

Reflections

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Reflection #57 – Thursday 18th June

The Lord is my shepherd; I have all that I need. He lets me rest in green meadows; he leads me beside peaceful streams. He renews my strength. He guides me along right paths, bringing honour to his name. Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me. You prepare a feast for me in the presence of my enemies. You honour me by anointing my head with oil. My cup overflows with blessings. Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the Lord forever.

Psalm 23

Hello Everybody,

Today, I want to write to you about peace, and how you can find it. You will all have some idea of what peace is, we even say the Peace within our church services. I think that demonstrates how important peace is to us. We can know what the paces of God is, but it can still be hard to have that peace.

Finding peace in a world where there is a lot of chaos and business can sometimes be difficult to do. Peace comes in different forms. You can have personal peace, you can be at peace with others and you can be at peace with God. The Bible speaks to all this different forms of peace, and how we can have them. Even though pace can come in different forms, all peace comes from God, and when we have peace in ourselves it is easier to have peace with others.

John 14:27 says, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid." Jesus has given us His peace so that we can exercise it when we are troubled. Jesus recognised that we live in a world that is in turmoil, and it is important for us to have peace. Often being at peace is just a matter of choice to focus on God rather than on that which is troubling. The peace that God gives is long-lasting, it is a peace that passes all understanding.

One of my favourite passages of Scripture is Psalm 23, which is a beautiful illustration of life with the peace of God. It shows that even in our darkest times we can be at peace and know that the Lord will protect us. We have peace throughout all areas of our lives, and through all situations.

Many Blessings,

Dominique

P.S. This is my last reflection for now. I have enjoyed writing them and I look forward to seeing you all in September.

Reflection #56 – Friday 12th June

Three difficult questions 31/50

At this point I feel as though I'm at a fork-in-the-road moment. We're in Revelation 6.

I have to keep reminding myself of why I am doing these Reflections. My goal is to 'diagnose' coronavirus. I am considering two possible 'diagnoses.' The first 'diagnosis' is that coronavirus is a random event, a strange combination of circumstances that led to the virus possibly travelling from one species to another and then to humans. In this case, the treatment may include lockdown, contact tracing, testing, and perhaps, in the future, vaccination. The second 'diagnosis' is that coronavirus is something God has brought about. It could be an act of judgement on human sin or it could be an aspect of 'End Times.' In this case, the 'treatment' is repentance. If the diagnosis is wrong, the treatment won't work.

Plagues have happened all through human history. The fact that there is coronavirus does not in itself prove anything. However, coronavirus could, taken with other events that are happening, strengthen our view that we are in 'End Times.'

Here is Revelation 6:8:

And I looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they [i.e. the four horsemen] were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth.

(The literal Greek word that is translated 'pestilence' is death, but a commentator (Osborne) tells us that it 'often translates the Hebrew word for pestilence ... Thus there is a double meaning in the term, death by plague.')

However, there are at least two ways to see things. One of the most highly-regarded commentaries on Revelation is by Gregory Beale. Beale considers that:

Rev. 6:1-8 describe the operation of the destructive forces that were unleashed immediately on the world as a result of Christ's victorious suffering at the cross, his resurrection, and his ascent to a position of rule at his Father's right hand. The natural inference of this is that all the events described in 6:1-8 are not reserved exclusively for a period of severe trial immediately preceding Christ's final coming.

Beale is not saying categorically that there will be no increase in the kinds of events described in 6:1-8 before Christ comes again. However, if the four living creatures called the horsemen out 2000 years ago, then whatever 'step-change' in death and destruction

they brought with them happened then. We should not expect such a dramatic change in the future. Clearly, in this understanding, we can't take the idea of a fourth of the earth dying literally, as such a thing did not happen 2000 years ago. But if 'a fourth of the earth' doesn't mean something like 'a fourth of the earth' then what does it mean?

The other view is that Revelation 6:1-8 describes a step-change in death and destruction that either lies in the future, or, conceivably, could be starting now.

Revelation 6:8 tells us that the four horsemen 'were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill...' I wasn't sure quite what that meant, but two other respected commentators seem to take the view that it means, literally, that a fourth of the earth's population will die! Gulp!

Robert Mounce tells us that:

They [i.e. the four horsemen] bring about the death of one-fourth of humankind.

Grant Osborne says:

Once more God "gave" ... the demonic forces ... "power" to inflict terrible suffering on humanity ... it is likely that all four together kill one-fourth of the human race, today about 1.5 billion people! That is more than all the wars of the last two hundred years put together.

Osborne's commentary came out nearly 20 years ago, in case you were wondering about the maths!

So, there is our fork in the road. According to one view, we should NOT expect a step-change in the level of war, strife, famine, pestilence and death associated with the going-out of the horsemen, either in our day or in the future – because the horsemen went out 2000 years ago. In the other view, the going-out of the horsemen lies in the future, or, conceivably, is happening in our time, and it will bring with it a step-change in the level of war, strife, famine, pestilence and death.

I lean towards the second. For the departure of the horsemen to be significant then there must be a change in the level of war, strife, famine, pestilence and death, and it must affect a fourth of the earth. Nothing in the past (for example, the siege of Jerusalem in AD 70) qualifies.

Have a good day!

Simon

Reflection #55 – Wednesday 10th June

Three difficult questions 30/50

I started this enquiry in response to the question, could God be behind coronavirus? Could coronavirus be some form of judgement from God or a sign of 'End Times'? To answer that in relation to 'End Times' we want to know what 'End Times' will look like. A decision we make at this point will have a strong bearing on our view of 'End Times.'

In my previous Reflection I looked at the first of the four horsemen in Revelation 6 – the rider of the white horse – and thought about who he is. I thought the evidence pointed towards him being Jesus, but there are certainly other possibilities and I want to be open to them. Today I'm going to consider another possibility. It's one that we can make a strong case for. It is that the rider of the white horse is a kind of spirit of conquest.

There is, without any question, a close correspondence between Jesus' teaching on 'End Times' in Matthew 24 and the actions of the four riders in Revelation 6.

Jesus speaks of wars and rumours of wars and Revelation speaks of conquest (the white horse). Jesus speaks of strife ('nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom' etc) and Revelation speaks of strife (the red horse, takes away peace). Jesus speaks of famines and Revelation describes a famine (the black horse). Jesus speaks of tribulation and death, and Revelation speaks of death (the pale green horse). Although there is no mention of persecution of believers in connection with the pale green horse, it's clear from the following verses in Revelation 6 that there has been martyrdom.

So, there is certainly a close correspondence between Matthew 24 and Revelation 6. However, if we choose to directly match these accounts up, there is a consequence! Jesus tells us (24:6) 'And you will hear of wars and rumours of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, BUT THE END IS NOT YET.' These wars and rumours of wars that Jesus is speaking of are not part of 'End Times'! Jesus says, 'there will be famines and earthquakes in various places ... All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.' Early labour. No reason to get too alarmed.

If we align the four horsemen with Jesus' statements, then the rider on the white horse corresponds to the wars and rumours of wars Jesus has spoken about – which are not part of 'End Times' at all. Similarly, the famine that comes with the black horse corresponds to famines which Jesus says will happen in various places. Is he referring to famines and earthquakes in general? These famines are only the beginning of birth pains. So they are not really part of 'End Times' either.

Is that how we see these horsemen? Have they been with us for 2000 years or so in the form of conquest, strife, famine and death? Perhaps we have been in 'End Times' all this time! Or should we expect 'End Times' to be marked by a dramatic change?

Let me first note that we don't have to align Revelation 6 with Matthew 24. Just because the two passages speak about similar events doesn't mean that they are the same! Sword, famine, wild beasts, and pestilence are 'standard' ways God acts in judgement (see Ezekiel 14:21). Just because the Big Mac I eat at one McDonald's is similar to the Big Mac I ate at another doesn't mean it's the same one!

Second, I think we should expect a dramatic change. In Revelation 4, the heavenly court sat. In Revelation 5, there's a scroll. The court has decided. Jesus takes the scroll. In Revelation 6, he starts to open its seals. Given what happens, it's clearly a judgement. The four horsemen are sent out following this act of judgement by God. Although there has been terrible war, strife and famine over the past 2000 years, the period we have been in doesn't feel like a time of judgement by God. It feels like what Jesus described in Matthew 24 when he spoke about 'wars and rumours of wars' [which] 'must take place, but the end is not yet.'

Also, what do we make of Revelation 6:8? The four riders 'were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, famine, and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth.' Does that mean that they actually kill a quarter of the earth?! The verse doesn't say this. However, if the verse means this, then it certainly doesn't apply to the past.

So, I'm continuing to take the four riders as being in the future – but I'm stepping forward cautiously.

Have a good day!

Simon

Reflection #54 – Tuesday 9th June

Hello Everybody,

Reflecting on the current riots and protests happening all over the world right now, I have been trying to understand how God works in situation like this. How does His justice work? And what does the Bible say in regards to dealing with those who oppose us? These can be sensitive topics, and they can be difficult topics to think about and reflection on.

Often when we are faced with an unjust situation, we want justice. But what does God say about justice? We know that God is a just God. Therefore, He cannot work in an unjust manner. Despite this we still face injustice in the world. So the question is how do we act in a Godlike manner towards injustice? The first part of Romans 12:19 says "Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord." This clearly tells us that God will bring justice to those who need it. It also tells us that it is not our job to do so. This is really hard to do, because as people when we look at an unjust situation everything within in as wants there to be justice. We want those who do wrong to be punished, however, this is not our responsibility. It is God's responsibility!

Furthermore, this scripture finishes with a list of things we are supposed to do instead. It says, "On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be

overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Wow! This is such a powerful scripture. We being told that when we are faced with injustice rather than pinching that person, we should love them and help them. It is like the old saying, “You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.” By showing love to those who do wrong to us, often they will be more convicted of their mistakes than if we were to attack them. This is easier to do in theory rather than in practice, but we must make the choice as Christians to always act in love.

Many Blessings,

Dominique

Reflection #53 – Monday 8th June

Three difficult questions 29/50

Today we meet ‘the four horsemen’. The first of the horsemen is described as follows (Rev. 6:2):

And I looked, and behold, a white horse! And its rider had a bow, and a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering, and to conquer.

Who is this? Why is he conquering? When will it happen? These are not easy questions to answer. But we need to have a go. I’ll start with ‘who’.

A whole range of possibilities has been suggested. Here is a set suggested by David Aune, author of a well-regarded commentary on Revelation.

Positive interpretations:

1. Christ, the ‘Divine Warrior’
2. The victorious progress of the gospel
3. Some other positive interpretation

Negative interpretations:

1. Military conquest
2. The Antichrist or false Messiahs
3. The sun god Mithras

Actually, as we dig deeper, we find that there are many more interpretations! It’s remarkable how divergent they are. One interpretation is that the rider is Christ and another is that he is the antichrist!

Let’s first take a view on whether the rider is good or evil. Here are four reasons for thinking the rider is good.

1. The appearance of the riders follows the decision of the heavenly court in chapter 4. The riders are sent out by one of the four living creatures – a member of God's court. Therefore, the sending of the riders is the will of the court, which is God's will, and is therefore good.
2. The four horses in Revelation 6 appear to be the same as the horses in Zechariah 1:8-10, although the colours aren't quite the same. These horses are sent by God.
3. The horse is white. Every other use of the word white in Revelation is in a context where it is clearly good.
4. Aune points out that 'the image of the celestial cavalier is widely understood in the Greco-Roman world as a savior who delivers people from various types of trouble.' The people of John's time would therefore have seen the rider as good.

An argument against the rider being good is that the other riders might seem to be bad. After all, they bring famine and death. But God clearly can cause such things!

The first argument above seems incontrovertible. The riders must be good.

In that case, which of the three variants is most persuasive? Is the rider Christ, or 'the victorious progress of the gospel', or 'some other positive interpretation' – for example, an angel of judgement? Here are some reasons for thinking he may be Christ:

1. He is given a crown. The commentators say that 'crown' is probably not the best translation, 'wreath' is better. But only one out of 59 English translations of the Bible uses the word 'wreath'!
2. He may be the same person as the rider on a white horse in 19:11-16. There's no mistaking Jesus there.
3. In Revelation the word 'conquer' almost always refers to Christ or to believers.

However, some commentators don't like the idea that this rider is Christ. They think it's too soon for Christ to appear on the scene, they don't like the fact that Christ is associated with things such as famine and death, and they don't like the fact that Jesus is opening the seals and is part of the outcome at the same time. None of these objections is insuperable.

The idea that the rider 'the victorious progress of the gospel' is not very persuasive. It doesn't seem to fit with a time of judgement, a time of God's wrath. It's difficult to imagine how 'the victorious progress of the gospel' can be given a crown. And there's a deeper problem. We haven't looked at it yet, but it seems that the victorious progress of the gospel is going to run into difficulties...

Could the rider be an angel? Why would the angel be given a crown? Admittedly, in Revelation, others apart from Christ have crowns.

These arguments point towards the rider of the white horse being Jesus. It was the view of Irenaeus in the 2nd century and the view of a majority of Christians until about the middle of the 19th century. Since then, many commentators have moved away from this

view. In the middle of the 19th century the view that the rider is the antichrist became popular. Today, there are many different views, and no view commands a clear majority.

In our next Reflection we'll look at why the horsemen are sent out.

Have a good day!

Simon

Reflection #52 – Friday 5th June

Three difficult questions 28/50

When I was in my twenties I worked as an engineer on power station construction projects. On one occasion a colleague was overseeing the construction of a concrete foundation for a very large fan. The foundation was many metres long and approximately rectangular. Unfortunately, after pouring the concrete, it was found that the foundation had been oriented at 180 degrees to its correct position. In principle the fan and the electrical wiring could still have been installed and everything would fit. But the fan would not have connected to the rest of the plant!

The point of this little story is that getting the initial orientation correct is really important. In our case, I feel that checking our orientation to Revelation warrants a little more time.

Over the past two millennia theologians have seen four main ways to 'orient' Revelation. Having chosen a particular orientation, they have been able to get the details of the interpretation to fit. I feel that the correct orientation is the futurist view. My main reason for thinking this isn't so much about the details of Revelation as about how Revelation fits the big picture.

In my previous Reflection I quoted from a passage in Daniel which tells us that 'a son of man ... came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom ... an everlasting dominion.' But this didn't happen by a snap of the fingers. First, another kingdom has to be removed. Daniel says of this other kingdom (7:26): 'But the court shall sit in judgement, and his dominion shall be taken away, to be consumed and destroyed to the end.'

Jesus tells us the same thing in Luke 19 in the Parable of the Talents. We all know this as a story about using our gifts and resources well. But there's a bigger story too:

A man of noble birth went to a distant country to have himself appointed king and then to return ... But his subjects hated him and sent a delegation after him to say, "We don't want this man to be our king." He was made king, however, and returned home.

When the king returns, were the subjects who didn't want him to be king still present, or had they mysteriously vanished? Of course, they were still present, and the king 'removes' them (19:27).

So, the wider context of the Bible story is that Jesus returns as king of the whole earth, and as we see in both Daniel and Luke, those who do not wish him to be king have to be dealt with.

I believe this is what Revelation is about. Revelation uses symbolic language which can fit other events in history. But if, in our understanding of Revelation, we don't see Jesus returning to take up his kingship – and dealing with those who oppose him – then our understanding of Revelation doesn't fit the big picture.

However, as Daniel tells us, the court must sit. There must be a proper process.

In Revelation 4, John is given a vision of the future – 'what must take place after this.' He sees a throne and the king and the king's retinue. It's a court scene – a royal court, rather than a law court – but when we had kings, the king heard cases. He sees twenty-four elders and they're clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads. This court is the highest authority, the equivalent of the UK Supreme Court. He sees flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder. Those gathered say, 'Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty.' It's awesome and impressively righteous.

