

Plague, Pestilence, and Famine – Lent 2 2020

Genesis 12 vv 1-4, Psalm 121, Romans 4 vv 1-17, John 3 vv 1-17 p1065

Give us this day, our daily bread is the line from the Lord's Prayer we've reached this week. Someone said to me lately that it is the most important petition in the prayer because it is asking God for what we need to live our daily lives. Without bread or some other form of sustenance, we should all be dead. The prayer does mean that – that we depend on God for every thing that we need and that we can depend on Him to look after us – but I think it also means more than that as I shall discuss in the last part of this morning's sermon.

But first, depending on God for what we need in this life. Looking at the news just now, it feels as if the whole world is out of kilter. There are terrible wars raging in Syria and Yemen and elsewhere. There is a growing refugee crisis. There have been wildfires in Australia and earthquakes in Turkey. There is the worldwide spread of the Corona virus. The United Kingdom and much of Europe have suffered three named storms in quick succession, what seems like incessant rain, and severe flooding. On the streets, there is a disturbing increase in knife crime and the murder rate. When I read that parts of Africa are now suffering from enormous plagues of locusts, the set somehow seems to be nearly complete. What more could happen?

The ancient prayer which we pray each week in the Litany suddenly seems very relevant and up to date.

From lightning and tempest; from plague, pestilence, and famine; from battle and murder,
and from sudden death,

Good Lord, deliver us.

The online version adds earthquake, fire, and flood to the list of things from which we pray to be delivered.

People often refer to these phenomena as biblical. Sure, they are mentioned in the Bible – sometimes as an expression of the wrath of God, but they are the universal experience of the human race. Throughout history and all over the world, human beings have long lived with the threat of tempests, disease, famine, and violence. No doubt people have always prayed for deliverance to whatever gods they believed in and have striven to understand the reasons for these disasters, and what we might do to prevent them or to ameliorate their effects. Jews and Christians have prayed to the God of Abraham, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the one true God, to save us from these and all other evils. We have sought to understand their causes in terms of our own behaviour – our faithless response to God's faithfulness to us, our failure to use well God's good gifts to us in creation to promote the welfare of everyone, especially the poor and the vulnerable, and our wickedness or folly in abusing the natural world with all its wonders. We have employed science and technology, engineering, sanitation and medicine to mitigate the effects of natural disasters, chronic poverty, shortages of basic necessities, and threats to health, whilst also seeking the means to bring about peace between and within nations and between individuals.

Maybe the degree of success we have experienced at least in the West in controlling the natural world so that we have eliminated many of the diseases which killed millions of people only a century ago, in reducing the incidence of absolute poverty in our communities and in securing peace with our neighbours has led to complacency. We no longer feel the need to pray, maybe, *Give us this day our daily bread*. We take daily bread for granted, as

we do freedom from hunger, comfortable and pleasant homes, and the NHS on hand if we are sick. We no longer say thank you to God. Grace at meals is generally only said on formal occasions. To pray *From lightning and tempest; from plague, pestilence, and famine; from battle and murder, and from sudden death, Good Lord, deliver us.* sounds positively archaic – unnecessary and, some people might think, ineffective even if it were necessary.

We no longer need God, some might say. We need vaccines and antibiotics, high-yielding food crops, decent sanitation, good schools, good hospitals, a sound science base, industries that can efficiently manufacture the goods that we need, and political and economic systems which promote peace and prosperity. In short, what we need is human effort to save us: science not religion; medicine not prayer; decent homes rather than compassion for the homeless; wealth generation for all in preference to charity for the poor, diplomatic and political solutions to international conflicts, not hand-wring from the pulpit.

