

Thought for the Week 20th September 2020

Meeting Fear with Faith *please read Acts 27:13-44*

There is nothing more certain here in Ireland than the fact that the weather is very hard to predict. In any one day there can be the equivalent of sunshine and showers, even the odd rumble of thunder or bolt of lightning - four seasons in one day, as we sometimes say. The spiritual atmosphere of any generation is a bit like the changeable weather we experience in Ireland - very hard to read. So how will the culture in which we are sent to share Jesus have changed due to the coronavirus?

There will be no one answer to that question. The hardened atheist will still say these things happen in a world governed by nothing more than chance and natural selection. The religious fanatic will still interpret the coronavirus as the judgment of God on a world turned away from his ways. And there will be everything in between these extremes in the views of people we know and to whom God sends us to share his good news. Indeed, for many the idea of God as good news at all will be hard to stomach. They are more likely to see him as the culprit or cause of coronavirus.

One thing that is indisputable in the aftermath of coronavirus is the growth of a culture of fear. Before the pandemic, life went on as though human progress had made us invincible. There was a sense that there was nothing that could shake our Western way of life economically, scientifically, socially, ethically and commercially. There may have been pandemics in the past, such as the Spanish Flu of 1918/9, but we've progressed so far in the past century that nothing like that could happen now.

But, as the reality that a tiny virus could stop virtually the whole world in its tracks has set in, that myth we had lived with for a long time has exploded without warning. Fear is suddenly everywhere. You might even say that its spread eclipsed that of the pandemic itself. Fear has cast its dark shadow over the news. It was even tangible as we stood in shop queues. It expressed itself in conversations as we shared our everyday views.

The question is, how will we Christians live and speak into this culture of fear as God resends us into a world that has experienced pandemic, so that we will be witnesses to the truth and power of the gospel of peace?

That's why today I want us to have a brief look at the story from Acts 27:13-44. In this account of the shipwreck on his way to trial in Rome Paul models for us how to **meet fear with faith** as he experienced stormy seas with a ship full of hardened

unbelievers. As we do so let's reflect on how it might guide us in sharing Jesus in the aftermath of the pandemic.

The sailors set off believing that they could ride out any storm by clever sailing technique (v13). In no time at all they find themselves at the mercy of a hurricane force storm (v14). They are no longer able to manage, they find themselves carried along by events outside of their control (v15). They still do what they can, but fear has set in (v17). They finally give up all hope of being saved (v20).

I wonder does what happened in that ship parallels what we have seen happen in society during the period of pandemic? We have seen politicians flapping around with all sort of ideas and empty promises. Testing is the answer - if you can manage to get one, that is! We have seen and heard all sorts of medical opinions on how to combat the virus.

Paul is in the boat at the time all this panic is happening. The sailors and soldiers with whom he was sharing the journey would have known who he was and that he was a prisoner going to stand trial before Caesar because he was a follower of Jesus. I wonder how Paul felt as he experienced the storm as a follower of Jesus? Was he totally free from fear? He was only human, after all, so it's only natural that he should be worried.

Maybe the experience of the pandemic has brought fear to the surface in your life? It's only natural that we should be afraid of something over which we have no control. Or has your faith in God help you counter fear?

What do we need to say to people who have no faith in God in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic? It might be tempting to say people deserve it because of their sin and doing evil in the sight of God

Paul stands up and speaks to the sailors about God twice in the story. The first time, he strikes a fine balance between pointing out how they hadn't listened to what he had said to them before, encouraging them that they need not be lost, offering hope and inviting them to share his faith in God (vv21-25). What has this to say to us?

What do we need to say to people who have no faith in God in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic? It might be tempting to say people deserve it because of their sin and doing evil in the sight of God. They should have listened when they heard the gospel preached, but they ignored it and though they could sort the all the problems of the world by themselves without reference to a higher power.

While we may need to be fearless in proclaiming the reality of human sin and rebellion against God, might we not need to temper that, and strike the kind of balance that Paul

patterns for us here? There is still hope for a lost world, isn't that the Good News of the Gospel?

The second time Paul speaks, he offers practical advice (v31), pastoral concern that they eat (v33-34) and prayer (v35). In the end the ship runs aground and is broken to pieces on the rocks just as Paul said it would be in verse 26 (v41). But Paul has left an impression on the centurion in whose charge he was a prisoner because he stops the soldiers from killing Paul (vv42-43).