Then, in chapter 5, John sees a scroll in the right hand of God. A decision has been made. What could the scroll signify? In Revelation, John regularly quotes from Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Zechariah. Each prophet either wrote or was given a scroll, and they were all scrolls of judgment. Given what happens as the seals of the scroll are opened, it's clear that this scroll also contains a judgement.

So, in his vision, John sees the moment when judgement is given. The time for God to deal with those who do not wish his son to be king has come. But the scroll is not opened all at once...

Have a good day!

Simon

Reflection #51 – Wednesday 3rd June

Three difficult questions 27/50

Today we start on Revelation. However, before diving in I'd like to do a quick introduction.

When we start to talk about Revelation we quickly find that there are a lot of different views. The main views are 'preterist', 'historicist', 'idealist' and 'futurist'.

Preterists believe that most of Revelation describes the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Many preterists think that the last chapters of Revelation then switch from Jerusalem to describe Christ's second coming. However, some consider that the entire book of Revelation relates to the fall of Jerusalem and Revelation lies entirely in the past.

Historicists see Revelation as a kind of book of history, written before it happened. Historicists might find references to Napoleon, the First World War, Hitler and so on in Revelation.

Idealists think that Revelation symbolically presents the struggle of God against Satan all through the ages, but the events it describes should not be tied to specific historic events.

Futurists think that Revelation, from chapter four onwards, relates to the future. However, at some point in time humankind will presumably reach that future, so I suppose that futurists will then have to think of a new name for themselves!

I take the futurist view and it is the only view which I will present as we start to look at Revelation. I don't think it's right for me to attempt to present other views.

Why do I take this view? I could give quite a few reasons. But there's a passage in Daniel which puts it beautifully. It's the second half of Daniel 7. Earlier, we looked at the first half of the chapter. Daniel described various kingdoms that would arise. But we didn't look at the second half. It's amazing! Here are some excerpts from verses 13-14 and 27-28:

¹³ ... behold, with the clouds of heaven
there came one like a son of man,
and he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him.

¹⁴ And to him was given dominion
and glory and a kingdom ...

his dominion is an everlasting dominion ...

The 'one like a son of man' whose 'dominion is an everlasting dominion' can only be Jesus! The consummation of the Bible story is Jesus receiving his kingdom. It's where the Bible must end. We must get to that point at the end of Revelation or the Bible will not be complete.

In the following verses Daniel describes a final kingdom which emerges out of the ten. Then he says:

²⁶ But the court shall sit in judgement,
and his dominion shall be taken away,
to be consumed and destroyed to the end.

²⁷ And the kingdom and the dominion

and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven
shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High;
their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom,
and all dominions shall serve and obey him' [the footnote says, 'or them']

²⁸ Here is the end of the matter.

Now we are at 'the end of the matter'. The saints receive the kingdom or kingdoms. Note that this follows on from the discussion of the other kingdoms. That is what the saints receive. The meek inherit the earth.

How does it come about? Verse 26 tells us: 'But the court shall sit in judgement.' That's step one. Then, 'his dominion shall be taken away, to be consumed and destroyed to the end.' That's step two. That is exactly what Revelation tells us. In chapter 4, which we will look at in the next Reflection, the court is convened. And in the following chapters of Revelation we see God taking away the kingdom from those who held it.

Can we say that 'his dominion shall be taken away, to be consumed and destroyed to the end' over the past 2000 years? It doesn't seem that way to me! If Daniel's prophecy, and most of Revelation, have not yet happened, then they are still in the future. Hence, I'm a futurist.

Have a good day!

Simon

Reflection #50 – Tuesday 2nd June

Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers. Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore, the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction. – Psalm 1

Hello Everybody,

Today, I thought I would write to you about Psalm 1. This is one of my favourite psalms, and there is some really great advice in it. Psalm 1 gives us 7 qualities of a Godly person, and I want to reflect on them today.

1. A Godly person is blessed – This psalm opens up by stating how a Godly person is blessed. They will know that God has promised to bless and keep them. This doesn't mean that every single day of their life is going to be perfect and wonderful. It does mean, however, that when they have struggles and difficult situation, Godly people know how to trust God and believe that God uses every situation for good.
2. They keep themselves from evil – A Godly person will know when the company they surround themselves with is not healthy for them. They will be able to resist the temptation to enter into sin. A Godly person will strive to walk in integrity and dependence on God in every area of their lives.
3. A Godly person loves God's Word – They have a heart and a love for the Word of God. They mediate on the Word and they keep the Word with them throughout the day. The Word is a Godly persons guide for life. They live by it and seek God's wisdom through it.
4. A Godly person live a life of strength – The psalmist compares a Godly person to a tree planted by streams of water. If you picture a mighty oak tree, there is not much that can cause that tree to fall, and when the storm comes and the wind howls, that mighty trees remains firmly planted. This is because the tree has big roots deep in the ground that gives it a stable foundation. When we put our make foundation out of God's truth, we will become unshakeable in in the times of trouble.
5. A Godly person has a fruit-filled life – Godly-people produce good things. They are a positive, appreciated, and fruitful influences on the lives around them. They show the evidence of their fruit in the way that they act and behave. A Godly person will demonstrate the fruits of the Spirit, which are love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control.
6. A Godly person has God's favour – A Godly person is prosperous and they work hard. A Godly person is always sustained by God, and God is constantly equipping, filling and blessing them. A Godly person has God's favour evident in all areas in their life. God's favour is not measured by outward prosperity, but it is measured by a deeper, more significant spiritual favour.
7. A Godly person had God watching over them – A godly person walks closely with God, and God protects and watches over their way. God's eyes are towards them and His ears are open to their prayers. No matter the situation that they are in, God is with them, and a Godly person can trust this fact.

This psalm offers us so much wisdom and instruction, and it is important that we heed the words it contains. As Godly people, it is important that we make sure we are aiming to grow in the qualities that this psalm gives us.

Many Blessings,

Dominique

Reflection #49 – Monday 1st June

Three difficult questions 26/50

Today is a milestone – the end of the second stage of my study. At the end of March, I decided to try to answer the question, ‘Could God be behind coronavirus?’ I knew that people were asking the question and it seemed like a good question. I decided to split the task into three parts. I would look first at the Old Testament, then the New Testament less Revelation, and finally, at Revelation.

Today, I want to recap on how I’m approaching the question and summarise some of what we have found so far.

How can we approach such a question? Perhaps a medical analogy will help. A person goes to the doctor. He complains of a tingling feeling in his skin and a headache, and he has a rash on his chest. The doctor knows what the patient has got. It’s shingles. A particular illness presents itself in a particular way. I assume that God’s judgement also presents itself in a particular way, and the same will be true of ‘End Times’. We can look for indicators.

In the Old Testament we learned something about why and how God judges. God judges sin in general, and he judged his people because they abandoned him and went after other gods. That’s the ‘why’. God often executed judgement by *acts in the environment*, and God refers to ‘my four disastrous acts of judgement, *sword, famine, wild beasts, and pestilence.*’ That’s the ‘how.’

Relating this to today, sin of many different forms is all too evident, and most of the western world has fallen away from God. We’re in ‘post-Christendom.’ A hundred years ago 80-90% of people in Europe considered themselves Christians. Now, in many European countries, the number is 5% of less. If God had reason to judge the ancient Israelites, he has reason to judge western society. The ‘why’ is there. We are in a time of unheard-of environmental destruction. This element of the ‘how’ corresponds. Coronavirus – a pestilence – would also be absolutely consistent with God’s judgement.

In the New Testament we have looked almost exclusively at End Times. We see a mix of indicators of ‘End Times.’ Some seem to be clearly evident; some less so. I started with Matthew 24.

The gospel has been proclaimed throughout all nations. That seems to be a clear indicator.

There are good reasons to think that when Jesus speaks about a fig tree, he has Israel in mind. Israel has been re-established as a nation and many Jews are turning to Christ. That’s another clear indicator.

Jesus indicates that there will be greater persecution of Christians. That’s a helpful warning but I’m not sure that it’s the clearest indicator. There have been waves of persecution all through human history.

I then moved on to Luke 21 and thought about Jesus' rather surprising comment about waves. Luke is the only gospel which mentions waves as part of the 'End Time' picture. We are already getting some very large waves, but given climate change, we may expect even larger and more destructive waves – especially storm surges from hurricanes. So perhaps this indicator is partially fulfilled.

Finally, in the last Reflection, we looked at the mysterious figure of 'antichrist'. It seems that there will be an actual person, but no one presently matches his description. This indicator therefore does not appear to be fulfilled. Might it be any time soon? In 2 Thessalonians 2:3 we find that this person will emerge at the time of the 'rebellion.' The word for rebellion is *apostasia* and means 'defection' or 'revolt'. We may speculate that the present falling-away from Christ in the western nations over the past century will progress to the rebellion that Paul has in mind. But that is speculation. We don't know when the antichrist will appear.

So, based on the pattern we see in the Old Testament, coronavirus is consistent with an act of judgement by God. And based on the passages we've looked at in the New Testament, some, but not all, the signs of 'End Times' that the New Testament mentions are evident. If we *are* in End Times then it would add weight to the thought that God is behind coronavirus. There will be plenty of plagues in 'End Times'. 12 out of 14 references to 'plague' in the New Testament are in Revelation.

Next, we move on to Revelation.

Have a good day!

Simon

Reflection #48 – Thursday 28th May

And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else. Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. – 1 Thessalonians 5:14-18

Hello Everyone,

The other day I was reading my Bible, and I came across a remarkable passage in 1 Thessalonians 5:14-18. This passage contains some of Paul's final pieces of advice to the Thessalonians, and there are so many little nuggets of gold in this passage. I thought it would be a good idea to write to you about it.

In verses 14-15, Paul tasks us with warning those who are idle and disruptive and encouraging those who are weak and disheartened. He then tells us to be patient with everyone. Here it is as though Paul knows he is giving us hard tasks and he knows that

we will need to be patient with people. Sometime when you are working with and helping people who are hurting, spiritually weak or physically weak, it will often take a long time to fully help these people, and for that you will need patience. Paul then reminds to always do what is good for each other. This is a challenging thing to do. As humans, we don't always want to do the right thing or the best thing, but we are reminded that this is Godly thing to do.

In verses 16-18, Paul changes tack a little bit, and he instructs us to rejoice always, pray constantly and give thanks in all circumstances. These are some of my favourite verses from the Bible, as they are so encouraging. This idea of rejoice always is hard to do. When you are in a difficult situation often the last thing you want to do is rejoice and be thankful. I touched on this in my last reflection, and I know I am repeating myself, but this concept is so important to remember. When faced with a trying situation, look for what you can give thanks for. Even if it is a small thing that does not seem particularly important, you can still give thanks for it.

I hope you have found this verse as remarkable as I have, and I hope that you have found your own nugget of gold from them. I want you to remember the in every situation always give thanks to God for even the smallest thing, and always aim to do right by one another.

Many Blessing,

Dominique

Reflection #47 – Wednesday 27th May

Three difficult questions 25/50

Today we are going to look at the mysterious figure of 'antichrist'.

The word 'antichrist' only comes in John's letters. However, there are other passages of scripture which seem to be about antichrist even though they don't use the word 'antichrist'.

Historically there have been many views as to who or what antichrist is. One view is that antichrist is the evil within every person's soul before it is illuminated by God's word. Another view is that antichrist is a human institution, for example, the papacy. Martin Luther, the Church of England, and Charles Spurgeon all made that identification. A third, view takes antichrist more literally – he is an actual person who will appear and oppose Christ in 'End Times'. Today, some Christians believe that antichrist will be a future leader of the EU. This is partly because they see the EU as the future super-state which they believe Revelation is pointing us towards.

Which view is right?

John's main discussion of antichrist is in 1 John 2:18-27. The passage tells us at least two things about antichrist.

One thing is that there is both a past and a future dimension. Antichrists 'have come' and 'antichrist is coming'. John also tells us that 'the spirit of the antichrist ... now is in the world.'

In regard to the antichrists in the past, John says, 'They went out from us.' John is describing some people who had left the church in his day as antichrists! In our day also, some of the strongest opponents to the Christian faith have come from within the Christian community. I think particularly of someone like Bart Ehrman. Friedrich Nietzsche occasionally signed his name as 'antichrist'. I don't believe he ever claimed to be a Christian, but he was the son of a Lutheran pastor.

A second thing the passage tells us about antichrist or antichrists is that they lie and deceive. Specifically, antichrists deny the truth that Jesus is the Christ, that he is from God, and that he has come in the flesh.

As I mentioned, we only find the word 'antichrist' in John's letters. But there are other passages in the Bible which describe a future figure which might be the antichrist. For example, Daniel mentions a king who speaks against God (Daniel 11:36) and Jesus warns against false christs in Matthew 24.

However, there are two passages which seem to be clearly describing the same figure as John. One is 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, where Paul speaks about 'the lawless one'. Like the antichrist, the lawless one has a past and a future dimension. The 'mystery of lawlessness' was at work in Paul's time, i.e. in the past. But he will be killed by Jesus, i.e. in the future. The fact that he will be killed strongly suggests he will be a real person. Like the antichrist, the lawless one deceives. He is characterised by 'false signs and wonders, and ... wicked deception'. The other passage is Revelation 13, the second beast. This beast seems to be an imitation christ and, like the antichrist, one of its chief characteristics is that it deceives.

Does this help us to imagine 'End Times'? I think it does.

First, John and Paul describe 'antichrists', the spirit of antichrist, and the mystery of lawlessness. These are in the past or present. However, John and Paul also anticipate a future person. We should expect a future antichrist.

Second, when we think about antichrist, we may imagine a person who is the epitome of untrammelled evil, someone like Hitler or Pol Pot, for example. However, antichrist may not seem so bad. He will deceive people more than terrorise them, and specifically deceive people about Christ.

John doesn't simply describe antichrist and antichrists. His concern is that believers should not be deceived by them! Here is the conclusion of his passage about antichrist and antichrists (1 John 2:24).

Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father.

Abide in God's word. Then you won't be deceived, and you will abide in God. And there is another good result in v.25!

Have a good day!

Simon

Reflection #46 – Tuesday 26th May 2020

Hello Everybody,

As you all know, Simon and myself will be sharing the writing of reflections for the next few weeks, and today is my turn!

Do you ever worry? Does your worry ever seem to overwhelm you? There are so many things that we can worry about. We can worry about family, friends, jobs, money and our surrounding circumstances. It is really easy to let worry become the focus in our lives. I know personally that I focus on the things that worry me often, and I struggle to change my focus from those things.

The Bible says several things about worrying and the concerns of the world. In Matthew 6, Jesus speaks to us about worry, and He says, "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 than food, and the body more than clothes? 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? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?" In this Scripture, we are told that worrying does not add anything to our lives. It is illustrated to us that if God takes care of even the birds, He can take care of us and all our needs.

Philippians 4:6-7 also speaks to this issue of worrying. It says, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." In this Scripture we are not only being told not worry, but we are also given instruction on what to do instead. We are told to pray, and to pray with thanksgiving in every situation. When faced with a worry, we should look for the one thing we can be thankful for, and thank God for it.

So, when your worries seem to overwhelm you, remember what the word of the Lord says and hold fast to it. Give thanks, even for the smallest things in your troubling situation.

Many Blessings,

Dominique

Reflection #45 – Monday 25th May 2020

Three difficult questions 24/50

Luke 21:25 says the following:

And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves...

The first part of the verse has a parallel in Matthew and Mark: 'the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light'. There is also a similar passage in Acts, where Peter quotes from the prophet Joel:

And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.

Earlier this year the images of the fires in Australia brought Joel's words to mind, especially after the rain produced huge clouds of smoke and ash.

Are these the kind of signs Joel imagined? I don't know! But many new channels described the scenes as 'apocalyptic'.