Yet, these are false dichotomies. Religion is not opposed to science. Medicine and prayer are complementary not competing resources in our quest for good health. Care for those living on the streets and the provision of good quality affordable accommodation are natural allies. It is perfectly possible to work together to increase the over all prosperity of society and to seek to ensure that there is nobody who does not have enough to live on decently. Preachers appealing for peace are encouraging and supporting politicians in their talks and treaties and both are underpinned by prayer,

I should go further and say that progress in science, medicine, politics, economics, husbandry, industry and indeed all areas of human endeavour is answer to faithful prayer. Some scientists, doctors, politicians, economists, farmers, factory owners, factory workers, diplomats, etc. know this. They may be inspired by their faith to do what they do. They may see their profession as a vocation, pray for success in their endeavours and know Whom to thank when they achieve something worthwhile. Others may not know God or think about Him at all, they may even be atheists, but God still uses them to achieve His good purposes. Our prayers are part of His purposes for progress towards the coming of the Kingdom of God. *Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, in earth as it is in heaven.*

As we were saying last week with the magnet, what we seek in prayer is for our will to be aligned with his Will, for our lives to be aligned with His purposes. The iron filings not only sort themselves out so that they align themselves with the force field created by the magnet; they each become little magnets. Christians, by the power of the Holy Spirit, become aligned with the purposes of God Who is love and each of us becomes a little child of God, an agent of God's love in this sinful world. In this way, we may even form part of the answer to our own prayers.

From lightning and tempest; Make sure the lightning conductors are working properly. Think about whether it is wise to build in flood plains or earthquake zones. Make sure that buildings are able to withstand whatever the environment may throw at them. Don't create a society in which the rich live in the most salubrious places while the poor congregate in places where no-one would live by choice: insubstantial, insanitary slums, river deltas, on the slopes of volcanoes. Many poor people do live in such places in the world today. If we

are experiencing more violent storms and draughts because of global warming, consider what you and I can do to reduce waste and to conserve natural resources, as well as applying political pressure to get government to respond seriously to the threats posed.

From plague, pestilence. Wash your hands. Try to avoid contacts which might spread infection. Support health professionals in their work. Look after yourself. Look after other people. Pay your taxes to maintain health and social services. Support research. There's plenty we can do to work with God in helping to answer our own prayers for good health.

And famine. Support aid charities and missions. Don't waste food. Encourage politicians to recognise that, as a wealthy country, we have a moral obligation to care for our own poor at home and to do our bit to reduce poverty in other countries. If you grow your own food, you might not be doing much to feed the world, but you're benefitting your own family's health both by the exercise you get digging and the higher quality of what you put on the table. You are also benefitting the environment by caring for your own bit of the planet – garden, allotment or even window box. Support farmers. Support all those involved in the production of food. Be nice to the people who serve you in the shops. Encourage their management to promote fair trade, reduce food miles and to be attentive to ensure the welfare of farm animals.

From battle. S Paul says, *If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.* Charity begins at home. Start by being at peace with the people you meet every day. Use your vote and any political influence you might have to encourage politicians to pursue the paths of peace. Make sure we take good care of ex servicemen and their families. There is actually no limit to what we can do if we are working with God to bring in His Kingdom of justice, mercy and peace.

And murder. What can we do about crime on our streets? Support the police. Support family life – maybe through the Mothers' Union. Think about the education system, schools, youth clubs. What about the rehabilitation of offenders? Probation? Community service? I could go on. What can you and I do to work with God to save people from a life of crime and to save people from becoming victims of crime?

And from sudden death. The point is to live as ready to die, so that when the Lord returns He finds us living in the way that He would have us live, that His Name is hallowed by those who bear a Christian name.

Give us this day our daily bread. Yes it does mean trusting to God to provide for our needs and for the needs of the world and we have talked about some of the ways in which we may work with Him in answering that prayer. But I am sure there is more. Jesus is the Bread of life. *This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven: says Jesus, if any man eat of this bread he shall live for ever.* Give us this day our daily bread. We are asking God to give us everything we need in the here and now, and we are also asking for what is infinitely greater, everything we need to live forever in Jesus. Give us this day our daily bread.