

Christian Living in Tumultuous Times.

Introduction

We are living in tumultuous times. Not since the days of the 2nd World War have times been so testing. At the beginning of 2020 everything looked so good and relatively stable. Sports teams had their seasons all planned out, the Olympic Games were planned and only very reluctantly have they been postponed until next year. Many of us were looking forward to travelling overseas for holidays and to visit family and friends. Now so much has changed. Shops, Schools and Child Care Centres have been closed and as many people as are able are still having to work from home. And perhaps the first time in church history Churches have willingly ceased to meet together. In short, much like it must have been in the 2nd World War there's not a single area of our lives which has been left untouched.

I'm sure many of us realise from our knowledge of God and our reading of the scriptures that the events of 2020 have not caught God unawares. God is the sovereign God and He knows exactly what is happening, he saw it coming long before the first case was discovered in Wuhan, and he knows exactly what lies ahead and how and when it will end.

There's a popular hymn we sing which goes like this;

I know who holds the future
And he'll guide me with his hand,
With God things don't just happen
Everything by him is planned,
So as I face tomorrow
With its problems large and small
I'll trust the God of miracles give to him my all.

Recently I've been seeking to work out what it means to 'trust the God of miracles' in these times. As I've done that I've heard God say two things. The first relates to the parable of 'the five wise and the five foolish virgins' in Matthew 25. There Jesus says five foolish virgins had failed to make sure that their lamps were full so when the bridegroom came they were shut out whereas the wise virgins with the full lamps were welcomed in. Then Jesus said watch and pray for you do not know the day or the hour. Matt.25:13.

So how should we live?

This raises the question 'How are we as Christians to live in such a way that we actually make sure our lamps are kept full through these very unusual times?'

Surely one answer to that is that we are to live in harmony with the Holy Spirit and listen to and act on what He is saying to us each day. So what is it he is saying to us today?

Today's reading, is from Paul's letter to the Colossians, chapter 3 reading verses 8-14 but I'm omitting verse 11.

‘But now (that means today!) you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to one another, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.....

‘Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these put on love, which binds them together in perfect unity.’

That is God’s word to us for today. If we look carefully at that passage we see that in verses 8-10 we’re told **how we shouldn’t be living** and then in verses 12-14 Paul tells us **how we should be living**. (So let’s deal with them in that order)

How we shouldn’t live

What I find amazing is that Paul was writing verses 8-10 to Christians! He seems to be implying that even though they were Christians some of them were harbouring anger, some were malicious, that is they were doing bad things to other people because they didn’t like them. Some were slandering others saying bad things about them to blacken their name and some were in the habit of swearing. Paul was telling the Colossians to get rid of such things. To most of us they are plainly unchristian. Such actions and attitudes grieve the Holy Spirit and consequently would have impaired the Colossian’s relationship with God and will ours too, if we don’t deal with them.

I implied earlier that if we think the world is going to go back to the way it was in 2019 we are kidding ourselves. We are facing an unknown future. Therefore like the Boy Scouts we should ‘Be Prepared.’ We need to be prepared before the Lord for whatever he in his grace and wisdom has in store for us. 1 Cor. 11:28 says “let a man examine himself” which in effect is what Paul was encouraging the Colossians to do, and I believe it’s what the Lord is saying to us at this time; ‘get rid of any negative things in your lives.’ Like the 5 wise virgins in Jesus parable now is the time for us to make sure our lamps are filled not with the negative things Paul listed but with the Holy Spirit,.

I find it hard to believe that there are any people in our church who are harbouring the kind of negative attitudes Paul describes. But it’s not Ross or the Elders who search our hearts but God, and nothing is hidden from his eyes. He knows exactly what makes us tick. However it’s very important for us to realise that when the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin, he’s not doing it to condemn us. Rather it’s because he loves us. He’s convicts us because he wants us to repent of anything that maybe hindering our relationship with Christ. We will all do well to say with the Psalmist, “Search me, O God and know my heart; try me and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” Ps 139: 23-24.

How we should live

The second thing God has been saying to me is from 2 Peter. Peter addressed his letter to ‘those who through the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ have received a

faith as precious as ours.’ **That’s us.** Then in chapter 3 Peter describes in some quite graphic detail how this world will end and asks us ‘Since everything will be destroyed in this way what kind of people ought you to be?’

In Colossians 3;12- 14 Paul tells us the kind of people **we ought** to be. He tells us we should be compassionate, kind, humble, gentle and patient, we should bear with one another and be forgiving and loving. Quite a list; or dare I say, quite a job description for Christians.

I’m now going to share with you the story of a little known person in the Old Testament who exemplified those virtues. I wondered if I should include this story in my message but as I prayed I felt the Lord say, ‘I counted the story of this person important enough to include it in my book. You should include it in your message.

In Jeremiah 38 we’re introduced to Ebed-Melech. He was an Ethiopian working in Jerusalem in the court of King Zedekiah around 588 to 587 BC. Impending judgement was hanging over Jerusalem as it is now over our world. For years Jeremiah had been warning the Jews that unless they repented of their idolatry Jerusalem would be attacked by the Babylonians and completely destroyed. Of course a lot of people didn’t like that message and didn’t see the need to repent.

