

Courage in a time of containment

Sunday 3 May 2020

Unshakeable God, you are our ever-present help in times of trouble. Amidst all the isolation, grief and fear caused by this crisis, renew in us your peace, restore to us your perspective, and reveal to us your presence as we spend this time with you now.

We rejoice in the reassurance of God's smile today, and praise him in the words of Psalm 4:1, 6-8:

¹ Answer me when I call, O God of my right!

You gave me room when I was in distress.

Be gracious to me and hear my prayer.

⁶ There are many who say, "O that we might see some good!

Let the light of your face shine on us, O LORD!"

⁷ You have put gladness in my heart

more than when their grain and wine abound.

⁸ I will both lie down and sleep in peace;

for you alone, O LORD, make me lie down in safety.

Today we are thinking about God's commandment to be strong and courageous when we are tempted to hide away and ride out the storm. These words are found in Joshua 1:8f:

This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful. I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.

Coronavirus began in China where the word for crisis is made up of two characters: the first means 'danger' and the second means 'opportunity'. The danger of this crisis is very real. Everyone is affected in some way. Hundreds of thousands are likely to die. Millions are losing their jobs. The world is heading for recession. It is important therefore that we heed the advice of our leaders and medical experts for the sake of the most vulnerable in our world.

But this crisis is also an opportunity for the people of God to 'be strong and courageous', to show his love to a world that is being shaken to its core. In the year 251AD a plague decimated the great city of Carthage. Its citizens were 'shuddering, fleeing, shunning the contagion'. Bodies piled up in the streets. In a famous sermon on Matthew 5:43-48, the great Church Father Cyprian urged the church to stay in the city to care not just for other Christians but for their non-Christian neighbours too (who had recently been persecuting them). Rodney Stark, in his book, *Epidemics, Networks and the Rise of Christianity* observes that: 'The minority Christian community, which did not flee but stayed to provide nursing, had a higher survival rate than their pagan neighbours; and the pagans who had been nursed through the crisis by Christians were likely to be open to a faith that, unlike their own, had worked.'

We ask the Lord to give us courage despite our nervousness to reach out to other people today, and to bring to our attention any specific people to whom he is sending us.

We also pray for our political and spiritual leaders that they may have wisdom beyond their own wisdom, and strength beyond their own strength to take a lead in this crisis.

Pause and pray

This is an unusual time of constraint and containment when the natural human impulse is towards self-preservation - mere survival. But this season of confinement may also be a great blessing. Eugene Peterson, in *Under The Unpredictable Plant*, writing about Jonah's time in the whale, says, 'Without confinement, without the intensification resulting from compression, there is no energy worth speaking of... Confined to the reality of the human condition, the person is surprised to be living not a diminished life but a deepened life, not a crippled life but a zestful life.'

Pause and pray

Lord, we ask that we would be deepened and not diminished, emboldened and not terrified, by the pressures of this crisis for the sake of those who don't yet know your love.

At this time of so much disruption and dismay we take hold of God's promise in Isaiah 41:10 drawing consolation for the day to come from this beautiful assurance:

Do not fear, for I am with you,
do not be afraid, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.

God of life,
may the promise of the sunrise
be echoed in our minds.
May the warmth of the midday sun
flow through our hearts.
May the peace of the sunset
touch our souls.
And when life seems dark
teach us to remember even then you are with us,
and that we will again see your light.
In the name of Christ.

Amen.