But the second part of the verse, where Luke talks about the roaring of the sea and the waves, is unique to Luke. Commentators mostly take this idea metaphorically. It is an image of great distress; it doesn't mean literal waves. Christians with a concern for the environment are more inclined to take it literally. Either is possible. All through the Bible 'waves' is used in both a metaphorical and a literal way. In the Old Testament, David says, 'For the waves of death encompassed me.' That's metaphorical. Jesus calmed the storm on the Sea of Galilee. That's literal.

We might be inclined to think – waves?! Surely waves aren't so bad? Hurricanes are bad. They are destructive. But surely waves only affect people out to sea or people on the coast? Waves don't affect most people. So maybe we should take Jesus' words here metaphorically.

We are being buffeted by some metaphorical waves right now. A teenager on Breakfast this morning said, 'Time's very strange right now. Everyone wonders what's going to happen next.'

But literal waves are a reality too. The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami claimed 230,000 lives. The 2011 earthquake off Japan caused a tsunami which flooded the Fukushima nuclear plant. Still, such tsunamis are a rarity.

However, I expect that another kind of wave will increasingly become an issue in the coming decades – specifically, the ‘storm surge’.

A storm surge can be the most damaging aspect of a hurricane. It was the storm surge that Hurricane Katrina produced that flooded New Orleans. The deadliest cyclone ever recorded hit Bangladesh (at that time East Pakistan) and West Bengal in India in 1970. It claimed 500,000 lives, mostly as a result of the storm surge – the wave, in other words – that it produced.

Storm surges are an issue now, but they will become more of an issue.

Hurricanes are increasing in intensity. The National Climate Assessment (a US government programme), the climate research lab, GFDL, and many other organizations tell us we should expect more and bigger hurricanes.

Sea levels are rising. That’s a fact, not hypothesis. Last year the organization ‘Climate Central’ advised that, ‘As a result of heat-trapping pollution from human activities, rising sea levels could within three decades push chronic floods higher than land currently home to 300 million people.’ East Asia will be most affected, especially Bangladesh.

Bigger hurricanes will cause bigger storm surges. Rising sea levels will mean that they will affect more people. Here in Britain we may get off lightly. But it seems to me that many people around the world will experience some literal ‘roaring of the sea and the waves’ in the coming decades.

Is there any good news we can give? Actually, there is. The writer of Psalm 46 tells us:

God is our refuge and strength,

a very present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,

though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,

though its waters roar and foam

But there’s more! A few verses further on from our opening verse in Luke, Jesus says, ‘Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.’

Have a good rest of the day!

Simon

Reflection #44 – Friday 22nd May

Three difficult questions 23/50

A four-minute read, at least...

Today, we're on to our last Reflection on Matthew 24! This Reflection contains some relatively complex arguments. I just can't make it shorter. Sorry. If you're in the mood for something stretching, read on!

As Jesus starts to wind up his answer to his disciples' question, he says this:

³² "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. ³³ So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁴ Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.

I want to make a little detour before we approach this. In Romans 9:6 Paul says: 'For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel'. The translators added some words for clarity. The original is more like: 'For not all who are of Israel are Israel'. Here, Paul is using the word 'Israel' in two different ways. There is 'ISRAEL', as in ethnic Israel. And there is '*Israel*', as in the true people of God, who may have any racial background. Not all who are of ISRAEL are *Israel*, Paul says.

It was never the case that ISRAEL as a whole would be saved. It was always an elect group from within the nation that would be saved. And although ISRAEL had largely rejected Jesus, it had not fallen beyond recovery. There is a remnant, and God is able to graft branches in again. So, in 11:25, Paul says, 'I want you to understand this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.' The hardening was partial. Not all Jews had rejected Christ. And the hardening was 'until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.' Paul anticipated that at some point in time there would be a turning to Christ from within ISRAEL, i.e. the Jews. They – some at least – would be grafted back into the body of Christ.

Some people, however, don't see things this way. They think that Christ inaugurated an entirely new 'Israel' when he called his 12 disciples, and that ISRAEL has no further role to play in God's purposes. This view is called supersessionism. I think this was the prevailing view in the church. However, Thomas Breidenthal, writing in 1999, commented:

In the past thirty years, one Christian body after another has officially denounced supersessionism, the doctrine that God has rejected the Jews as God's chosen people, replacing them with the church.

OK, end of detour. Let's return to Matthew. What is this fig tree? In Matthew 21 we read that Jesus cursed a fig-tree. Nobody imagines that Jesus had a grievance against a particular tree; everyone recognizes that it was a symbolic act. D.A. Carson, who has been my go-to commentator for this chapter, comments: 'Most scholars interpret the cursing of the fig tree as a symbolic cursing of the people of Israel for failing to produce faith and righteousness'. Carson doesn't see it that way himself, but it seems pretty logical to me!

So, in Matthew 21 Jesus curses a fig-tree and most commentators think the fig-tree represents Israel. Now, in Matthew 24, Jesus refers to a fig-tree. So, it seems reasonable to suppose that Jesus is once again using the fig-tree as a symbol of Israel. In the spring, a fig-tree might look rather dead, but summer will come. Its branches will become tender and it will put out its leaves. Surely Jesus' meaning is that within Israel, hard hearts will become soft; within Israel there will be a revival. Jesus is saying the same as Paul.

But no commentator I have looked at – and I've looked at quite a few – likes this view. One after another, they accept that the fig-tree in Matthew 21 represents Israel, but ignore or reject the possibility that Jesus is referring to Israel when he talks about a fig-tree in Matthew 24. I don't know why this is but I'm suspicious. Such a view gives a future role to Israel. Maybe that doesn't fit with their theology. And to make things worse, this view has been taken on with relish by Christians and Christian groups reputable theologians don't get along with: people like Hal Lindsey and Plymouth Brethren.

Moving on to verse 34, commentators are divided as to what 'generation' means. Back in the 1970s and 1980s some commentators considered that 'generation' could refer to the Jewish race. More recently, however, commentators have been distinctly cool on that. The old 1984 NIV had a footnote against the word generation to show that an alternative meaning is 'race', but the present NIV has removed that footnote.

I am not a Bible scholar. From my limited viewpoint I think it makes a lot of sense to take the fig tree to mean Israel, and 'generation' to mean the Jewish race. Then, when Jesus says, 'this generation will not pass away', he means that the Jewish race will not be wiped out. There have certainly been times in history when that could have happened.

Are there any indications of the branches on the fig-tree becoming tender and it putting out leaves? Absolutely! In 2017, Barna, a reputable research organization, found that a significant number of American Jesus recognize Jesus as the son of God. The number of messianic congregations in the US has increased rapidly. In Israel, the number of messianic Jews has increased from 23 in 1948 to 30,000 or more today. This YouTube video is less than two minutes long and well worth watching:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jqrA7_oxRLs

So, we have much to be excited about and praise God for!

Have a good rest of the day!

Reflection #43 – Thursday 21st May

Three difficult questions 22/50

A three-minute read

We have two more Reflections to do on Matthew 24. Today, we look at verses 15-22.

So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house, and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath. For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short.

What is Jesus on about?! I said earlier that Jesus' disciples asked two questions. One concerned the destruction of the temple – which happened in 70 A.D. – and the other concerned 'End Times'. Which question is Jesus answering here? We'd certainly be happy if he *isn't* talking about 'End Times'. The tribulation Jesus describes sounds truly awful: 'such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be.'

I think we can breathe a sigh of relief. This warning relates to the destruction of Jerusalem, not to 'End Times'. This is evident for at least two reasons. Jesus gives instruction to 'those who are *in Judea*'. That is applicable to the destruction of Jerusalem, not to 'End Times'. Also, Jesus describes 'tribulation, such as has not been ... *and never will be*'. If Jesus was talking about 'End Times' then it would be superfluous to say 'and never will be'.

What is 'the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel'? Back in the 18th century, William Whiston, translating Josephus' account of the siege of Jerusalem, imagined that it was the moment when the Roman armies, with the images of their idols in their ensigns, occupied the temple area, ready to lay Jerusalem desolate. But many possibilities have been suggested, and sadly, it isn't entirely clear!

Is it imaginable that the destruction of Jerusalem was a time of 'tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be'? I mentioned Josephus' account of the siege of Jerusalem. This is a detailed account of the war and actually, the only detailed account we have. You can find it online (search for 'Jewish wars Gutenberg'). Based on Josephus' description, it looks very much as though Jesus' description was justified. In his commentary D.A. Carson wrote:

There have been greater numbers of deaths—six million in the Nazi death camps, mostly Jews, and an estimated twenty million under Stalin—but never so high a percentage of a great city's population so thoroughly and painfully exterminated and enslaved as during the fall of Jerusalem.

So, is that all there is to be said? Can we conclude that the fall of Jerusalem is not relevant to our enquiry about 'End Times' and breathe a sigh of relief that 'End Times', bad as they may be, will not be that bad? Maybe. But maybe we shouldn't be in too much of a hurry to move on.

Commentators note, perfectly reasonably, that Jesus' answer to his disciples' question links the destruction of Jerusalem with 'End Times'. The themes seem to be intertwined. Is that a mistake which simply confuses us? Or could it be intentional? Could it be that one is a picture of the other? Could it be that 'the near event, the destruction of Jerusalem, serves as a symbol for the far event' – as Carson puts it? If that is the case, then the destruction of Jerusalem is not at all irrelevant to our question about 'End Times'. On the contrary, it serves notice that God will act in judgement.

Have a good rest of the day!

Simon

Reflection #42 – Wednesday 20th May

Three difficult questions 21/50

A three-minute read

Today we continue to look at Matthew 24. On Monday we noted Jesus' warning of the danger of 'premature eschatological excitement'. ('Eschatology' is another word for 'End Times'.) Yesterday we noted Jesus' warning that 'End Times' will be tough.

As part of his warning, Jesus said this: '...you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake.' It's very strong, isn't it? 'Hated by *all* nations'?! In an earlier Reflection I noted the perception of many Christian advocacy organizations that the level of persecution of Christians around the world is increasing. But hostility towards Christians is increasing in the west too.

In 2014, George Yancey, a professor of sociology at Baylor University, published a book titled '*So Many Christians, So Few Lions: Is There Christianophobia in the United States?*' The title is based on the idea – expressed by a number of respondents to a survey – that they would like Christians to be thrown to the lions, as in Roman times! You can read part of the book on 'Google Books'. The part I read was enough to show me that a significant part of the US population harbours what looks very much like hatred for Christians, and especially 'fundamentalist' or 'conservative' Christians. It doesn't take too much imagination to guess where the hatred arises from, as Christian values are so

opposed to the values of humanistic western society. I think Christians experience some hatred in Britain; perhaps the situation in the US gives us a clue as to where we too may be heading.

Anyway, onto other things. Today, we look at just one verse: Matthew 24:14.

And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

In 1793 William Carey and his family set off for India, marking the start of the modern mission movement. Over the following 200 years, Christian mission reached almost every country in the world. Even in countries where there is only a tiny percentage of Christians now, such as Somalia or Afghanistan, there was a Christian witness. The notable exception was the Soviet Union. If we regard the Soviet Union as a single nation, then the gospel had reached it. But if we regard the Soviet Union as a group of separate nations, then the gospel hadn't reached all of them.

We certainly can argue that the 15 republics that made up the Soviet Union were nations. Every republic had its own flag and, with one exception, its own national anthem. As we all know, Moscow exercised strong control, but constitutionally, the Soviet Union was a federation and each republic had the right to secede. That right was invoked when, at the end of 1991, the Supreme Soviet of the USSR voted the USSR out of existence. So, we could regard the republics as nations.

There were six of these republics/nations which the gospel had never reached: the five Central Asian 'stans' and Azerbaijan. But following independence, the gospel has been proclaimed in them too. So, it seems very much as though Jesus' prophecy, that the gospel would be proclaimed to all nations, has been fulfilled in the past thirty years.

Many mission organizations see it as more appropriate to think in terms of 'people groups' rather than nations. There is logic in this. It would be ideal if everyone could hear the gospel in his or her native language. However, whereas there are 195 countries in the world, there are perhaps as many as 18,000 people groups! Reaching every people group is a much, much bigger task than reaching every nation. If you want to know how the church is doing in reaching every people group, good places to go are the websites of 'The Joshua Project' and 'Finishing the Task'.

Taking this a step further, it would of course be even more ideal if not simply every people group but every individual heard the gospel. But the plain meaning of Jesus' words is that the gospel will be proclaimed throughout the whole world, *to all nations*. Maybe I'm intrinsically lazy. But that, it seems to me, is fulfilled.

Have a good rest of the day!

Simon

Reflection #41 – Tuesday 19th May

Three difficult questions 20/50

A three-minute read

Yesterday I resumed our series after a ten-day break. I gave you an easy start back, but today we have some solid study ahead of us L.

We want to know if God could be behind coronavirus. Could it be connected to God's judgement or to 'End Times'? To answer that we want to know what judgement from God looks like and what 'End Times' will be like. We started in the Old Testament and we've now moved on to the New Testament – specifically, to Matthew 24.

D.A. Carson, who is a highly-regarded New Testament scholar, made the following comment about this chapter:

Few chapters of the Bible have elicited more disagreement among interpreters than Matthew 24 and its parallels in Mark 13 and Luke 21.

Why is there disagreement? Yesterday I quoted the question Jesus' disciples asked: 'what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?' But I didn't quote their entire question. Jesus had been speaking of the destruction of the temple. His disciples then ask him, 'Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?' Jesus' disciples probably imagined that the destruction of the temple (which happened in 70 A.D.) and 'End Times' were all part of the same event. So, their question concerned *both* the destruction of the temple and Jesus' second coming, and it would be natural to assume that Jesus answered both questions. But which part of Jesus' answer concerns the destruction of the temple and which part concerns 'End Times'? There are many opinions on this. Carson believes that verses 4-14 concern 'End Times' and that makes sense to me. In v.6 Jesus says, 'but *the end* is not yet'. In v.13 he says, 'the one who endures to *the end* will be saved.' And in v.14 he says, 'then *the end* will come.' So surely, Jesus is talking about 'End Times'!

Yesterday, we looked at verses 6-8. Jesus warns against seeing conflict, famine and earthquake and imagining that 'End Times' have come. 'All these are but the beginning of the birth pains', he says. He continues (verses 9-11):

Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

Such things have been true throughout the history of the church. But since Jesus is telling us these things in the context of a discussion about 'End Times' then we may assume they will *especially* characterize 'End Times'.

We may feel this doesn't help us very much. We want to know if we are in 'End Times'. But in this area, the change as we enter 'End Times' may be a matter of degree – and that may be difficult to sense.

Even so, I think Jesus' instruction here is very helpful. He is saying that 'End Times' – whenever they come – will be tough.

I mentioned previously that Priscilla and I lived in Azerbaijan for a time. After we moved there, we started to learn Azerbaijani. I was never good at languages at school. At the time I was learning Azerbaijani I thought it was the hardest thing I'd done in my life. But one thing that helped me was the fact that I expected it to be hard. I knew that you can't reach a good level in a language like Azerbaijani in just a few months.

If we expect 'End Times' to be tough then it will help us to press on as and when difficulties do come.

Have a good rest of the day!

Simon

Reflection #40 – Monday 18th May

Three difficult questions 19/50

A three-minute read

There's a great family film called 'The Princess Bride'. It's definitely worth watching if you enjoy a romance with lots of action and humour. A farmhand, Westley, is in love with a beautiful young woman called Buttercup. A Sicilian named Vizzini kidnaps Buttercup; Westley, wearing a mask, goes in pursuit, catches up with Vizzini, and challenges him to a battle of wits. He takes two goblets, hides them behind his back and tells Vizzini that he has put a deadly poison – iocane – in one.

