

Thought for the Week 27th September 2020

James 4:13-17

¹³ Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit” — ¹⁴ yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. ¹⁵ Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.” ¹⁶ As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. ¹⁷ So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

Living with uncertainty

Most of us live life by a series of well laid schedules, routines and plans. We tend to get up at the same time, set off on the school run or daily commute. Or maybe we have our coffee time around 11.00am, or ‘every second Tuesday’ we catch up with friends. Our electronic devices ping with reminders of what we should be doing in fifteen minutes time. Our lives these days have come to run almost like clockwork. We spend our money booking holidays, buying concert tickets, pre-ordering books that haven’t been published yet months in advance. We expect life to go as planned. Our plan.

But then the effects of the coronavirus pandemic shattered that illusion – the illusion that we are in control. Things that we took for granted that were sure, certain and guaranteed to happen, were suddenly derailed. Over the past six months so many aspects of our lives have become filled with uncertainty. Many things have had to be rearranged or put on hold.

Our problem is that with our modern privileged lifestyle we don’t live with a sense of just how fragile our lives are – in contrast to our ancestors or indeed to many people in other parts of the world. We just assume one day will follow another in an unending pattern of activity. But the coronavirus pandemic has given us a rude awakening. The whole world seemed not to know what would happen next. People became unexpectedly ill the hospitals began to fill up. Respirators were in short supply and then rising numbers of people died. At first it was all numbers and figures, but quickly the statistics began to take on the names and faces of people we knew. There was a rising sense of fear as life suddenly felt very fragile. It was all very uncomfortable.

Then in the summer the worst seemed to be over – we could go out and meet people again. The children could go back to school. The restaurants and hotels could open again. That was until now when it looks like we are going back to square one and there is no certainty about anything again. (Government – Daily Star)

So I think this is a significant time to have a look at some verses from James 4:13-17 that remind us that our lives are uncertain and fragile and see how God intends us to live wisely in light of that reality. James reminds us that we are much less sure of today or tomorrow than we usually tend to think. We assume that we are in control of our movements, our minutes and our money (v13).

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”

In other words everything we plan can only ever be written in pencil.

James goes on to say, ‘*you do not even know what will happen tomorrow*’ (v14). During the coronavirus pandemic, despite every attempt to plan, this was actually the case, even for the experts in health care, government officials and medical staff.

Of course, we don’t like having to approach life with a feeling of less than certainty. **Yet** James pictures our lives as ‘a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes’ (v13). There are few things more fleeting than that. Picture the steam rising from a kettle and how quickly it evaporates into the air.

The question is, how might it change what we value and how we live if we were to gain a new realisation of how fleeting and fragile our lives are? What has living through the experience of the pandemic taught us about the value of life generally and the lives of our loved ones in particular?

Instead of being arrogant and boastful about what we are going to do, James tells us that we ought to understand that our plans are dependent on God. We should say, ‘*if it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that*’ (v15). It used to be that you would see in an advertisement the letters DV (Deus Vult) – God willing.

There are things we thought last week that we would be able to do, that, all of a sudden, we won’t be doing because of an announcement from the government. Those older folks knew what they were saying when they said, “*If it be the Lord’s will.*”

As we are faced with a situation that has bloomed into a crisis, every one of us is confronted with the issue, of “who is our leader at this time?” What do we want our leaders to protect us from? What will happen if they fail? What are we willing to do or become if this thing continues? What freedoms will we give up?

I wonder to we human beings appear to God like sheep scattered on a hill trying figure out which direction to run. Thanks to the spread of information and disinformation on social media some sheep are terrified, and their own fear will kill them.

When you peel back the layers of our anxiety, what is at the heart of it all? What are we really worrying about? **We are worrying about the possibility of dying.** Fear of our own death, or fear of the death of those that we love is, of course, a genuine concern. Yet as believers we have the antidote to the fear of death. His name is Jesus Christ. He who said, “*I am the resurrection and the life.*”

Occasionally you will see news of a raffle for a dream home. You pay £100 for a raffle ticket for a chance to win a fully furnished brand new beautiful home. If they draw your name, the house becomes yours. You can be confident that it will be ready and waiting for you to move in as soon as you are ready to go through the front door.

The really big question is “Do we really trust what Jesus tells us about death and the eternal home he has prepared for us?” Or are we so not sure about it- so that, like the rest of the world around us, we have to do everything possible to put it off, just in case there really is nothing beyond it?

