

God & Covid - A reflection (at 2 metres)

Back in the dim and distant days of my education, I was learning about the properties of glass (they said it was a fascinating topic, but I saw through it straight away). One of the reasons it sticks in my mind was that the teacher was a renowned glass expert, who apparently was advising on the repair of the Rose Window in York Minster, which had caught fire following a lightning strike. There was some debate at the time about whether this might be a judgement from God following the appointment of a Bishop whose theology was regarded in some circles as verging on heretical. The appointment was of the Bishop of Durham, not York, but let's not nit-pick on minor details of divine retribution. I mention it now because it recently struck me that at no time in all the media discussion (in the UK anyway) about Covid 19 has anyone asked the question about whether Covid is a judgement from God.

On the downside, this is probably indicative of how irrelevant God and Christianity are seen today. There is still a great desire for hope and salvation, but people are looking to science, not religion, to provide that, and, thank God (irony intended), science has responded with a range of vaccines and more effective treatment. On the upside, we have been spared an ill-informed debate about one of the most common misconceptions about who God is and how He sees the world.

Many times in the Old Testament, we hear of a God who punishes and strikes down. The Israelites in the wilderness seeking the Promised Land grumble and are attacked by venomous snakes sent by God (Numbers 21: 6-9). Forty-two young men are mauled to death by two bears set upon them in the name of God by the Prophet Elisha for "disrespecting" him (2 Kings 2: 23-25). Seemingly innocent Egyptians are subjected to a series of plagues from frogs to the death of the eldest child of every family (much of early Exodus).

It is so often forgotten that the Bible is less a book of rules, and more a book of stories of people's experiences of God. Much of the Old Testament is made up of different accounts of events described by those who were part of God's Chosen People. The world, through their eyes, was one where God helped and protected them. When bad things happened to their enemies, it was clear to them that God was helping them. However, when bad things happened to them, the only possible explanation they could find was that they had sinned or displeased God and they sought ways of "turning back to Him".

It took the coming of Jesus to show the way to a God of love. When a tower in Siloam falls on, and kills 18 people (Luke 13:4), a debate starts about whether these 18 folk were guilty of sin. Jesus's answer is clear - "I tell you, No!" Slightly later, a realisation starts dawning on the early church that God's love isn't just for his chosen few, but for everyone. So - Covid is not a judgement from God. Well - I think we knew that. But that raises an even harder question - how can a God of love let something like Covid happen? Where in Covid can we find God?

One of the lessons we can perhaps take away from Covid is that we are not as God-like as we thought. For many, it has been quite a shock to discover that expectations of reasonable health, the ability to travel where and when we want, and to be able to buy any sort of food at the local supermarket are not the rights and privileges we were coming to expect. It is an uncomfortable thought that we were not put here by God to be "happy", but rather, to do a job.

I don't know any more than you do why God lets Covid (or any other bad thing) happen. To choose to believe in a God of love is to also choose that, in the long run, it is better so. I asked where we can find God in Covid and the answer, of course, is that it starts with us. I was so pleased to hear about Salisbury and Lichfield Cathedrals becoming vaccine centres. But it doesn't just have to be about big things. We can look out for our friends and neighbours. We can phone those on their own. We can keep our two metres' distance from others with a smile and an appreciative word. We can smile and be patient in queues and not worry that others can't see the smile behind the mask! And we can hope - for a time where when in our worship we can sing together and share in refreshments. And, maybe, be just a little bit wiser and more appreciative and caring of the world we find ourselves in.

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