'All right' Westley asks. 'Where is the poison? The battle of wits has begun. It ends when you decide and we both drink, and find out who is right and who is dead.'

Vizzini thinks it through. He suspects Westley wants him to drink from one goblet so he chooses the other. He drinks from the goblet in front of Westley – and dies.

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At one point, Jesus' disciples ask him, 'What will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?'

The first thing Jesus does is to warn them. 'See that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, "I am the Christ", and they will lead many astray.' Jesus then goes on to tell them *not* to pay any attention to some things. 'You will hear of wars

and rumours of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.'

Conflict, famine and earthquakes have happened all through the ages. They are 'but the beginning of birth pains' – the time when Jesus' kingdom becomes a reality. We should *not* take such events as indications that 'End Times' are imminent.

When it comes to the subject of 'End Times', one mistake is to imagine that we are in 'End Times' when we are not. The opposite mistake is to fail to recognize that we are in 'End Times' when we are.

Every commentator I have looked at in relation to this passage warned of the first mistake – of prematurely imagining that we are in 'End Times'. But like Vizzini in *Princess Bride*, it's possible, in our effort to avoid one mistake, to make the opposite one.

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After Westley had set Buttercup free, she said, 'To think – all that time it was your cup that was poisoned!'

But in fact, she was wrong. 'They were both poisoned', Westley tells her. 'I spent the last few years building up an immunity to iocane powder.'

The only way for Vizzini to survive was to not drink from either goblet. As we look at Jesus' answer, we want to avoid both wrong goblets: prematurely imagining that we are in 'End Times', and failing to recognize 'End Times' when they are on us.

Have a good rest of the day!

Simon

Reflection #39 – Friday 15th May

Hello Everyone,

This week I've written to you about faith and joy, and today I want to finish with hope. I want to use Abraham as an example of having hope. God had promised Abraham that he would be the father of many nations, but Abraham still had to wait for many years for that promise to be fulfilled. When that that promise was fulfilled and he was blessed with a son, God took it one step further and asked Abraham to sacrifice the son he had waited for. However, through all this challenges Abraham still clung to the hope that God would fulfil those promises.

Romans 4: 18 says, “Even when there was no reason for hope, Abraham kept hoping.” In this passage, Paul is demonstrating that in the waiting, Abrahams never stopped believing in God. In fact, Abraham’s faith just grew stronger. It was the waiting that taught Abraham to rely on his fully on his faith in God. True hope is being determined to believe on God, even when the world seems to be ending. That is the power of hope. Standing strong in God’s promises in the face of calamity is having hope.

The key to surviving tough challenges is hope. Having hope in the fact that Jesus loves you, having the hope that He is with you, and having the hope that God’s promises are true. When you put your hope in these things, you will be able to use your faith to overcome.

Many Blessings,

Dominique

Reflection #38 – Wednesday 13th May

Hello Everyone,

Today I want to talk about being joyful! I’m going to be completely honest and tell you that I really struggle to be joyful. Maybe it’s the rational way I think or maybe it is my pessimistic side. But there can be days when I just don’t want to be joyful, and I’m sure I’m not the only one who feels this way! So, I went on a journey to discover what it means to be joyful in a Biblical way. I learnt a couple things on this journey that I would like to share with you.

Firstly, I learnt that joy comes from the Lord, not from surrounding circumstances. In fact, it is when we focus on our circumstances that our joy is understood to be an emotion. Romans 15:13 says, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” This Scripture to me demonstrates that when we put our trust in God, He will fill us with joy. It is that joy that opens the door for there to be hope in our lives.

Secondly, I learnt that joy and happiness are not the same thing. Often we think that joy and happiness go hand in hand. However, happiness is actually the outward expression of the joy that God gives us. Being happy is an emotion that we can choose, but joyfulness is a condition of the heart. The issue here is when we are not happy does that mean we are not expressing joy? Well, I believe the key here is to turn our focus from our circumstances and put it on Christ. Psalm 64:10 says, “Rejoice in the Lord and take refuge in him.” When we take our refuge in God, He will provide us with joy.

Knowing the place that joy has in our lives is so important. When we know where our joy comes from, we can also know where our strength comes from. I’m sure you all heard the Scripture that says, “The joy of the Lord is your strength.” So when circumstances seem to overwhelm you, find your joy in the Lord, and He will strengthen you!

Many Blessings,

Dominique

Reflection #37 – Monday 11th May

Hello Everyone,

Its Dominique writing to you today! While Simon is on his break, I offered to take over the writing of reflections this week. Now, I know he is in the middle of a series, but I thought it might be fun to talk about something different.

So today I wanted to think about having Faith over Fear! It can be very easy, particularly at the moment, to slip into a mind-set of fear, and learning to have faith over fear is not always an easy thing to do. This is something that the Bible addresses in 2 Timothy 1:7, which says, "God has not given as a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind." In its context, this verse is Paul reminding Timothy to be strong in his faith, even when circumstances may prove difficult. It is important that we grow in our faith, to insure that in trying times we are able to stand strong.

There are 3 ways in which we can grow our faith. I'm sure there are more than 3, but these are the ones that stood out to me:

1. Knowing the Word of God – Properly knowing our Bibles is the foundation on which we can build our faith. Having the courage to remain strong in our faith stems from a full knowledge of the Word of God.
2. Obeying the Word of God – Once we know what the Bible says about having faith. The next step is to follow the guidance that God has given us in the Bible. When we step out in obedience according to the Bible – the more our faith grows in the Lord and we become less afraid of the unknown.
3. Living the Word of God – When we know and obey the Bible, we are then able to live it out in faith. The choice of faith over fear becomes increasingly easier because we can be sure in the promises God has made to us. It is through the constant use of God's Word in our lives that allows us to grow our faith to the point where fear is no longer the deciding factor in our lives.

Following these 3 steps will help us to choose faith over fear, and standing strong in our faith is very important. I hope that as you go about your day and your week, you are reminded of these steps, and that you will be able to choose faith over fear.

Many Blessings,

Dominique

Reflection #36

Three difficult questions 18/50

A three-minute read

Today we're at a milestone in our Reflections. We'll be leaving the Old Testament! Do I hear 'hooray'? 😊 After a short break we'll move on to the New Testament. A milestone is a good place to take stock. It's probably impossible to summarise 23 Reflections in a short space but I'm going to attempt it...

Before Easter I did five Reflections on our general response to coronavirus. We go to God. We pray. We grieve. We are sensitive and empathetic, as Jesus was to a leper. But we should also ask questions. Is God doing something? Is God saying something?

After Easter I started to look for answers.

Some people have asked why we need to ask such questions. Maybe God isn't doing anything or saying anything. But the world is clearly very ill, and not just with coronavirus, so it would be surprising if the great physician had nothing to say about it. I believe we need to ask and answer those questions if we are to fit into God's purpose and support God's message to the world.

But can we answer such questions? Probably not with 100% certainty. But if coronavirus, climate change, and so on fit with how God judges and/or 'End Times' then we might assume there is a connection.

So, what have we learned? I can't do more than give a few main points here.

Thinking about how God judges, the first Old Testament story we looked at was the plagues of Egypt. God acted in judgement for the good of his people to deliver them from slavery. That's an important point. God's purpose in judgement is good! God acted against Egypt, but he did so as gently as possible. The Israelites had been slaves for some time before God acted. Moses delivered God's message to Pharaoh. Pharaoh rejected it. God then sent 10 plagues which steadily increased in intensity. God gave Pharaoh every opportunity.

In the prophets we saw that God judged his people because they abandoned him and went after other gods. God judged other nations for their pride and arrogance. That's important. We don't need to be serial killers for God to judge us! God initially acts in judgement to call people to repent. However, if warnings are not heeded, God doesn't simply say, 'Oh, never mind.' The story of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians shows what God does if people do not heed his warnings. That is a very, very, very important point. People need to hear God's warnings when he gives them – and that means that we, God's people, need to listen.

God uses a number of 'standard' means of judgement such as the sword, famine and pestilence. In addition, God judges through acts in the environment. That is important. Coronavirus fits.

Thinking about 'End Times', prophecies of global environmental destruction in Isaiah 24 and Daniel 7, and Daniel's prophecy of persecution of God's people are either already true or rapidly coming true. Daniel's vision of a fourth beast is true today if we take the beast as the Roman Empire and the ten horns as the westernised nations. This is important. If we are in 'End Times' then we should expect acts of judgement by God. In that case it would be more likely that coronavirus is one.

God's acts of judgement will be hard for everyone. But as the Old Testament prophets look forward to 'End Times' they see a time of joy for God's people. That's important. Although there will be pain, it will be followed by something very good.

We haven't fully answered our questions yet but we've made a start. The first indications are that coronavirus fits with the way that God judges, and the situation in the world today corresponds in many respects with what we expect to see in 'End Times'. No doubt we'll find more information in the New Testament. I believe that if we stick the course we can come to a reasoned view of whether God is speaking to the world through coronavirus and the other events that are happening today and, if God *is* speaking, what he is saying. That, in turn, will guide us to know what we should do!

Simon

P.S. I will restart Reflections on 18/5. However, Reflections will not come to a complete halt until then as our wonderful Moorlands students are going to do four or five over this period. It will no doubt be a pleasant change!

Reflection #35

Three difficult questions 16/50

A three-minute read

I titled this series 'Three difficult questions.' In reality, there are two main questions: 'Is coronavirus a judgement from God?' and 'Are we living in end times?' But are these important questions to ask?

Suppose you don't feel well and go to the doctor. The doctor checks your blood pressure. She listens to your heart. She takes a blood sample and sends it for analysis. A week later she calls you. 'It's clear what the issue is', she says. 'Fortunately, it's quite easy to treat.' The doctor found out what the problem was and now she knows what treatment to prescribe. Correct treatment requires correct diagnosis.

We who are reading this are, we hope, not spiritually ill. We don't need to repent and turn to God; we did that a long time ago. Day by day we are living in covenant relationship with Jesus and that's great. But we live in a world that is ill, and it is primarily for the sake of the world around us that we need to ask and answer the questions above.

Is the world ill? I was interested to hear Sir David King, former UK Chief Scientific Adviser, on the news at lunchtime today. He commented on climate change and coronavirus and said, 'There is of course, a major difference. Humanity will survive coronavirus...' Had I heard correctly!? Was Sir David King saying that climate change is an illness which could be fatal for humankind!? I checked on some other comments by Sir David King to see if I'd misheard. He said in 2014, 'Climate change is not the biggest challenge of our time, it's the biggest challenge of all time.' He clearly thinks the world is facing a huge problem. We can easily reel off a dozen 'illnesses' that we see in the world today.

I started these Reflections in response to coronavirus. What do our 'doctors' say the cause of coronavirus is? Scientists have suggested that someone got the virus from a pangolin and the pangolin got the virus from a bat. Sounds remarkable! Donald Trump has suggested that a Chinese bio-lab developed it. No less remarkable! But suppose those aren't the actual reasons. Suppose the actual reason is that God wants to wake humankind up, to warn humankind that it needs to change its ways, or else...

Just as in the analogy of the doctor, if the diagnosis is wrong, the treatment will be wrong. Let's suppose that coronavirus is indeed a warning from God, and the treatment is that humankind repents. If that is the treatment, then nothing else will work. We, the church, can pray to God to heal. We can pray a blessing on our land. Humankind can sort out coronavirus. I'm not sure if we can sort out climate change. But if the root problem isn't fixed it won't solve the problem. God will simply send another warning, only louder.

We – God's people – are the only people who are able to work out if this is actually the cause of the problem. We are in the role of the doctor in the analogy. I have no vested interest in attempting to show that the root cause is God's anger at a world that almost entirely ignores him. But the patient – the world – is very ill, and like the doctor, I want to run the tests. I want to be confident in a diagnosis. I believe that is the best thing I can do to help the world. How we then communicate the results is another matter. And it's very possible that 'the world' would completely disregard the results anyway. But one step at a time...

Have a good day.

Simon

Reflection #34 – Tuesday 5th May 2020

Three difficult questions 16/50

A three-minute read

In today's Reflection I'm looking at why we can be encouraged, even as we think about 'End Times' and God's judgement. We don't know if we are in such a time, but suppose we are? Jesus described the various signs that will accompany 'End Times' as 'the beginning of birth pains.' Painful, but the pain will pass, and we'll be in a *much* better situation. But what exactly do we have to look forward to?

I want to stick with the Old Testament for the moment. To find some answers I'm going to a passage that is encouraging, difficult and tantalizing. It's Isaiah 65:17-25. It starts like this: 'For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth...' God then tells us that we have joy, rejoicing and gladness to look forward to! God is speaking of 'heaven', isn't he? But as we continue, the passage gets very interesting:

No more shall there be in it

an infant who lives but a few days,

or an old man who does not fill out his days,

for the young man shall die a hundred years old,

and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed (20)

for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be (22)

People dying? Sinners? Accursed? Trees live a long time, but aren't we going to live forever? One commentator scratches his head and notes astutely, 'The reference to death and a curse on the sinner presents some problems, for one would not expect these to be present in the new heavens and the new earth'. No, one would not! Everyone struggles and no one has a good answer. Possible answers are:

(A) Isaiah is speaking of heaven, and these words don't mean what they appear to mean.

(B) He is speaking of Christ's future 1000-year reign, as referred to in Revelation 20. Some Christians don't believe this is intended literally.

(C) He is suggesting that mankind will return to the longevity of the age before the Flood. There are many parallels between Genesis and Revelation, so that is not too strange an idea.

I don't like (A). I don't like to assume that words in the Bible mean something other than they appear to mean. So, I'm inclined towards (B) or (C) or perhaps some combination of both. But of course, I don't know which is correct! We are all left wondering. But I'm going to continue to wander down this path. During this 1000-year reign of Jesus (if that's what it refers to), life on earth continues. Satan has been thrown into a pit, Jesus is in charge, and life is much, much better:

They shall build houses and inhabit them;

they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

They shall not build and another inhabit;

they shall not plant and another eat (21-22a)

They shall not labour in vain

or bear children for calamity (23a)

That sounds all right, doesn't it? Well, now that I am in such a good groove, I'm going to really let my imagination run wild... We're imagining Christ's 1000-year reign, as described in Revelation 20. In Revelation 18 there is economic collapse and in Revelation 19 a great battle. At the end of Revelation 19 we don't read of Mary Poppins appearing. Earth is a mess. Then Jesus starts to reign. What do we imagine he will do? To me, the idea of getting to grips with messy old Earth and sorting it out for 1000 years, with Jesus as boss, sounds like a lot of fun! OK, the Bible doesn't say that's what we'll do! I'm just imagining! My big fat book on theology says, 'there is ... little theological rationale for the millennium. It seems to be somewhat superfluous.' Well, maybe it isn't. Maybe there will be a job to do! But please note. This is for those who stick with it. Revelation 20:4 tells us, '*They* came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.' Look at the verse to see who 'they' refers to. (N.B. It's better to look at the ESV than the NIV!)

And then, heaven comes down to earth. That's what Revelation 21 tells us. Heaven *on earth!* But that's another subject entirely!

I'm excited! We have much to look forward to. And that, in turn, helps us to not be too dismayed at the prospect of 'birth pains'.

Have a good day and God bless.

Simon

Reflection #33 – Monday 4th May 2020

Three difficult questions 15/50

A three-minute read

We are trying to read signs. Are we in a time of God's judgement? Are we in 'End Times'? As we look at possible signs, I can imagine several errors we might make:

We can take something as a sign that is not a sign. In Greek mythology, the beauty of Europa inspired the love of Zeus. He approached her in the form of a bull and carried her away from Phoenicia to Crete. The name Europe comes from that myth. In front of the Council of Europe headquarters in Strasbourg is a statue, 'The Removal of Europa', based on the myth. Europa is naked, riding a bull. Europa's face also appears on EU banknotes.