Jesus died on a cross, and he rose from the dead, because he knew each one of us was going to die because of our wrongdoing and the evil in our hearts. He knew that we would be afraid of death, because inside we know that we have done wrong, and that somehow we are going to have to give an account for what we have done, and pay for it.

It was out of his love for us, that Jesus gave us the words to remove the fear of death from us. He said, John 14:1-3 (NIV) 1 *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. 2 In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."*

Today, more and more people are being troubled because they are forced to face this coronavirus. They may convince themselves they will be among the small percentage of people that will die. They can take all kinds of precautions but they still have little control over what happens.

How should believers respond to any crisis in which the fear of death is out there? It begins with knowing that our hope is always to be rooted in God. Our most well-known verse in the bible, is where we should begin. Psalm 23 tells us. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

God says, we are his sheep and the sheep of his pasture. God knew about the coronavirus 10 years ago and even a 1000 years ago. God knew about our days, before a single one of them came into being. Nothing has ever caught God by surprise. God did not wake up earlier this year and say, *"I've got to change my plans for the church and for the world, because I forgot to take into account the coronavirus spreading in the world in the year 2020."*

This is not the first virus or plague to enter the world. So maybe we need to consider the possibility that God wants to use the church, to show the world who He is by how we react to the coronavirus? Are we willing to talk with others about what the fear is with the virus? Are we willing to bring up the topic of death and what's there afterwards?

When our friends and colleagues mention how worried they are about what's going to happen next, do we join in saying how worried we are too. Or do we remember the words of Jesus in which he said Matthew 6:25-27 (NIV) 25 *"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? 27 Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?"*

If the Lord is truly our shepherd, then is not the Lord free to do with His sheep what he thinks is best. As believers are we to be afraid, or to worry about what the coronavirus might do to us? Do we believe that in all things God works for the good of those who love him and are called according to His purposes?

Past rampant plagues and diseases have been opportunities for Christians to shine in society. Between the years 250 AD and 270 AD a terrible plague devastated the Roman Empire which stretched across Europe, the Middle East and northern Africa. At the height of the plague, known as the Plague of Cyprian, St. Cyprian chronicled that 5000 people every day died in just the city of Rome itself. That's not including the rest of the empire. This occurred at the same time there was an empire wide persecution of Christians under the emperor Decius. The enemies of the Christians blamed the

Christians for the plague. There were two problems with the theory of the Christians being responsible. The first is that many Christians died from the plague. Why would Christians start something to kill Christians? But the Second problem with the theory was the witness of the Christians of the love of Jesus Christ to their pagan neighbours. Whereas many people abandoned those who got sick, the Christians risked their lives to take care of those who had been abandoned by their families.

Candida Moss, a professor of New Testament and Early Christianity notes, *“an epidemic that seemed like the end of the world actually promoted the spread of Christianity. By their action in the face of death, Christians showed their pagan neighbours that Christianity is worth dying for.”*

Let’s just suppose for a moment that this coronavirus is being used by God to create a harvest of hearts that are open because of fear, anxiety and worry. Beyond the virus itself, people are going to worry about how they are going to pay their bills with their jobs being shut down, and who will watch over their kids while they work.

How many of us are willing to be a lamb sent out among wolves for Jesus in this crisis? I do know that Jesus knew, if he sent out lambs among the wolves, some of those lambs are not going to make it back. Then there are other words of Jesus that sort of put us on the spot when we are all tempted to quarantine and isolate ourselves. What did he actually mean when he said, *“Greater love has no one than this, than that he should lay down his life for a friend.”* Should we only serve Jesus when it is safe to do so?

What was it the Christians had during the plagues in Europe that caused them to head toward the sick and dying to help them, when everyone else were running away from them trying to save their own lives? Could it be they loved Jesus more than they loved their own lives? Could it be they believed the promises of Jesus even in the face of death itself. Were they trying to love their neighbour as themselves?

How does God expect to use us in response to the worry and fear that has spread through our nation and the world? Will we see this as an opportunity to reach out and serve those who are affected by this situation directly or indirectly? Will we show a confidence in Christ for our future that the world has not known by not joining in the panic?

Will we become bolder in our witness of God actually being in charge of our lives?

We need to have plans. Life cannot function forever on the hoof. The challenge is really to our sense of who is in charge of what happens. Our lives are not our own. They are a gift from God, given that he might determine how they best display his glory. Sometimes that means our preferred story must give way to his purposes and glory.