

Trinity 16 (27/9/2020) Yr A Proper 21 Havant

“Is the Lord among us or not?”

Those words from this morning’s first reading come from the Bible’s account of the Exodus, God’s people’s escape from slavery in Egypt. It is a question that is asked in every time of crisis. *“Is the Lord among us or not?”* In times of crisis we are always tempted to put God to the test. Where is God in all this? How can God allow this to happen?

Six months ago when lockdown began we were advised that the problem would soon pass. In words reminiscent of the early days of the First World War we were confidently told “It will all be over by Christmas”, and even some of our religious leaders, who should have known better, assured us that the crisis would pass.

I can’t comment on politicians who seem to think that stating the desirable somehow makes it happen, but I can say that as Christians we should regard any predictions of how things in this world will turn out with the utmost suspicion.

The reason I say this is because Jesus himself told his first disciples, and through them us as well, that *“in the world you will have trouble”* - although of course they and we hardly need Jesus to tell us that. What was new, distinctive, and the cause of endless hope, was what Jesus went on to say: *“but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.”* Jesus did not say that bad things won’t happen, or that they are less bad than they seem - but rather that bad things do not have the last word.

Trouble and delight are both permanent features of life. Yes, trouble and delight. What a strange mixture of experiences we have, and how important it is to find a way of making sense of both joy and sadness in our picture of the world we inhabit. Do you remember the reaction of Job in the Old Testament when he was told about four tragedies that had befallen his sons and daughters *“Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord..... Should we accept from God only good and not evil?”*

The traditional English expression *“the patience of Job”* is not accurate if patience simply means being uncomplaining in the face of suffering. The Bible talks rather about his steadfastness. He raged against what had happened, but refused to curse God despite the encouragement of those around him to do so.

The whole of the Book of Job is a wonderful and agonizing exploration of the mystery of human suffering, but it leaves the mystery at that: it doesn’t attempt to give any easy answers but invites us to trust God, come what may. And that’s the point. There is no simple intellectual answer to the question *“Why do bad things happen?”* In any case, having an intellectual answer wouldn’t give any comfort or help us deal with our wretchedness. The more pressing question is *“What are we going to do about it?”*

This brings us straight to our present crisis. Despite the brave words I mentioned at the beginning, we are now told that the Corona Virus is here to stay and that we need to learn to live with it. That does not mean there is nothing we can do about it. We have rather to recognise that some of the changes we have had to get used to about the way we live and interact with each other will have to be permanent. And

because they will be permanent, we may need to be more subtle about how we apply them. To give just one example, we should alter our language: let's not talk about social distancing as if it means we should have less to do with each other - let's talk rather about physical distancing, maintaining a healthy space while at the same time doing all we can to be closer to each other in other ways.

Above all, however, let's stop complaining about why things are the way they are but commit ourselves to improving how things are, to living with what cannot be escaped, knowing that the answer to the question in my text from this morning's first reading "*Is the Lord among us or not?*" is a resounding YES.

To repeat Jesus' words: "*In the world you will have trouble*" of course, that's just the way things are, but remember how he went on to say, "*be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.*"