'It's a sign!' some people say. 'It's just like Revelation, a woman riding a beast.'

But is it? Or is it seeing something as a sign that is not a sign?

We can take a false sign as true. As far as I can see, every reference to a false sign in the Bible is in connection with 'End Times'. I'm not sure what are false signs today – but the warnings are there.

We can fail to see or heed a true sign. I think this is a real risk. Jesus criticised the Pharisees and Sadducees for failing to read the signs of the times. To avoid falling into the trap of over-interpreting Scripture or signs we see around us we might be overly cautious and under-interpret, not taking note of what is reasonably evident.

In my last Reflection, I attempted to identify the fourth beast in Daniel's prophecy and its ten horns. It seemed reasonable to imagine that the ten horns represent the nations that are the spiritual and cultural successors of the Roman Empire, countries which we think of today as the westernised nations. Some people (over-interpreters, perhaps?) see those ten horns as the European Union.

But let's run with the hypothesis that the ten horns are the westernised nations, and return to Daniel. Daniel describes the fourth beast as 'terrifying', 'dreadful', 'exceedingly strong'. He says, 'It had great iron teeth; it devoured and broke in pieces and stamped what was left with its feet' (7:7). He says much the same in 7:19, and in 7:23 adds that 'it shall devour the whole earth, and trample it down, and break it to pieces.'

Does this description fit with the ten horns representing the westernised nations? *Exceedingly strong?* Yes. *Iron?* Yes. The world today is built on steel, which is about 98% iron. It's especially true now. World production of steel has gone up by 600% in the space of the last 60 years. *Devouring, breaking in pieces, stamping, trampling?* Yes. We see the effect of the global economy on the environment. *Devouring the whole earth?* Yes, but it's only in the past 50 years or so that we could say that the global economy is devouring the whole earth.

It seems to me that, without over-interpreting, there's a lot here that supports the hypothesis that the ten horns in Daniel's vision represent the westernised nations. However, these descriptions do not only support the hypothesis. They take us further and locate us in time. It's really only recently that 'devour the whole earth' has become a reality.

There's a poem that has spread very quickly on YouTube and Facebook called 'The Great Realization'. Part of it goes:

You see, the people

Came up with companies

To trade across all lands

But they swelled and got much bigger

Than we ever could have planned

We'd always had our wants,

But now, it got so quick.

You could have everything you dreamed of

In a day and with a click.

Daniel doesn't speak of God's judgement on these nations. However, with all of this trampling and devouring going on, we can't imagine God would be very happy. But I think we'll have to wait until we get to Revelation for further development of these ideas.

Have a good day.

Simon

Reflection #32 – Friday 1st May 2020

Three difficult questions 14/50

A four-minute read today.

On the small Greek island of Patmos there is a place called 'the Cave of the Apocalypse'. It is here, according to tradition, that John had the vision which we now have in the form of the last book of the Bible, Revelation. However, in the Book of Revelation, the word 'vision' is used just once. I think there was more to John discerning what he described than him going into a trance and seeing things. Peter tells us that Old Testament prophets 'searched and enquired carefully.' I imagine John did the same. Revelation quotes more from the Old Testament than any other book in the New Testament. I think John spent a lot of time looking at Old Testament prophecies and wondering what they meant. I imagine the process as being like making a tapestry. John drew many of the threads for his tapestry – Revelation – from the Old Testament. He drew most threads from Isaiah, and second-most from Daniel. I imagine John doggedly looking at each thread and thinking and praying about it, until God revealed to him how it fitted into the whole tapestry.

Almost half of what John quotes from Daniel comes from chapter 7. In this chapter Daniel has a vision of four great beasts coming up out of the sea. These beasts represent four kingdoms. Some versions translate v.17 as 'kings' and some as 'kingdoms', but v.23 makes it clear that they are kingdoms. Some commentators take the four kingdoms as Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome. Others split Media and Persia into two, in which case Greece is the fourth and Rome doesn't come into the picture. We may note that the fourth beast has ten horns.

We possibly can't decide from Daniel alone which of these two interpretations is correct, but Revelation helps us. In Revelation, John tells us he saw a sign: 'a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns' (Rev. 12:3). Aha! The ten horns align the dragon in John's vision with Daniel's fourth beast. However, the seven heads are new; Daniel doesn't mention seven heads. A little further on, John tells us that 'the seven heads are seven mountains' (Rev 17:9). Many Bible versions have 'hills' instead of mountains. Rome was built on seven hills but we do not know of any other city that existed in John's time that was. So, John's reference to seven hills identifies the dragon he saw as Rome, i.e. the Roman Empire. That also means that Daniel's fourth beast is Rome. Good progress!

Daniel 7:24 tells us, 'As for the ten horns, out of this kingdom ten kings shall arise'. As in v.17, some Bible versions have 'kings' and some have 'kingdoms', but we won't worry too much about that; one commentator sees the two words as being nearly synonymous. In other words, the one kingdom splits off into ten kingdoms. Hmm, the Roman Empire no longer exists, but is there sense in which it has split off into ten kingdoms?

Yes, indeed! The Roman Empire passed away, but it handed on a legacy of thought, culture and civilisation to Europe. Rome had embraced Greek philosophy and handed that on to Europe. It handed on language: many European languages have roots in Latin. It handed on its alphabet. It handed on a pattern of government: Rome was a republic, and presently 14 European countries are parliamentary republics. Trial by jury was a Roman practice.

In the past, the phrase 'the West' referred to Europe. But 'the West' now has a wider meaning. We might talk about the Cold War as 'a standoff between the West and the U.S.S.R.' So here, 'the West' includes the USA. The USA has Roman roots: it too is a republic, and it has a senate. Canada, Australia and New Zealand also have their roots in European culture. And now, western culture, philosophy and worldview are spreading all around the world; 'westernisation' is happening in many countries.

Some people think Daniel's ten horns means specifically ten kingdoms – not nine, not eleven. But 'ten' could simply mean many. Daniel's ten horns can then be the many nations that are the spiritual and cultural successors of the Roman Empire, countries which we think of today as the westernised nations. I don't know if this is a correct

interpretation, but if it is, it would mean that Daniel's prophecy is fulfilled. The fourth kingdom, Rome, appeared and disappeared, and ten kingdoms (many, in fact) have come out of that kingdom.

Have a good day!

Simon

Reflection #31 – Thursday 30th April 2020

Three difficult questions 13/50

Today we move on to Daniel. We're familiar with many of the stories in the first half of Daniel, the fiery furnace, the lion's den, and so on. But we're less familiar with the material in the second half. Daniel has a lot to say about 'End Times'. One thing that Daniel tells us is that there will be persecution of God's people, to the extent that Daniel describes it as 'war'.

Then I desired to know the truth about the fourth beast ... and about the ten horns that were on its head, and the other horn that came up ... As I looked, this horn *made war* with the saints and prevailed over them ... (Daniel 7:19-21)

A little further on Daniel tells us that this 'horn' 'shall *wear out* the saints of the Most High' (7:25). He also has a vision in which he sees a king who will '*destroy mighty men and the people who are the saints*' (8:24).

Daniel's prophecies are notoriously difficult. However what Daniel is saying here is clear enough. He uses the words 'war', 'wear out' and 'destroy' in relation to the saints. Could we describe the world today that way? The answer is 'yes'.

Last year, Jeremy Hunt, who was then Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, commissioned a report to guide the British government in how to respond to the worldwide persecution of Christians (the Truro Report). The report uses the word 'genocide' 57 times in relation to action against Christians, often in conjunction with the phrase 'met the test' or similar. The report tells us:

The eradication of Christians and other minorities on pain of 'the sword' or other violent means was revealed to be the specific and stated objective of extremist groups in Syria, Iraq, Egypt, north-east Nigeria and the Philippines.

That looks like war, doesn't it?

In 2016, a book was published entitled 'The Global War on Christians'. The author, a journalist called John Allen, said he was hesitant to use the word 'war' in connection with the attacks on Christians around the world. But he finally decided that it was the right word to use.

I feel uncomfortable simply presenting these cold facts. They reflect murder, beheadings, torture, bombings, abductions, rape, forced marriages, discrimination and ostracism. We find hundreds of stories as soon as we start to look.

But to return to our purpose: we're trying to understand the Bible's picture of 'End Times'. We understand that war against Christians is part of that picture. But Christians have been persecuted for the last 2000 years. If we're saying that persecution of Christians, to the extent that it could be described as war, is a marker of 'End Times', then persecution of Christians must increase in End Times. Has persecution increased? Can we even measure it?

In preparation for the year 2000, Pope John Paul II set up a commission to research and catalogue those who died for the faith in the 20th century. The commission discovered that the "20th century has produced double the number of Christian martyrs [than] all the previous 19 centuries put together."

Every book, article and report I've looked at says that the level of persecution is increasing. The Truro Report says that. Open Doors says that. Last year, Henrietta Blyth, Chief Executive of Open Doors UK and Ireland said: "Our research uncovers a shocking increase in the persecution of Christians globally." One observer noted that when Islam expanded in the 7th and 8th centuries, Muslims didn't try to wipe out Christians: they simply made them second-class citizens. But groups such as ISIS were "wiping Christianity off the face of Syria and Iraq." That is a change.

Isaiah tells us about global environmental destruction. Jeremiah tells us about Babylon and in Revelation John relates it to a future Babylon. It isn't too difficult to imagine an entity that fits the description. Ezekiel describes a future temple, and that is by no means inconceivable. Daniel tells us of 'war' on the saints. That's happening. We're putting ticks against a lot of 'End Time' markers...

Have a good day. And say a prayer for those for whom today is not such a good day.

Simon

Reflection #30 – Wednesday 29th April 2020

Three difficult questions 12/50

You're on a whistle-stop 'ten-cities-in-fourteen-days' European tour. You had three days in Paris and then two days in Rome. Now you have two days in London. On your first day you had a highly cultural visit to the British Museum. That was great! Today, your tour guide takes you to a former railway depot in North Acton. In front of you is an expanse of rubble, some diggers and huge dump trucks. Huh? She takes you over to a large information board.

“HS2 will be a catalyst for growth”, it says. “The high-speed backbone of Britain’s transport network.”

“But will it be?” you ask your tour guide.

š

You’re on a whistle-stop tour of Old Testament prophecy. You had three days in Isaiah and two days in Jeremiah. Now, you’re in your second and last day in Ezekiel. Your tour guide takes you to chapters 40-42. They provide a detailed architectural plan for a temple. But it’s for a temple that doesn’t presently exist and never has existed.

“Will it exist?” you ask your tour guide. “Will that be part of our ‘End Time’ picture?”

You detect the slightest trace of a smile from your tour guide.

“In early church history people like Jerome and Gregory the Great thought Ezekiel’s picture could only be taken symbolically”, she explained. “In the 12th century, the Scottish theologian Richard of Saint Victor took it literally. Recently, some people don’t think Ezekiel wrote these chapters at all. After all, it’s as if a Byron suddenly turned into a Brunel! But even if Ezekiel didn’t write it, I’m not sure that it makes a lot of difference. We’d still accept it as part of the Bible, I think...”

“I see. And recent commentators?”

“Many recent commentators think the picture is symbolic. They don’t think Ezekiel’s plan could actually be implemented. One commentator has likened it to Martin Luther King’s ‘I have a dream’ speech. Something that is envisioning, but not necessarily to be implemented in reality.”

You take a moment to digest this.

“But surely Martin Luther King’s dream *does* need to be implemented in reality! And Ezekiel’s plan is very detailed, isn’t it? It’s more than a vision statement.”

Your tour guide smiles.

“I couldn’t agree more! Some commentators think the plan was for a temple the exiles should have built after they returned to Jerusalem from exile. And some commentators think the plan is for a temple that will be built in ‘End Times’. That’s what Jews think. In fact, there’s a group of Jews who are already making detailed plans.”

“Wow. So, it could be built?!”

Your tour guide shrugs in a non-committal way. “Well ... there’s a mosque there, and it’s been there for 1,300 years.”

“But what about scripture?” you ask. “How do you read it?”

“There are some verses in the New Testament which make you think. For example, Paul talks about a man of lawlessness who will be revealed. He will take his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. So clearly there must be some kind of temple! The question is, what kind? Irenaeus, who was a second century bishop, took the verse to mean a literal temple. But many modern commentators take it to mean the church. There are also some verses in Revelation which speak of a temple – Revelation 11:1,2, for example. But there are many ways to interpret them...”

“So?” you ask in suspense. “What do you think? Will a temple be part of our ‘End Time’ picture?”

Your tour guide looks thoughtful.

“*Ezekiel’s temple*, you mean? Because there already is a temple, you know. You’re part of it!”

“Oh, yes, of course,” you say, catching on.

“I’m really not sure what to make of these passages of scripture”, your tour guide says. “But I think I’d lean towards it being built.”

“Well, if it is built, I guess it would mean that we’re in ‘End Times’!”

“I guess it would”, she says.

š

In front of you, a digger lifts a pile of rubble onto a dump truck. Your tour guide smiles.

Have a good day!

Simon

Reflection #29 – Tuesday 28th April 2020

Three difficult questions 11/50

A three-minute read

Today, we’re moving on to Ezekiel in our whistle-stop tour of Old Testament prophecy.

Just to keep our goal in mind, our purpose in this series of Reflections is to look at passages of scripture which tell us about how and why God judges, and about ‘End Times’, so we can see if coronavirus and/or other current events fit with them. We’re approaching scripture – presently, the Old Testament prophets – with specific questions. But the prophets’ messages of judgement are set in a larger picture. For example, the prophets also tell us about their personal battles, and the glory that is to come. Ideally, we would want to take in that bigger picture, but there is only so much we can look at!

I need to give a little background to Ezekiel.

605 B.C. – Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, defeats Assyria in a historic battle. Judah had been under the rule of Assyria for more than a century, so when Babylon defeated Assyria, Judah became part of the Babylonian empire.

597 B.C. – Nebuchadnezzar attempts to conquer Egypt but was unsuccessful. Judah sees an opportunity and revolts. Nebuchadnezzar comes to Jerusalem, lays siege to it, captures it and deports many Jews to Babylon. Ezekiel is one of them.

595 B.C. – Ezekiel, in captivity in Babylon, starts writing at about this time.

587 B.C. – The Jews in Jerusalem revolt again. Nebuchadnezzar returns to Jerusalem and this time, he razes the city.

Bible commentators are usually dry, academic and restrained. So, this description by commentator Iain Duguid is remarkable:

If you imagine the kind of doomsday scenario painted in movies like *The War of the Worlds* or *Terminator*, in which society as we know it has been reduced to rubble and ash and a few shell-shocked human beings remain, desperately trying to keep themselves alive among the ruins, then you won't be too far off the mark of what life must have been like for those who remained in Judah.

God really confirms this picture of terrible destruction when he tells Jerusalem, 'And because of all your abominations I will do with you what I have never yet done, and the like of which I will never do again' (5:9).

What led God to do such a thing? In Isaiah God accused his people of rebelling against him and breaking 'the everlasting covenant'. In Jeremiah, God said his people had forsaken him and gone after other gods. But in Ezekiel, God is sharper, angrier, more impassioned. In Ezekiel, Israel, the beautiful, cared-for, cherished bride, has become a whore, a brazen prostitute, and an adulterous wife. Read chapter 16 at your peril.

Although Ezekiel mentions other forms of sin, sexual immorality and adultery, for example, by far his greatest emphasis is on idolatry and abominations. Israel had lots of idols and they took their idols into their hearts (14:3-7 is a good example). Some of the abominations *are* the idols (see ch.8 for example) and they are, among other places, *in the temple*.