One day a group of Jerusalem’s leading people went to the king and said to him, “look, Jeremiah is upsetting the people.” Which was true. And they wanted permission from the king to take him out. By 588 BC God was long past promising to deliver Jerusalem from the hand of the Babylonians if the nation repented. No, they had hardened their hearts so much that God told them, through Jeremiah, that judgement was about to fall. The city would be destroyed with terrible loss of life and those who survived would be taken into exile in Babylon and elsewhere. Jeremiah told them if they wanted to survive they needed to go over to the Babylonians now. If they did they would be saved. So these leading people complained to the king that Jeremiah was undermining the morale of the troops and that he needed to be dealt with. And the king replied, “Go and do what you like with Jeremiah.” So they arrested him and lowered him into an empty water cistern. I say it was empty but there was a thick layer of soft wet sediment in the bottom and poor Jeremiah sank down into it. He was in a miserable terrible situation and wasn’t likely to live long.

It was then that Ebed-Melech sprang into action. He saw Jeremiah’s plight and realised that he’d starve to death if he was left where he was. So he went to the king and told him what had been done and asked permission to rescue Jeremiah. Thankfully the King agreed and sent 30 men yes 30! (that’s 2 rugby teams)- with Ebed- Melech to pull Jeremiah out. (it sounds as if Jeremiah was a pretty big fella if it was going to take that many guys to pull him out!) Anyway they got some strong ropes and off they went to rescue Jeremiah. On his way Ebed-Melech went into a store room in the temple and picked up a load of old rags. When they got to the cistern he lowered the rags down with the ropes and shouted to Jeremiah to put them under his arm pits so that the ropes didn’t cut into him and bruise him as they pulled him up. So Jeremiah, the faithful prophet of the Lord was rescued.

He was rescued in a time of impending judgement, by a compassionate man who saw his predicament. A good man who did a very good deed. He was a kind and gentle man who

thought to provide rags to make the lift out as comfortable as possible. And he was a patient man because he stuck around. In short Ebed-Melech was a living example of what Paul describes in verse 13- a good man who did a good deed in a kind way.

And Ebed-Melech was rewarded. A short while later the Babylonians did destroy Jerusalem and in Jeremiah 39 we're told that the Lord saved Ebed and delivered him from the hands of those he feared, because the Lord said to him, "You trust in me."

Sadly there are cases, you may know of some, where a good person does not act with the kindness and gentleness of Ebed-Melech. They may see someone struggling with something and blunder in without showing any empathy or trying to understand the real problem, doing what they decide needs to be done. That is doing a good deed but in a bad way and it can cause a lot of hurt as it would have done for Jeremiah if Ebed-Melech had not provided him with some old rags. And if you've ever read Job 42:7 you'll see how upset God was with Job's comforters.

Now moving on, in Colossians 3: 14 Paul identifies additional Christian virtues to add to the list we've just been considering. Firstly he tells us to bear with one another.

What does that mean? Fortunately it's easy to answer. We all know people who for one reason or another either upset us or offend us. It may be something as simple as they're bad mannered or rude, or maybe cut in on us when we're in the middle of a conversation with someone else. Paul says bear it, suck it up and be patient and forgiving towards them.

Here's another example. The scriptures are ambiguous about some things. There are many godly people who don't necessarily share our views on drinking alcohol or creation, or on pre-trib, or mid trib, or post trib. Paul says 'bear with them'- don't get aggravated or annoyed with them. You can share with them your reasons for believing as you do but when all's said and done each one of us must be fully persuaded in our own hearts. Of course when it comes to matters relating to salvation or of false doctrine the scriptures are clear and we must stay true to those. But where the scriptures aren't definite then bear with the brother or sister who holds a different view than yours. Calvinists should still be friends with Armenians.

Earlier on I suggested that our Christian character indicates whether our lamps are full or not, and we looked at Ebed-Melech as an example of godly living in an age of impending judgement.

But now we've come to the last two virtues Paul lists, forgiveness and love. There is a lot more about forgiveness in the Gospels and of course the Lord's Prayer makes clear what our attitude should be. Unfortunately we don't have time to delve deeper into that this morning.

But I think it's true to say that love in particular is the real measure of how full our lamps are. Jesus told us to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your minds and Love your neighbour as yourself.' All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments." Matt 22:37-39

So very clearly our motives matter to God. We can only truly love God and our neighbours as we should if we are filled with the Holy Spirit.

John Piper recently stated that one of God's purposes in allowing the corona virus to take hold is not to judge Christians but to cause us to humbly seek his face, repent of our back sliding and for us to be filled anew with the Holy Spirit so that our lamps will be full and ready for Jesus return, whenever that is. But he said, make no mistake Jesus is coming back, in the clouds in the same way he went up into heaven but this time it will be in great power and glory. We need to be ready. Corona virus is a huge challenge and a massive wake-up call to Christians.

Conclusion

In conclusion. We are facing massive changes to our lives not only now but in the future. Some of us may not make it. Only God knows if we will or not. Whatever the outcome God wants us to come through all this with a deeper richer faith and trust in Him. We need to face the challenges it poses to us in our personal lives and also make sure that what our godless world sees and what heaven sees is this; that we are clothed with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bearing with each other and forgiving whatever grievances we may have against one another. That we forgive as the Lord forgave us. And over all these we've put on love, which binds them together in perfect unity.'

Peter Day

10th May 2020.