly large number. There is no sign of the virus yet mutating to the less virulent form which I have hoped for all along. We were warned that cases would increase again in number as the schools and colleges went back, people returned to work and Winter set in. That is just what happened, but only at first in the Midlands and the North and then London. We here still felt safe. Then, really very suddenly, this second national lockdown. I trust that there will be a similar community spirit to the one we celebrated in the first lockdown, that we shall keep in touch with one another, look after one another and be prepared to do our bit when called upon to do so. I think that there is now less optimism, however. It is very frustrating to have to close the churches and supposedly inessential businesses once again and to have to refrain from doing so many of the things which are normally important to us. Maybe, we don't feel that the end is as close as we once thought it was.

But where is God in all this? We know that a lot of people don't believe in God, although it is remarkable how many self-professed atheists continue to pray.

There are people who do believe that there might well be a God, but that, if there is, He is not relevant to their lives. The people to whom Zephaniah is prophesying in our OT reading were in that category. They worshipped false gods which seemed to satisfy their needs, as people today seek their lives' meaning and satisfaction in the pursuit of wealth, power, beauty, status, mind-altering substances or leisure activities. They discounted the living God. *The LORD will not do good, neither will he do evil.* So they were free to live their selfish, self-centred lives without any fear of judgment or need for mercy, or so they thought.

And then there is a surprising number of Christians who believe in God, pray to Him and hope to spend eternity with Him, but who do not believe that He involves Himself very much in the affairs of this world. They get out of the difficult question of how can there be such awful things as COVID 19 in the world if God is both all-powerful and all-loving by asserting that God does not interfere in the running of the world. He respects the freedom He has given His creation too much to micro-manage it. Thinking like that does evade some difficult questions, but a god who does not involve himself in the affairs of this world, in my concerns and yours, is not the God of the Bible. The God of the Bible is the Word made flesh who dwelt among us and died on the Cross for us at a particular time and in a particular place. The God of the Bible hears and answers prayer. He cares for every individual creature as He cares for the whole of creation. *He's got the whole world in His Hands and He's got you and me, brother, you and me, sister, in His Hands.*

God is just and there will be a judgment. God is not indifferent to or detached from the wickedness which is done on earth. The innocent will be vindicated and the oppressed set free. The Gospel is good news for the poor. *And his mercy is on them that fear him : throughout all generations. He hath shewed strength with his arm : he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seat : and hath exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with good things : and the rich he hath sent empty away.*

In our NT lesson, S Paul warns us that this judgment is coming when it is least expected. The *children of light*, the followers of Jesus Christ, however, ought not to be taken by surprise. We ought always to live as ready to receive our Lord. We walk in the light. We disseminate the light. We use the talents, the resources God has given us and make more of them, make the most of them for the purpose of bringing in His Kingdom of Justice, Mercy & Peace. *For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ, Who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him. Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do.*

I don't feel competent to say what God is doing in this pandemic. Sometimes I pray for a prophet from the Lord to be given a word to explain what is going on to us and how God wants us to respond to it. I am, however, quite sure that God is active in the world today. He is not detached, disinterested, indifferent or helpless. There is a reason for everything that happens. God is watching over us, every one of us. He does hear our prayers. Each one of us is called to use his or her talents to disseminate the light, to share the love. There is judgment and there is mercy. We live as men (and women!) who wait for our Lord. That is all we can do and, for now at least, it is sufficient. We shall know hereafter.