A specific area that God strongly condemns was the failure of the Jews to keep the Sabbath. This is Ezekiel's focus in chapter 20. Keeping the Sabbath isn't simply one command among many. Twice in this chapter God says, 'I gave them my Sabbaths, as a *sign between me and them*.' Maybe it's a bit like the fruit in the Garden of Eden. Eating a piece of fruit was not hugely significant, but it was a very clear indicator of whether Adam and Eve were trying to follow God. (This was something of a wake-up call to me. After I started as a minister, I often neglected to have a Sabbath rest.)

When we started on this journey, I imagined we would think – in a rather detached way – whether any of the things we observe today could be signs of God’s judgement *on the world*. Ezekiel makes it very personal. Paul tells us that God’s judgement will start with the household of God. So, I have to ask, are we, God’s people today, like those ancient Israelites? Have *we* surrendered to the ideologies of our day? Have *we* taken the world’s idols into *our* hearts?

Have a good day!

Simon

Reflection #28 – Monday 27th April 2020

Three difficult questions 10/50

It’s a four-minute read today. Sorry, I couldn’t make it shorter.

In 605 B.C. the Babylonians defeated the Assyrians at the Battle of Carchemish. Babylon became the ruler of much of the civilised world.

Most of the book of Jeremiah concerns destruction *by* Babylon. The Babylonian Empire conquered the Kingdom of Judah and destroyed Jerusalem in 587 B.C. But the last two ‘proper’ chapters of Jeremiah concern the destruction *of* Babylon. Jeremiah’s last words are as follows:

When you finish reading this book, tie a stone to it and cast it into the midst of the Euphrates, and say, ‘Thus shall Babylon sink, to rise no more...’ (51:63).

For two to three hundred years after invading Judah, Babylon was the largest city in the world. But after that, what Jeremiah prophesied happened. It sank into the desert and there it remains, although a little has been excavated.

We might forget about Babylon except for one rather important thing. In Revelation, John speaks of Babylon. The Babylon that existed in Jeremiah’s day was destroyed, therefore the Babylon which John speaks of is a future Babylon, or at least, it was in the future from John’s perspective in the first century A.D. It could, I suppose, be present now. John mostly calls it ‘Babylon the Great’, so it’s clearly a significant empire or city. It appears mostly in Revelation 17 and 18, when we’re well into ‘End Times.’ ‘Future Babylon’ must have a strong similarity to the Babylon Jeremiah wrote about, or it would be meaningless for John to call it ‘Babylon’.

John takes many of Jeremiah’s prophecies that relate to ‘former Babylon’ and applies them to ‘future Babylon’. Some remain much the same. Former Babylon was very wealthy; future Babylon is too. Former Babylon largely destroyed God’s people; future

Babylon persecutes them. Former Babylon suddenly fell; future Babylon will too. Jeremiah prophetically warned the Jews to 'Flee from the midst of Babylon'. In Revelation, God tells his people, 'Come out of her, my people'.

However, in some cases John, or perhaps God, either sharpens Jeremiah's prophecies or gives them a slightly different meaning. Let me give you a couple of examples.

Here's the first. Jeremiah writes, 'Babylon was a golden cup in the Lord's hand, making all the earth drunken; the nations drank of her wine; therefore the nations went mad' (Jer. 51:7). Former Babylon pushed its ideology on all the other countries of the world. But what was that ideology? Jeremiah doesn't say. John, however, does. John writes: 'The woman was ... holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality' (Rev. 17:4). Former Babylon was renowned for its licentiousness but Jeremiah didn't mention it. John, however, mentions future Babylon's sexual immorality both explicitly and often.

Let's have another example. In Jeremiah 51:13 Jeremiah addresses Babylon, saying, 'O you who dwell by many waters.' You know the song, 'By the rivers of Babylon'? Or maybe the psalm? Former Babylon was literally by many waters: it was located on a branch of the Euphrates river. An angel tells John, 'Come, I will show you the judgement of the great prostitute [i.e. Babylon] who is seated on many waters' (17:1). So far, so good: it's similar. But the angel tells John it applies in a different way to the future Babylon: 'The waters that you saw, where the prostitute is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages' (17:15). Jeremiah's description is literal; John's is metaphorical. Jeremiah's prophecy has developed.

Earlier in this Reflection I quoted Jeremiah's instruction to attach a stone to his book and throw it into the Euphrates as a symbol of what would happen to former Babylon. Funnily enough, an angel decides to follow Jeremiah's instruction. But he does it in respect of future Babylon:

Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, 'So will Babylon the great city be thrown down with violence, and will be found no more' (Rev 18:21).

Wow! Angels are so respectful of scripture!

But what did we learn in today's Reflection? We are wondering, among other things, if present-day events are indicative of 'End Times'. To do that, we need a picture of 'End Times'. And 'Babylon' is part of that picture.

Have a good day!

Simon

A three-minute read

In 2008 we went to China to watch the Olympics. Our two children were 10 and 8 and it really was a once-in-a-lifetime family holiday. When we first visited the main stadium – the ‘Bird’s Nest’ – I remember thinking, ‘It’s like a temple!’ At the Olympics, the flame, the oath, the hymn, the opening ceremony provide ritual and cult which are simply not present in other athletics events. The Olympics exalt health, maybe beauty, certainly human achievement. Where’s the line between celebrating achievement, and idolising it?

In the time of the prophets, it was easy to spot when people were following other gods. People had idols at home. They had shrines in high places. They might put up an Asherah pole. Today, our ‘gods’ don’t look like gods. But they’re still there. Science and technology, money, a charismatic leader, material possessions, an expensive car, success and achievement, health, beauty, recognition are all things which – for some people – are ‘gods.’ They give them time and money; put their trust in them; approach them with almost religious veneration.

Today we move from Isaiah to Jeremiah. By number of words Jeremiah is the longest book in the Bible. If you took all of Paul’s letters, from Romans to Philemon, you would only just have more words than Jeremiah. Jeremiah had the unenviable task of prophesying Jerusalem’s destruction not long before it happened. The answer to ‘Why God judged?’ is unmistakable in Jeremiah. God tells Jeremiah at the beginning, and he tells him consistently all the way through.

In Jeremiah chapter 1 God calls Jeremiah to be a prophet and he tells him why he is calling him to that task:

And I will declare my judgements against them, for all their evil in forsaking me. They have made offerings to other gods and worshipped the works of their own hands (1:16).

This is the only charge God mentions when he calls Jeremiah. Without doubt there was injustice and shedding of innocent blood in Jerusalem. People even sacrificed their own children. But this is the charge God consistently makes, all through Jeremiah. Let’s have one more example:

And when you tell this people all these words, and they say to you, ‘Why has the Lord pronounced all this great evil against us? What is our iniquity? What is the sin that we have committed against the Lord our God?’ then you shall say to them: ‘Because your fathers have forsaken me, declares the Lord, and have gone after other gods and have served and worshipped them, and have forsaken me and have not kept my law...’ 16:10-11.

Look at 5:19 and 22:8-9 if you want other examples – and there are plenty more. The people of Jeremiah’s day seem surprised, shocked even! Surely, they had not been guilty of terrible sins? But it was not necessary for them to be guilty of crimes against humanity for God’s judgement to fall on them.

The sins that brought God’s wrath on his people in 587 or 586 B.C. are not very different to the sins we see in the world today. By and large, people have abandoned God and turned to other gods. If such sins were sufficient for God’s judgement to fall on the Israelites of Jeremiah’s day, we should assume they are sufficient for God’s judgement to fall on the world today.

Poor old Jeremiah. It wasn’t a nice message to give. But initially, there was a way out for the people of Jeremiah’s day. It was repentance.

Have a good day!

Simon

Reflection #26 – Thursday 23rd April 2020

Three difficult questions 8/50

A three-minute read

Ten days ago, I mentioned that I would include a few Reflections on notable events in Christian history, mainly to give us a bit of variety. Today we’re going to have the first of those. The event is the siege of Jerusalem.

In 66 A.D. a Roman prefect attempted to seize money from the temple. The Jews revolted. The Romans acted to suppress the revolt but the Jews ambushed and defeated a Roman expeditionary force, killing 6,000 Roman soldiers. In 70 A.D. Titus brought 60,000 soldiers to Jerusalem and laid siege to it. They built a five-mile long barricade around Jerusalem. Many Jews fled to escape the city but the Romans crucified them to intimidate the population. According to one account they crucified up to 500 people a day. As the siege continued those inside the city carried the dead outside. The Romans appointed someone to count the number: it was 115,880.

Eventually the Romans built an earth ramp up to the top of the walls and used battering rams to break down the walls, and took the city. They brought nearly 100,000 prisoners back to Rome and paraded them through the streets in a procession. In AD 82 they built a massive arch to honour Titus for his conquests. It still exists. It has a nice carving on it of Romans soldiers carrying away the temple lampstand.

Jesus foretold this, and he made it clear that it would be an act of judgement by God, and although the apparent reason Rome attacked Jerusalem was Jewish rebellion, the real reason was that the Jews had put God’s son to death (see Luke 19:41-44 and Matthew

21:33-41).

But in this story of awful judgement, there is something we can take encouragement from. We can find it in Luke 21:20-22:

But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, for these are days of vengeance, to fulfil all that is written.

Jesus' instructions are clear – and the early Christians followed them! An early Christian scholar called Eusebius tells us that the entire Jerusalem church left Jerusalem before the siege started and moved to a town called Pella, and so did not suffer the fate that befell Jerusalem.

But let's read on a little. In 21:24 Jesus says, 'Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.'

After the Romans took Jerusalem it was controlled by Romans, Persians, Byzantines, Arabs, Crusaders, Tatars, Ottoman Turks and finally, us – the British! But nearly 2000 years of trampling by Gentiles was about to stop. In 1948 Israel was established as a state. Israel took Jerusalem later that year. It captured the temple mount in 1967, and in December 2017 President Trump recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. It's exciting!

Recently, we've been hearing the word 'unprecedented' a lot. It means, 'never previously done, known, or experienced.' Maybe that's true. But the siege of Jerusalem shows that Jesus knows what's coming. He isn't taken by surprise. As the song goes:

I do not know what lies ahead,

the way I cannot see;

yet One stands near to be my guide,

He'll show the way to me...

Have a good day!

Simon

Reflection #25 – Wednesday 22nd April 2020

Three difficult questions 7/50

A three-minute read

People often talk about ratios. We have student-teacher ratio, price-earnings ratio, debt-GDP ratio, power-weight ratio and so on. I'd like to propose a 'significance-study ratio' to highlight significant passages of Scripture which we overlook. Today's passage is one of them.

World leaders and scientists have been alerting the world to climate change for two decades. Nicholas Stern's 'Stern Review' was published in 2006. Seven years later, he commented, "I got it wrong on climate change – it's far, far worse". In 2009, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon described climate change as, "the greatest collective challenge we face as a human family." At the Paris Climate Change Conference in 2015 Al Gore said, "After the last 'no' comes a 'yes', and on that 'yes' the future world depends." At the same summit David Attenborough said, "If we don't take action, the collapse of our civilisations and the extinction of much of the natural world is on the horizon."

Climate change (or perhaps, more broadly, the environment) is The Issue of our time. Therefore, The Passage of Scripture which above all speaks on The Issue of our time must surely be significant! That, in my view, is Isaiah 24. Do we study it? No. We're not even aware of it! On 'SermonCentral' there are 1,631 sermons on John 3. 682 sermons on Isaiah 9. Guess how many on Isaiah 24? A mere nine! Its 'significance-study ratio' is sky-high.

Here are some excerpts from Isaiah 24:1-5.

¹ Behold, the Lord will empty the earth and make it desolate,
and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants...

³ The earth shall be utterly empty and utterly plundered;
for the Lord has spoken this word.

⁴ The earth mourns and withers;
the world languishes and withers ...

⁵ The earth lies defiled
under its inhabitants;
for they have transgressed the laws,
violated the statutes,
broken the everlasting covenant.

If only we had time to look at this passage properly! In chapters 13-22 Isaiah foresaw God acting in judgement against surrounding nations, in many cases through actions in the environment. Now his vision becomes global. In these verses Isaiah talks about a global environmental crisis. In verse 3, 'shall be ... plundered' is passive. We don't know who is doing the plundering. But I don't believe God plunders the earth. It can only be mankind.

Many people would say that is true today. US businessman Ray Anderson owned a company which manufactured carpet tiles! In 1994 he sensed what his company was doing. Later he commented, 'I was running a company that was plundering the earth.' Was it an exaggeration to say that his modest-sized company was plundering the earth? It is something we are collectively doing. Pope Francis and Prince William have both used the word 'plunder' to describe what mankind is doing to the world.

Isaiah's prophecy looks very much like the situation in the world today. We could argue as to whether we've reached Isaiah's description: 'The earth shall be *utterly* empty and *utterly* plundered.' Over the past 50 years the world's population has sky-rocketed and we have become greater and greater consumers. We are plundering like never before. But maybe we aren't quite at the point of '*utterly* plundered.'

So, maybe we are at the point at which Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled. If not, we are surely close to it. That is set in a time of God's judgement (see e.g. 24:20-21) and 'End Times' (see e.g. 25:8). That in turn, guides our understanding of coronavirus.

Have a good day!

Simon

Reflection #24 / Tuesday 21st April 2020

Three difficult questions 6/50

A four-minute read

We're looking at three questions. Is coronavirus a judgement from God? Are we living in end times? And, what does the Bible say about COVID-19?

In order to answer them I'm looking at prophecies that were made maybe 2700 years ago. Why?

In order to understand an event, we almost always draw on a number of sources of information. Suppose I'm out walking with my young son. I hear the sound of hooves and a moment later a group of horses gallops past. My son gazes at the horses and asks, 'Is it a race?'

In front of my eyes – in the foreground – I saw horses. If I had only seen horses galloping, I might not have been able to answer. But I also see a background picture. As they passed, I noticed the riders were wearing racing colours. In front of me is a long swathe of turf with white railings on both sides. There are crowds. I hear commentary over the P.A. system. I know we're in Newmarket. All of these items of information are like pieces of a jigsaw that form a picture. Because I see the background picture, I understand the foreground picture. I know that the horses are racing.

To answer our questions in the first paragraph, we also need to see the background picture. We need to understand what judgement from God looks like, what 'End Times' will be like. And to answer questions like these, the prophets is the place to go to! It's a slow process, because we're adding pieces of the jigsaw one at a time.

Today, we're going to add another piece of our jigsaw.

From 1995 to 2012 my wife and I lived in Azerbaijan. A friend – maybe he thought we were a bit cut off – took out a subscription for us for Time Magazine. From about 2000 the magazine gave a lot of coverage to global warming and climate change. It made me think.

In Scripture I understood that God had given mankind responsibility for looking after creation. It was almost the only task God gave to Adam! But I gradually saw that there was another thread running through Scripture. Verses such as these sensitised me to the theme:

Therefore the showers have been withheld, and the spring rain has not come (Jeremiah 3:3)

I also withheld the rain from you when there were yet three months to the harvest (Amos 4:7).

Wikipedia tells us 'There is currently a strong scientific consensus that the Earth is warming and that this warming is mainly caused by human activities.' I wouldn't disagree. But there can be more than one cause for a thing! Verses such as the two above show us that *God* acts through the environment.

In yesterday's Reflection I started to look at Isaiah 13-22 and Isaiah's oracles (or burdens) regarding 11 neighbouring nations. But I didn't have time to make my third point. My third point is that in most of the cases where God judges these nations, part of God's action is action in the environment. We noted two examples yesterday. In Assyria trees would largely disappear, and in Egypt the Nile would dry up. We find many more examples in these chapters. Speaking of Babylon, Isaiah says, 'Behold, the day of the Lord comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, *to make the land a desolation*' (13:9). There are similar prophecies related to Israel (land is scorched), Damascus (the harvest will flee away), Moab (the grass is withered, the vegetation fails, the greenery is no more), Philistia (famine).

