

Some questions to ask in the face of our present situation...

The Old Testament prophets saw God's action behind, in and through the political, climatic and social events of their day. To a casual observer, those events may have seemed as the "natural" unfolding of human or environmental affairs but to the prophets, they were seen as God's attempt to reach his people to get them to change their ways when they had strayed from his will. One of the saddest things about the events of 9/11 is that few of us asked the question, "Is God trying to say something to us through all of this?" Now, I am obviously not saying that God is behind Al-Qaeda, but that he can allow things to happen to get our attention. This, I believe, is what lies behind God's word to Solomon at the dedication of the Temple:

When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people, if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land. 2 Chronicles 7:13-14 (NIVUK)

I do not have the prophetic gift but would like to hear from those who do about what God might be saying to us as individuals, the Church, society and the world through this current epidemic. We need to include ourselves, as orthodox Christians, here, because in 1 Peter 4:17, we are told that: "For it is time for judgment to begin with God's household; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?" Are there things God might be saying to us through this crisis?

Here are two that have come to me through things I have read or thought about: sabbath rest and the need to grieve.

Sabbath rest: As individuals and a society – and even (perhaps, especially) the Church, we are caught up in an endless round of "doing"; "being" has dropped further and further behind. The principle of sabbath rest has behind it the issue of whether we really trust God or not – do we trust him enough to let go for an hour, a day, a period of time and be confident he can take care of things without us for a while? With almost total lockdown and social distancing, we have been forced to rethink how (and why) we "do" things and have been given time to reflect. All this goes without saying that our hyperactivity has damaged our planet; it is significant that world pollution has decreased due to things being shut down. Is God saying something to us about caring for the world he has given us to look after? How can we carry on this trend when things return to "normal"?

The need to grieve: In this crisis we have lost much – stability and routine, plans we have made (family, career, holiday, etc.), close contact with others, finances, maybe even good health. Grief is a response to loss. As we face what we have lost in this time of reorientation, recognize the stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance, etc.¹), lament and allow the God of love who

¹ Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death & Dying*, (Simon & Schuster/Touchstone, 1969).

has experienced loss and therefore grief to walk alongside you. Throughout human history, and supremely in Jesus, God suffers *because* of people's rejection of him; God suffers *with* people who are suffering; God suffers *for* the people. In this time of Lent and on into Holy Week and through to Easter, allow God to take you through death and loss to resurrection and new life beyond. Express your feelings of grief to God, allow God to meet you and receive God's affirmation of who you are in Christ and then receive a recommissioning to become a channel of healing and blessing to others.

As we reflect upon our failures and losses, there is encouragement for us in the words of Paul: "The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express" (Romans 8:26). Like our Saviour in the Garden of Gethsemane, in the midst of our own grief we groan and suffer as we lift up to God the pain of the world. We begin to pray – however we are able – and the Spirit takes it from there. In the midst of our pain and grief, by the Spirit's prayer, we begin to exercise our God-given purpose as his vice-regents over creation and walk in the way he has set before us.

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