

Sermon 14 June

Genesis 18.1–15 Matthew 9.35 – 10.8 Dean Susanna Pain

if Jesus came during covid 19. what would he say, what would he do..?

Ann Siddall reflects: As the restrictions on daily life during COVID-19 begin to ease, we find ourselves in liminal space. We have more, but not total freedom yet and as CMO Brendan Murphy says we will need to take personal responsibility for keeping ourselves and others safe for some time to come. The temptation is always to by-pass liminal space and return to our familiar way of life. But if we do so we miss an opportunity to pause before we press restart".¹ So, what have we learned? What seeds are waiting to be watered? How shall we then live, individually and communally with that sense of personal responsibility about what will be good for ourselves and each other? The possibilities range from bread-making to therapy. Changes can be subtle or dramatic.

If we found ourselves stressed and depressed by inactivity we might want to think about the possibility that ageing, or unexpected events, may also bring physical restrictions and some isolation and consider looking at this and seeing how we may be better prepared for it.

If we have missed keeping busy and occupied we might be invited to discover that our first vocation is to be a person who is loved and approved of by God just for who we are. And we might then be able to affirm this for others.

We may have found that good conversations literally change the world and want to give this more time.

We may have realised that some of the environments we have formerly been part of were actually taking us away from our true selves or our real values, and see what we can do about that. All this takes honesty and courage, but each of us is part of building a family, or friendships, or groups or communities and our personal soul work" is a part of that. ²

We are all too human, as Nikolai says. Then we hear of the humanity of our forebears in faith who were also in for a time of great change.

¹ <https://beingpresent.home.blog/2020/05/11/before-pressing-re-start/>

² <https://beingpresent.home.blog/2020/05/11/before-pressing-re-start/>

Abraham and Sarah were old, very old. God had promised that they would be parents of many nations, but that seemed like a joke really. Now three visitors arrived with the same story, Sarah is gonna have a baby. Sarah laughed at God's improbable promise to her that she would bear a child and become "the mother of nations".³

She was listening in on the conversation and snorted, she laughed with incredulity, now that I'm so old am I going to have pleasure? I don't know whether she was talking about sex or about the baby itself, but she laughed, a normal response to such a ridiculous proposition. This was the second time that Abraham had received this promise; when he heard it the first time he "fell face down, laughed, and said to himself, 'Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?'"⁴

Sarah responded in an identical manner when she overheard the stupendous suggestion. Sarah doubted and denied, she laughed and she lied, because of the "absurd disproportion between the divine promise and the human possibility."⁵ Her response was entirely human, and not really surprising. From a human perspective her disbelief was warranted, even appropriate. People do not procreate in old age. But her unbelief also evoked a rhetorical rebuke in the punch line of the narrative: "Is anything too difficult for the Lord?" (18:14).

But God did not shame Sarah in a punitive manner. Quite the contrary. We read that "God was gracious to Sarah as God had said, and God did for Sarah what he had promised." In a delightful double entendre, they named their son Isaac, which in Hebrew means "he laughs." Their son of laughter would always remind them of their disbelief. He would also testify how God fulfilled His promises and acted in their personal history despite improbable and unbelievable circumstances.

Whereas Sarah had brought her nervous laughter to God's promise, in the end the tables were turned:

³ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20080609JJ.shtml>

⁴ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20080609JJ.shtml>

⁵ Editorial comment from The New Oxford Annotated Bible (1991), on Genesis 18:12.

"God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me. Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have born him a son in his old age" (21:1–7), Sarah laughed.

Sarah's response reminds us of her humanity, and ours, and a delicious irony, but also focuses on God's power to act in the most hopeless of circumstances.

Sarah demonstrates how God's drama of salvation is not a story of stellar saints so far removed from our own experiences that we could never hope to emulate them, but of messy characters portrayed with their own faults and failures.

Commenting on the untidy and unsavoury nature of the Biblical characters, Eugene Peterson puts it this way:

God, it turns out, does not require good people in order to do good work. As one medieval saying has it, "God draws straight lines with a crooked stick." He can and does work with us, whatever the moral and spiritual condition in which he finds us. God, we realise, does some of God's best work using the most unlikely people.⁶

I take genuine comfort in knowing that my own doubts and denials, are the raw material of God's salvation history..

But I guess the real point of the story is God's enduring faithfulness, though God's timing is not really the same as ours!

if Jesus came during covid 19. what would he say, what would he do..?

In the gospel we have Jesus out there doing his stuff, healing the sick, casting out Demons, raising the dead, proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand, and now He chooses some blokes to do the same stuff he does. He chooses them to go out, and the people he chooses are also ordinary people: Peter with his foot in mouth disease, a fisher by trade, Thomas with his questing mind, the sons of thunder, James and John, angry and hot headed, that stuff up and want to have seats of power, with Matthew the tax collector, a bit suspicious...

⁶ Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays In Ten Thousand Places* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), pp. 140-141.

Andrew, the kid brother of Peter. Always trying to live up to his brother's long shadow, Judas, the greedy one who sacrificed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, Simon the Zealot, a political fanatic, liberal or conservative we don't know, but he was a fanatic and probably wanted Jesus to be a political revolutionary.

Then, Bartholomew and Thaddeus. Don't know anything about them.

So, as we look at the original group of twelve, we find people who are *not* the heroes of faith; they are *not* in the "who's who" of religion; they are *not* the model citizens of our stereotype of the kingdom of God. Jesus chose twelve common and ordinary, *imperfect* people.⁷

And you will notice that *not one of them* is a priest or rabbi or religious lawyer or prophet. Not one. The only thing the disciples have to offer is the kingdom of God, the power and presence of God to heal their lives, to make a difference in the way they live. Nothing more.

Ordinary people, and this list doesn't include the many women who followed Jesus and did Jesus stuff like Susanna and Johanna who provide for him and Mary and Martha who cook for him and provide a home for him. And these ordinary people follow in his footsteps.

Jesus gives the Twelve clear instructions, then sends them forth to do his works and proclaim his message.

When the realm of heaven is near, healing and liberation take place. In the disciples the church finds itself cast into the world, taking Jesus' message beyond his instructions into surprising new contexts.⁸

So, how are we doing, are we following Jesus way in this time of covid 19?

Holy One, Creator of life,
you hold us tenderly
as we journey through this time
of uncertainty and loss.
As restrictions begin to ease,

⁷ http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_a_the_harvest_is_ripe_sermon.htm

⁸ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=98

save us from merely returning
to “life as normal”.
Help us to pause, and gather in
the wisdom of what we have learned.
In this Pentecost season,
we remember the Spirit coming
upon those who gathered in your name.
In hope and vulnerability
we ask again, “Send your Spirit”.⁹
Amen

⁹ <https://beingpresent.home.blog/2020/05/11/before-pressing-re-start/>