The world is currently experiencing the greatest environmental problems since the flood. From a Wikipedia perspective, mankind has caused most of them. But the Bible shows that where there is rebellion against God, environmental problems follow. And when God acts in judgement, environmental problems are usually part of the package.

We cannot say for certain that our present environmental problems are a sign of God's judgement. But we can say that they are consistent with the way God acts in judgement. It's another piece of the jigsaw. If we see more things that are consistent with God's judgement, then we are likely to take the view that the world is under God's judgement. That in turn will help us with our foreground picture, in which we gaze at coronavirus and ask, 'Is God behind it?'

Have a good day!

Simon

Reflection #23 / Monday 20th April 2020

Three difficult questions 5/50

A four-minute read

I apologise that today's Reflection is slightly longer than usual.

In chapters 13-23 Isaiah pronounces a series of 'oracles' regarding eleven neighbouring nations. This part of Isaiah is often referred to as 'the oracles against the nations.' But Isaiah doesn't introduce his oracles as 'against'; he uses the phrase 'an oracle concerning...'. Oracles don't have to be curses or condemnation. Balaam blessed Israel in his oracles. And the word 'oracle' may not help us. What is an oracle, exactly?! Many versions of the Bible use the word 'burden' instead of 'oracle'. The word translated 'oracle' is the word that the Bible uses for burdens that camels, mules or people carry. Isaiah is expressing a burden he feels.

These chapters are important for at least three reasons.

First, although the primary purpose of these oracles isn't to pass judgement, Isaiah makes a number of comments which reveal why these things will happen. Isaiah mentions some things we would see as terrible sins – such as Babylon's oppression and cruelty. But the most frequent reason Isaiah gives for the events he foresees is human arrogance and pride. So, he says:

The Lord of hosts has purposed it,

to defile the pompous pride of all glory,

to dishonour all the honoured of the earth (23:9).

We may imagine that God only gets angry at terrible atrocities: the holocaust, the Nanjing massacre, the behaviour of Russian soldiers in Berlin in 1945, the carpet bombing of Cambodia, 'crimes against humanity' in Rwanda and Yugoslavia, the atrocities

perpetrated by ISIL. I am certain that God is absolutely furious at such things. We may feel that arrogance and pride are simply not in the same league. But here, these are the things Isaiah speaks of most frequently as the causes for what he foresees.

A second reason these oracles are important is that Isaiah tells us what he foresees. Some things have been fulfilled. Speaking of *Assyria*, i.e. modern-day Iraq, Isaiah writes, 'The glory of his forest and of his fruitful land the Lord will destroy ... The remnant of the trees of his forest will be so few that a child can write them down' (10:18-19). We know from news coverage of the Iraq war what Iraq looks like now. It didn't use to be that way. It was once well-forested. The hanging gardens of Babylon were one of the seven wonders of the ancient world and there were also world-famous hanging gardens in Nineveh. Both places are now in treeless, desolate plains. Isaiah foresees that *Babylon* would become uninhabited, a home for owls, jackals and desert creatures (13:8-9, 20-22). That has been the case for millennia. The fact that these prophecies have come to pass builds our confidence in Isaiah.

Some other things Isaiah foresaw haven't yet come to pass. Speaking of *Syria*, Isaiah writes, 'Behold, Damascus will cease to be a city and will become a heap of ruins' (17:1). Damascus is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, but it has never been destroyed. The conflict between Syrian forces and IS resulted in massive destruction (Google 'Damascus drone video'). Six months ago, Damascus was named the world's least liveable city. And yet today, life is returning to normal. It hasn't ceased to be a city.

Speaking of *Egypt*, Isaiah writes, 'The waters of the river (i.e. the Nile) will dry up and the riverbed will be parched and dry' (19:5-7). Such a thing would probably have been unimaginable even twenty or thirty years ago, but it is clearly happening now (Google 'Nile drying up').

Should we take such events – as and when they happen – as indicative of 'End Times'? Immediately following the prophecies concerning Damascus and the Nile Isaiah makes prophecies which seem to me to relate to 'End Times' (see 17:7-8 and the five 'In that day' prophecies in the second half of chapter 19). So, I would say, 'I think so'. But the two commentators I've looked at are irritatingly non-committal.

For our third reason as to why these chapters are so important, we will have to wait to tomorrow.

Have a good day!

Simon

Reflection #22 / Friday 17th April 2020

Three difficult questions 4/50

A three-minute read

At last, we're looking at the prophets! We're starting with the 'prince of the prophets', Isaiah. We'll have four Reflections in Isaiah. In the first three we'll look at examples of God's judgements: against Israel in Isaiah 1; against 'the nations', in chapters 13-23; and against the whole earth – an 'End Time' prophecy – in chapter 24. In the fourth Reflection we'll look at Isaiah's vision of 'new heavens and a new earth' in chapter 65.

So, today, we're in Isaiah 1. Yesterday I quoted 1:2:

Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth;
for the Lord has spoken:
"Children have I reared and brought up,
but they have rebelled against me."

This is an arraignment. First, God summons the heavens and earth as his witnesses. Next, the indictment: 'they have rebelled against me.' Now God gives evidence from three areas. They concern Israel's national, religious and social life.

First, as a nation, Israel was deeply unhealthy (v.6):

From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it ... Your country lies desolate ...

It's intriguing that God cites this lack of health as evidence that Israel had been rebellious. The implication is that if Israel had not been rebellious then it wouldn't be in such a state.

The second piece of evidence was that Jewish religion had become a sham (v.11-14):

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? ... Bring no more vain offerings ... Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates.

The third piece of evidence was the many social vices (v.21-26):

How the faithful city has become a whore, she who was full of justice! Righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers ... Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts.

Israel is guilty, but is that the end? Thankfully, it isn't. God says what he will do (v.25-28):

I will turn my hand against you and will smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy. And I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counsellors as at the beginning. Afterwards you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city ... But rebels and sinners shall be broken together, and those who forsake the Lord shall be consumed.

Yesterday I wrote that Christians today may be unclear how and why God judges, or even if God judges at all! Isaiah 1 gets us off to a good start. Does God judge? Yes, he judges! Parents judge. Teachers judge. Law courts judge. God is God. He is the ultimate boss. He judges. Why does he judge? Here, he judges because his people have rebelled against him. This rebellion was evident in the national, religious and social spheres at the time of Isaiah. And I think it's evident today.

Have a good day!

Simon

PS, from now on, 'Reflections' will be weekdays only. So, the next one will be on Monday. Also, if you are not presently getting 'Reflections' by email but would like to, please email me and I'll add you to the list.

Reflection #21 / Thursday 16th April 2020

Three difficult questions 3/50

A three-minute read

From tomorrow until about mid-May we'll be looking at some passages in the Old Testament prophets. I would love to dive straight in, but I feel that some sort of introduction is in order.

First, the Old Testament prophets take up more of the Bible than the whole of the New Testament! We believe that God is the ultimate author of Scripture, and he's very smart. We may therefore assume he gives coverage to different subjects according to how important they are. In that case, the subject matter of the prophets must be important!

Second, by and large Christians don't give much attention to this part of the Bible. There is a website called 'SermonCentral'. It's a source of sermons, but it also makes it possible to see how many sermons have been preached on a particular book or chapter of the Bible. I took a look at how many sermons are preached on the Old Testament prophets. Probably ten times fewer sermons are preached per chapter on the prophets as are preached on the New Testament. I accept that some parts of Scripture are more important than others, but the difference is too great. We are neglecting this part of Scripture. As a result, we will be unclear on how and why God judges, or even if God judges at all!

Third, the Old Testament prophets' major theme is God's judgement, and within that, their major focus is God's judgement on his people who had progressively abandoned him from the time of Solomon onwards. Just to give you a sense of this, Isaiah, the prince of prophets, starts like this. Here is Isaiah 1:2.

Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth;

for the Lord has spoken:

“Children have I reared and brought up,

but they have rebelled against me.”

God’s judgement culminates in the overthrow of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 or 586 BC. This was followed by the exile of a large proportion of the population.

‘But 587 B.C. was a long time ago!’ you’re thinking. ‘How can that be relevant today?’

The Old Testament story contains multiple ‘pictures’ of God’s greater story of salvation. ‘Picture’ is perhaps not the best word, because it suggests something insubstantial. Some people use the word ‘paradigm’. Or think of a pattern or model or example and you get the idea.

God calls Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. God then holds back Abraham’s hand, but it’s a pattern of how a loving father would ultimately give *his* only beloved son. The Israelites daubed lamb’s blood on their doorposts and the angel of death ‘passed over’ their homes. That is a pattern of Christ’s blood which propitiates God’s wrath. In the Exodus, God took his people to a promised land. That is a pattern of how God delivers his people from slavery to sin to bring them to a heavenly country. The great event almost at the end of the Old Testament story is God’s judgement on his apostate people through Babylon, followed by his judgement on Babylon and the return of a purified remnant to Jerusalem. That, in my view, is a pattern of what is to come. In Revelation, John describes a great power which persecutes God’s people and which God later overthrows – and he names it ‘Babylon’.

We need to grasp the pattern in order that we can then recognize the reality. To understand how, why, and if God’s judgement will come in our day, we need to understand how, why, and if God’s judgement came on God’s people and the surrounding nations in the 6th century BC.

Hence, we need to look at the prophets. Tomorrow, we start!

Have a good day!

Simon

Reflection #20 / Wednesday 15th April 2020

Three difficult questions 2/50

A three-minute read

*Before him went pestilence,
and plague followed at his heels* – Habakkuk 3:5, speaking of God

We're looking at three questions. Is coronavirus a judgement from God? Are we living in end times? And, what does the Bible say about COVID-19? These are hard questions!

Today I will think about the question, could or would God send a virus? Answering that won't answer our three hard questions, but it's a step in the right direction. If we were to answer, 'No, God couldn't or wouldn't send a virus', then we need go no further. I prefer easy questions to hard ones, and this, I'm happy to say, is an easy one. God could and would send a plague or pestilence.

In medicine plague is a specific disease in the same way as cholera or diphtheria are specific diseases. The 'Black Death' of 1347 was bubonic plague. Modern English usage of the word 'plague' is a bit broader and it means 'an infectious disease which spreads rapidly and has a high mortality rate'. It doesn't only apply to diseases affecting humans. There is cattle plague and duck plague. Biblical usage of the word follows the modern English usage – a plague can affect humans or animals. Very occasionally, its usage is wider still, for example a plague of frogs. It is there clear that the Bible would consider coronavirus as a plague or pestilence, and a pestilence is one of three, or possibly four, standard ways in which God judges.

The verse which I think indicates this most clearly is Ezekiel 14:21:

For thus says the Lord God: How much more when I send upon Jerusalem my four disastrous acts of judgement, *sword, famine, wild beasts, and pestilence*, to cut off from it man and beast!

There is no scope for misunderstanding that! Pestilence is one of God's 'four disastrous acts of judgement'. We find the same set in Revelation. Here is 6:7-8:

When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" And I looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they were given authority over a quarter of the earth, to kill with *sword* and with *famine* and with *pestilence* and by *wild beasts* of the earth.

The fact that the same four kinds of judgement appears here shows that God is consistent – as if we need to be told that! These are God's standard kinds of judgement.

If we were in the mood to be picky, we could observe that other passages in the Bible speak of three, not four, main judgements. Jeremiah repeatedly (17 times to be precise!) refers to three judgements: sword, famine and pestilence. For example:

And I will send sword, famine, and pestilence upon them... (24:10)

But apart from the fact that Jeremiah has omitted 'wild beasts' they are the same as Ezekiel's four. Jesus' grouping generally fits with Jeremiah's. He says:

And when you hear of wars and tumults [*sword*] ... Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom

[again sword]

. There will be great earthquakes, and in various places *famines* and *pestilences*... (Luke 21:9-11).

But there is no need to be picky. The main point is perfectly clear. Pestilence is one of three or four 'standard' kinds of judgement which God uses. So, God could, and would – if the need arose, send coronavirus. That does not mean that God *is* behind coronavirus. That is a much more difficult question.

Have a good day!

Simon

Reflection #19 / Tuesday 14th April 2020

Three difficult questions 1/50

A three-minute read

We're looking at three questions. Is coronavirus a judgement from God? Are we living in end times? And, what does the Bible say about COVID-19? Today we'll look at some general principles about how God responds to a situation he doesn't like.

1 Kings 6:1 tells us that 'In the four hundred and eightieth year after the people of Israel came out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign ... he began to build the house of the Lord.' This verse allows us to estimate the date of the Exodus to around 1445 or 1446 BC. That year, God rescued the Israelites from slavery, but to do so he brought judgement on the Egyptians. A great year for the Israelites, but not such a great year for the Egyptians.

On Sunday the Guardian ran an article with the headline, 'US's global reputation hits rock-bottom over Trump's coronavirus response'. The same day, Bill Gates was interviewed by the BBC. He said, 'Few countries will get an A-grade for what that scrambling looked like' (talking about their response to coronavirus).

Leaders have to respond to changing situations. Some do well, some don't do so well. God also responds to what he sees happening in the world. He saw that his people – the Israelites – were enslaved and suffering. How did he respond?

In Azerbaijan I taught English for a time. When you teach English to non-native speakers it's often useful to teach 'collocations.' That means, words that are often found as pairs. For example, 'fast food' is a collocation, so is 'pay attention'. I wondered what collocations there are for 'response'. The seven adjectives that are most often paired with 'response' are 'immune', 'emotional', 'positive', 'appropriate', 'correct', 'immediate', and 'quick'.

Are these adjectives characteristic of God's response to the Israelites' situation in Egypt?

What about emotional? God told Moses, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings ... I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them." God is not unfeeling, like a chess computer!

What about appropriate? Have you ever wondered why there were 10 plagues? God was giving the Egyptians every chance to comply with what he was demanding.

What about immediate and quick? Hmm, there's an interesting one! Doesn't God's response seem rather slow? The Israelites were obviously slaves for some time. In fact, in Genesis 15:13 God tells Abraham that his descendants would be 'sojourners in a land that is not theirs and ... will be afflicted for four hundred years.' Why so slow, God? This morning Priscilla and I read the first half of Psalm 103. Verse 10 says, 'He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities'. God doesn't rush to execute judgement. It isn't a nice thing to do.

God responds to what he sees happening in the world. He judges. He has to. It isn't my job to judge God's response. But perhaps it's OK for me to say: 'God, I for one am very happy with the way you responded in that situation.'

Have a good day!

Simon

Reflection #18 / Monday 13th April 2020

Does God have a purpose in coronavirus? How to approach the question

A three-minute read

In my second Reflection I wrote: "Some Christians are asking why we're experiencing this pandemic. Is coronavirus a judgement from God? Are we living in end times?"

In my fifth Reflection I noted that the Daily Express had asked another question: "What does the Bible say about COVID-19?" I promised to tackle that question after Easter.

So, we have three questions to consider. Easter Sunday has passed, and it's time to look at them. But, first, we need to consider how we should even approach these questions.

§

In 1 Peter 1:10-11, Peter tells us that the prophets who "prophesied about the grace that was to be yours *searched and enquired carefully*, enquiring what person or time *the Spirit of Christ* in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories."

The prophets “searched and enquired carefully”. We can easily skip over these words. But the commentators draw our attention to how emphatic they are. One commentator, McKnight, tells us: “To emphasize the diligence and intensity of the ancient prophets, Peter uses two terms, ‘searched intently and with the greatest care’ ... The two Greek words are [such and such], the first signifying ‘seeking out and searching’, the second ‘inquiring carefully’ (as when, for instance, invading military personnel inquire from house to house)” – and he gives an example of that from Greek literature.

