

Thought for the Week – 19th April 2020

So here we are – another week of “lockdown” has passed. I don’t know about you, but I find it hard enough knowing which day of the week it is, never mind never mind how many weeks have passed it is since the coronavirus restrictions came in. And now it’s been announced that we are going to have at least another three weeks of it! I heard on the news that one scientific advisor has said today that social distancing may have to be retained until a vaccine is found (which could be another year)! So, as there’s no sign of us getting back to meeting together in our congregations, you’ll just have to make do with me on these little video presentations. The advantage is that, unlike in church, you can always just fast-forward it to near the end!

We may not have experienced anything like this in our lifetime with the world-wide death toll now exceeding 2 million, but pandemics like that caused by the coronavirus are actually nothing new. It is reckoned that between 2005 & 2012 A.I.D.S. killed up to 35 million worldwide. The Hong-Kong Flu pandemic of 1986 killed up to 4 million, the Asian Flu of 1956-8 killed 2 million and worst of all in the 20th century the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918 may have killed up to 50 million people world-wide. Throughout history there have been even more devastating pandemics – the bubonic plague that ravaged between 1346- 1353 (known as the “Black Death”) may have accounted for up to 200 million deaths worldwide. An earlier bubonic plague in 541 decimated the population of Europe by half with about 50 million deaths. While the statistics may be interesting, behind them is, of course, untold suffering as well as grief for those who have lost loved ones.

During the 17th century much of Europe was affected by the Thirty Years War (1618-1648). During this grim time Martin Rinkart (1586 -1649) was a Lutheran Pastor in his native town of Eilenberg, Saxony. The little walled town became a refuge for hungry and homeless people from the locality which had been devastated by the invading Swedes and in 1637 a plague struck the town. Eight thousand people died, including a large number of children and all but three of the town council. One by one the various clergy of the town fell victim, until only Martin was left. He alone conducted 4,480 funerals, sometimes doing as many as 40 in a day. One of them was that of his wife. A severe famine followed, and Martin did what he could to help those in need. He sold all that he had, mortgaged his future income and kept only the minimum rations for his own family. When the commander of the invading army demanded an exorbitant ransom from the town, Martin acted as intermediary. When he request for clemency was rejected he turned to the townsfolk and said, “*Come, my children, we can find no mercy with man; let us take refuge with God,*” and on his knees led the people in prayer to God. The Swedish commander was so impressed he reduced the levy to a small sum.

In spite of everything that had happened to him, Martin Rinkart was able to write a hymn which I believe can resonate with us strongly today. When we feel that things in our lives are out of control, when we’ve been shaken out of our comfortable routines, when the future looks uncertain can we say as Martin did?

Now thank we all our God, with hearts and hands and voices.
Such wonder he has done! In him the world rejoices.
Who, from our mother's arms has blessed us on our way
with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

The call is to ALL of us to thank God whoever we are, wherever we may be and whatever our circumstances. This will not always be easy when things are difficult (and it certainly wouldn't have been easy for Martin) but it is what Paul has called Christians to do in Ephesians 5:20 "...always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." Notice that the hymn shows us how we are to give thanks: with our "*hearts*" – not superficially but from the very depth of our being; with our "*hands*" – in practical ways in our everyday actions and activities; and with our "*voices*" in our words and in our songs of praise and worship. And the second half of the stanza tells us why. Throughout all of our life we are in God's hands, so regardless of what exhausting and seemingly hopeless circumstances we may face today, we can take heart and thank God that His "*countless gifts of love*" are truly still ours today through Jesus Christ our Saviour.

The second verse of the hymn acknowledges that we continually need God's help. It is indeed a prayer which we all can pray today.

So may this generous God through all our life be near us;
to fill our hearts with joy and with his peace to cheer us;
to keep us in his grace and guide us when perplexed;
to free us from all ills in this world and the next.

If we have known the boundless generosity and grace of God in saving us from our sins, then we have the assurance of his presence with us and so we can face whatever comes without anxiety of fear. Two of God's most precious gifts are here – hearts filled with joy and blessed with peace. And because of these God will keep us in his grace, he will guide us when we are perplexed and don't know what to do and although there are plenty ills from which we may not be spared in this world, we shall indeed be free from them all in the world to come. That is what is promised in Revelation 21:4-5 where God says he will "... wipe away every tear. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain."

And so, despite Covid19 and the death and misery it has brought, despite the little discomforts and inconveniences we are experiencing we can say with Martin Rinkart:

All praise and thanks to God who reigns in highest heaven,
To Father and to Son and Spirit now be given –
The one eternal God, whom earth and heaven adore –
For so it was, is now and shall be evermore.

Amen.

John Murdock