What sort of practical, pastoral and prayerful witness can we offer to a shattered world as we live through the period of the pandemic? What hope can we offer as we bear witness to people picking up the pieces in the aftermath of the effects of Covid-19? These are important questions which we need to consider carefully. The Gospel is Good News, not good advice! The media often portray Christians as nice people who really do not know much about what is really happening in the world. The truth needs to be very different. We need to be alert to what is happening and seek God's wisdom on the best way to live and work and witness in the world.

Luke does not cite any aggressive evangelism during this whole situation, though Paul must have been involved in personal verbal witness on the trip and when can say a word for Christ, he certainly does so. Often quiet and appropriate acts of affirming our faith, especially in the middle of a crisis, can play an important role in pointing people to God. Throughout his ministry, and no less in this situation, Paul adopts the attitude of a servant on the ship and in the following part of the story on Malta.

What can we do and what can we say so that we bring hope that will leave an impression for God on people's lives? That's our challenge.

PCI Let's Pray

A prayer that we might be refined by our experience of God

Lord, you have promised to be like a refiner's fire, proving and purifying our lives as your people.

You refine us like silver and test our lives like gold.

In these last months we have suffered grief and known all kinds of trials.

These have come so that the proven genuineness of our faith - of far greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire - may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.

It all sounds so stirring and heroic when we read it on the page of Scripture, but, like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego of old in the fiery furnace, we have felt the heat of the flames that have licked around our lives.

We're not sure whether we shine brighter, or we are in danger of shrinking back from the lessons you have taught us.

But we want your refining to redefine our lives as your people, and as your church.

Help us to take confidence that as we have walked through the fire, we have not been burned and the flames have not set us ablaze.

Already refined by the experience of pandemic and lockdown, give us a fresh faith to call on your name, and to know that you will answer us and say, 'They are my people,' so that we can reply with new vigour, 'The LORD is our God.'

As your work in us is further revealed by fire in these days, and that furnace tests the quality of our life and witness, may we be further refined into your ways for us - reformed, remolded, reshaped, re-polished, reignited, for your glory.
In Jesus' name. Amen.

Sunday 20 September | Adoring God

*Give thanks that despite the restrictions within which we continue to gather for worship, we can still know God's presence as his people, reassuring us of his grace and prompting us to live well for him.
Pray for a fresh appreciation of worship in these days as something we do primarily because God is worthy of our praise and not because it serves our needs and desires or satisfies our whims.*

Monday 21 September | The Refined initiative

*Give thanks for all those who have contributed to the These Three Remain initiative, providing content for resources, blogs, podcasts and prayers and how it is has helped the Presbyterian family in Ireland to encounter God together as a denomination during the pandemic and lockdown.
Pray for the launch of the Refined initiative this week, asking that God would use it to enable us to move on to a forward footing in our life and witness as a denomination as we transition to the next phase of our response to living through the pandemic.*

Tuesday 22 September | Government

*Give thanks to God for government charged with the responsibility of leading through the period of the pandemic, asking that he would give wisdom in exercising finely balanced judgement and making difficult decisions.
Pray for unity in government in Westminster, across the devolved administrations of the United Kingdom and in Ireland as we continue to face difficult days in our islands.*

Wednesday 23 September | PCI global mission workers

*Give thanks for PCI's global mission workers and partners across the globe, asking that God would bless their work and encourage them in life and witness as they continue to minister for him in a multitude of settings and circumstances.
Pray for grace, patience, creativity, resilience, wisdom and safety for PCI global mission workers as they serve far from home and loved ones in these strange and disrupted times.*

Thursday 24 September | Care homes

*Give thanks for the staff in care homes run by PCI and others, asking that God would continue to keep them safe as they serve the needs of residents under continuing difficult circumstances.
Pray for residents of care homes and their families, asking that they would know God's peace and reassuring love in these times of disruption and upheaval.*

Friday 25 September | Blended children's and youth work

*Pray for those involved in planning and delivering children's and youth work in congregations as restrictions continue to make meeting together difficult and programming has to be provided with a blend of digital limited gatherings with social distancing, asking God for creativity and wisdom.
Pray for the maintenance of good contacts with children, young people and their families at this time, asking that God would make his love, care and encouragement evident in every conversation and communication.*

Saturday 26 September | Onset of winter

*Pray that as autumn soon gives way to the onset of winter, God would preserve us from a second spike in coronavirus.
Pray for wise restraint and the observation of necessary restrictions across society, enabling attempts to avoid spreading the virus as more time is spent indoors and there is greater risk of the spread of infection during winter months.*