These ancient prophets searched for revelation with the greatest care. But how did they search? Peter mentions that “the Spirit of Christ” indicated things to them. But clearly prophets also built on the insights of other prophets. This is clearly the case in Revelation. Revelation is the great book of prophecy in the New Testament. John, who wrote it, was led by the Holy Spirit; he says so specifically. But clearly, he had an exceptional knowledge of Old Testament prophecy. Revelation quotes more from the Old Testament than any other book in the New Testament. It has more than twice as many quotes as Matthew, which is in second place. It is soaked in Scripture.

I believe our approach to our three questions should be to soak ourselves in relevant Scripture, and as we are doing that, inquire of God and pray that God will give us insight. At present, I have a completely open mind. I don’t know where this inquiry will lead.

§

My broad plan is to look at passages of Scripture that relate to judgement or ‘End Times’, about 18 from the Old Testament, about 8 from the New Testament (but not from Revelation), and about 18 from Revelation. That makes 44. To add a little variety, I’m going to include a few Reflections on notable events in Christian history, such as the Crusades or Joan of Arc and/or on particular subjects, such as the ‘Second Death’. That will bring the total to 50 Reflections. From tomorrow, Reflections will change from being daily to being on weekdays only. So, this should take us 10 weeks. I hope this will be of interest, but as always, feel free to drop me an email if you don’t want to receive them.

Have a good day!

Simon

Reflection #17 / Sunday 12th April 2020

A reflection on Easter

A three-minute read

Who is speaking?

Person A: ‘One can’t believe impossible things.’

Person B: 'I daresay you haven't had much practice. When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.'

Did you get it? Person A is Alice and Person B is the queen, in Alice in Wonderland.

Now try this.

Person A: 'Christ is risen! Alleluia!'

Person B: 'That's impossible!'

Did you say Person A is a Christian? In 2017 the BBC carried out a survey. They found that 'a quarter of people who describe themselves as Christians in Great Britain do not believe in the resurrection of Jesus.' Wow! Remarkably, the survey also found that many people of no faith *do* believe the Easter story!

There are many reasons for believing that the resurrection did happen. Today I thought I'd look at one piece of evidence in John's gospel. I don't think it's the most persuasive evidence, but it's the first piece of evidence that John saw. Here's your chance to be Sherlock Holmes. Consider the evidence and try to work out what had happened.

Mary Magdalene visits the tomb where Jesus' body was laid. She comes back and tells the disciples, 'they have taken the Lord'. Peter and John go to the tomb. When they arrive, it's as Mary has said. There isn't a body. But the tomb isn't entirely empty. John sees some linen cloths that had been used to wrap Jesus:

And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself (John 20:5-7).

OK, Sherlock, what would you conclude?

Could Mary be right? Could someone have taken Jesus' body? Would someone unwrap his body before taking it? No, they wouldn't, so that's not the explanation.

Perhaps Jesus didn't really die on the cross? But would someone staggering around half-conscious fold up his face cloth? Unlikely!

What about the linen cloths Jesus was wrapped in? Did Jesus take them off himself? In that case, wouldn't they be in a pile somewhere? They are lying (the word means 'lie outstretched'). So, that doesn't seem right either.

And what about the face cloth? Jesus is a nice tidy guy, the kind of person who pushes his chair in after a meal, clears the crumbs off the table, rolls up his napkin and puts it in the napkin ring. Seems like the kind of thing he might do.

John has figured it out. So, he writes, 'Then the other disciple [he means himself], who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed.'

Christ was risen! For John, that changed everything. And it does for us too!

Have a good day!

Simon 😊

Reflection #16 / Saturday 11th April 2020

A reflection on Easter

A three-minute read

He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.

He descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again.

This is part of the 'Apostles' Creed', which dates back to around the 5th century AD. It says, 'He descended to the dead'. Huh? Yesterday we remembered that Jesus died on the cross. Joseph of Arimathea took his body down and placed it in his tomb. There it lies. Jesus is dead. But now he's got into some sort of ethereal lift and is heading down to the dead? What's going on? Before going too far, let's note that the Apostles' Creed is not the Bible. It might not be correct.

However, there is one intriguing passage of Scripture which hints that *maybe* something was going on! Here is a part of it. It's 1 Peter 3:18-19.

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed [or 'preached'] to the spirits in prison...

MAIN MENU

Martin Luther thought this was the most obscure passage in the New Testament. A recent commentator (McKnight) wrote: 'Few passages have so many themes and different ideas intertwined. It is no wonder that commentators have shaken their heads in despair!' Should I even mention it? If I avoided passages of Scripture that I didn't fully understand I'd never speak on anything!

There are many difficult questions. When did this happen? Where did Jesus go? Who were the spirits in prison? There are many theories. Calvin, who we think generally had his head screwed on, thought that it meant that while Jesus was dead his spirit

descended into a place of the dead, and that through his spirit, he preached there. 'No, no', others say. 'Death is the end. No second chances!' We can't possibly engage in the argument here!

A great principle when we're confronted by a difficult passage is to look for the things we *can* understand and get benefit from. Our troublesome passage starts with the word 'For'. In verses 18-22 Peter is illustrating a point he's made in the previous section. His point is very plain in verse 14: '...even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed.' 18-22 illustrate this point. Jesus suffered (for righteousness' sake, mustn't forget that), but God vindicated him (see v.22 – he is now at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him). Peter decides to include a brief explanation for why Jesus suffered, 'that he might bring us to God'. It's hard to find a much better reason to suffer! And then – and this is the part I really like – 'Christ ... made alive in the spirit ... went and preached.' I don't know when, where, or to whom! Maybe it was within hours of being laid in the grave. Maybe it was to those who died in the time of Noah (see v.20). We don't know. But it seems that having won the victory over the grave, the first thing Jesus wanted to do was to preach to the poor 'spirits in prison'. And if Christ was so keen to proclaim the news of his victory over death, then I think we should be keen to do it too.

Have a good day!

Simon

Reflection #15 / Friday 10th April 2020, Good Friday

A reflection on Easter

A three-minute read

'Were you there when they crucified my Lord?'

Yesterday morning I listened to the Italian prime minister, Giuseppe Conte, being interviewed. He said that Europe's leaders were 'facing an appointment with history'. To be sure, we're in a historic time. But *today* we remember *the most historic* day in history, the day when Jesus – the Son of God – died. 'Were you there?' is a very good question. Jesus met a lot of people that Friday. We are probably very like one of them, so, in a sense, we were there. Few of the people Jesus met covered themselves with glory. So, who did Jesus meet?

A group of priests, elders and scribes. They condemned Jesus to death. *Simon Peter.* He denied Jesus three times. *Herod.* He ridiculed Jesus. *Pilate.* He told the Jewish leaders three times, 'I have found in him no guilt deserving death'. But eventually he caved in. 'I am innocent of this man's blood', he said, and then gave Jesus up to be crucified! But saying you are innocent doesn't make you innocent! *A crowd around Pilate.* They clamoured for Jesus to be crucified. 'His blood be on us and on our

children!' they shouted out. *Ordinary Jerusalem residents*. They knew who Jesus was – a good man, at least. They knew what was happening. Some watched and wailed as Jesus was going to the cross. But they did nothing. *A Roman centurion*. He saw how Jesus died and said, 'Surely this man was the Son of God!' *A man on a cross next to Jesus*. He told the man on the third cross: 'We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'

As Christians we are in danger of acting like Simon Peter. We're happy to follow Jesus most of the time. But when *he's* on a cross, and declaring that you're a follower is likely to result in *you* ending up on one too, well, then it's another matter. In fact, the only person who clearly aligned himself with Jesus that day was already on a cross!

However, the group in this story which troubles me most are the ordinary Jerusalem residents. Giuseppe Conte told the interviewer, 'If we do not seize the opportunity to put new life into the European project, the risk of failure is real.' He was urging action. It was the same for the ordinary Jerusalem residents in Jesus' day. Action was required. By not acting, they went along with the judgement of their leaders.

Jesus anticipated that the judgement the people of Jerusalem would pass on him would bring judgement on them. Approaching Jerusalem before his crucifixion, he said, 'The days will come upon you ... when your enemies will ... tear you down to the ground because you did not know the time of your visitation.' The Parable of the Tenants is a similar warning. The tenants kill the son. 'What will the owner of the vineyard do?' Jesus asks. 'He will come and destroy the tenants.'

It came to pass. In AD 70 the Roman army destroyed Jerusalem. The historian Josephus wrote that the city 'was so thoroughly razed to the ground by those that demolished it ... that nothing was left that could ever persuade visitors that it had once been a place of habitation.' For ordinary Jerusalem residents, not acting was not a 'Get Out of Jail Free' card. Confronted with Jesus on a cross, we have to make our minds up.

Have a good day!

Simon

Reflection #14 / Thursday 9th April 2020, Maundy Thursday

A reflection on Easter

A three-minute read

Jesus ... poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet (John 13:3-5).

Today is Maundy Thursday. On the evening of the first 'Maundy Thursday' Jesus sat down with his disciples for supper. He had a lot to tell them. But in all his teaching – which occupies about five chapters in John's gospel – there was just one thing which Jesus actually commanded, using the word 'commandment'. He said, 'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. *Just as I have loved you*, you also should love one another'.

What's the connection between foot-washing and love? As far as we know this is the only time when Jesus washed his disciples' feet. If the ultimate expression of love is literally washing people's feet then Jesus would have been doing it the whole time. Clearly, there's a bigger picture. Do you remember Peter telling Jesus, 'You shall never wash my feet'? Jesus replied, 'Unless I wash you, you have no part with me'. This has nothing to do with Peter's feet being literally clean or dirty! Jesus' action in physically washing his disciples' feet was a picture of his humble, sacrificial service on the cross: an action by which he made us clean by taking our dirt onto himself.

Jesus wanted his sacrificial service to be an example to us. He told his disciples, 'You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord', and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet' (13:14).

About five years ago, Priscilla and I went to a Christian retreat centre in Devon called Lee Abbey. While we were there, we met a young Ukrainian lady called Irina. She casually mentioned that she had two Master's degrees. But at Lee Abbey she was doing kitchen work and working with children. She might have thought that was beneath her but she didn't. Then she mentioned that her family lived in the east-central part of Ukraine. People fleeing fighting further east were arriving in their area and coming along to church. The pastor told the church: 'There are several new families here – they need somewhere to stay' (dot, dot, dot!). So, the congregation helped. Irina's story is a great example of love that calls for humility and sacrifice.

Why should we love like this? One reason relates to the past: Jesus loved us this way.

But there's another reason to love, and this relates to the future. John Stott wrote, 'Jesus rose from supper just as he had risen from his heavenly throne. He laid aside his garments just as he had laid aside his glory and emptied himself of it. He girded himself with a towel, a badge of servitude, just as in the incarnation he had taken the form of a servant. He washed and wiped just as he had gone to the cross to secure the washing away of our sins. Then he put his garment on and resumed his feast, just as he returns to his heavenly glory and sat down at the Father's right hand.'

The other reason to love is that we won't be washing forever! The day will come when we join Jesus at his feast, his banquet.

Have a good day!

Simon

Reflection #13 / Wednesday 8th April 2020

A reflection on Easter

A two-minute read

Last year, Muhammad was the most popular boys' name in the UK. Surprised? But Judas was not in the 'Top 100 Boys' Names'. You're not surprised. We don't call boys 'Judas'. There's a very simple reason for that: a certain Judas in the Bible. (In Poldark, Demelza frequently says 'Judas', especially to Jud. But that isn't because Jud was short for Judas – Jud is almost always short for Judson. It was because historically 'Judas (Priest)' was used as a swear word.)

We very rarely hear sermons about Judas. Maybe we're embarrassed by him. Maybe we don't think his story is exactly edifying. But he's part of the Easter story, and there is something we can learn from him.

Although preachers tend to skip over Judas, Christian scholars have shown some interest in him. The accounts of how he died don't seem to quite line up, and that's puzzling. And there was a definite flurry of excitement about 15 years ago. There are at least a dozen 'gospels' which the early church rejected and did not include as part of the Bible. One such gospel, the 'Gospel of Judas', was rediscovered in Egypt in 1970. It was written in Coptic, the ancient language of Egypt, but translated into English in 2006. It was probably written by Gnostic Christians, and consists of conversations between Jesus and Judas Iscariot – imaginary, I assume! It presents Judas in a rather good light. One writer, Marvin Meyer, noted: 'Judas Iscariot is presented as a thoroughly positive figure ... a role model for all those who wish to be disciples of Jesus.' One interpreter even sees Judas as a hero who cooperates with divine plans to hand over Jesus! Even before the 'Gospel of Judas' was published in English some Christian scholars had been trying to recast Judas Iscariot in a more positive light. The publication of this 'gospel' generated more discussion. The well-known theologian, Tom Wright, weighed in with a book about it.

So, what do we think? Have we got Judas wrong? Is he not as bad as we thought? Let's look at Jesus' assessment. He asked, 'Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!' (John 6:70). He commented, 'It would be better for him if he had not been born' (Matthew 26:24). Jesus' assessment is clear. There is nothing positive here.

On the face of it, Judas betrayed Jesus for money – 30 pieces of silver to be precise. The amount is a fulfilment of a prophecy in Zechariah (Zechariah 11:12-13). It seems pretty clear that Zechariah regarded the amount as an insult.

What can we take away from this? First, contrary to what the ancient Gnostics believed and what some Christians today believe, what we do matters. We are responsible for what we do, and there is a consequence. Second, Judas followed Jesus for three years.

If you'd asked him, 'Are you a disciple of Jesus?' he'd have said 'Yes, of course!' I don't suppose he would have imagined for a moment that he would ever betray Jesus. The worm of greed was well hidden, perhaps even from him. There's a warning in this story, that we need to watch our hearts.

Have a good day!

Simon

Reflection #12 / Tuesday 7th April 2020

A reflection on Easter

A three-minute read

Today we come to one of the most important passages in the whole Bible, Isaiah 52:13-53:12. This passage tells us why Jesus had to die. Certainly, that is a very important subject! But the reason *this* passage is so important is that it's almost the only passage of Scripture *in the Old Testament* that tells us that a man would be a sacrificial lamb and take on himself the sin of the world.

Why is that important? Let's suppose Isaiah had never written this prophecy. Jesus was born, lived and died. Afterwards people suggest what his death had accomplished. They come up with different theories. We'd probably just shrug our shoulders. We'd say, 'Maybe you're right, maybe you're not'. As I said two days ago, it's relatively easy to fit a theory to the facts once we know the facts. But what if someone writes down beforehand exactly what will happen and then it happens? Almost certainly it means that the person who wrote it down had the correct explanation. That's why this passage in Isaiah is so important. It explains why Jesus had to die 700 or so years before he was even born!

This passage is sometimes called 'the fourth servant song'. Back in 1892, a German theologian called Bernhard Duhm was writing a commentary on Isaiah. He noticed that there were four poems towards the end of Isaiah on the subject of God's servant. He called them the servant songs and the name has stuck. This song is so full of extraordinary prophecy that it would be quite impossible to cover more than a fraction here. Please do read it!

However, we can make a few points! First, 53:5 makes it clear that the servant's suffering was because of our sin: '... he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities ... upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.' Not clear enough? Go on to 53:6: '... and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.'

Second, notice how this servant is suffering. Isaiah talks about griefs, sorrows, stricken, afflicted, wounded, crushed, chastisement, stripes. It's hard to imagine how he could have been more emphatic.

Third, notice that the servant suffers alone. Verse 4: ‘...yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God...’ One commentator wrote, ‘we stood aloof, reckoning that he must have deserved all he suffered’. If we look on to verses 5 and 6 there’s no indication that we’re any help! We’re the cause of his suffering. We’re going astray. I have no doubt that God is utterly distressed at what his servant is going through. But look at verse 6. God is laying our sin on his servant. So, the servant suffers alone; he suffers under our sin and under the Lord’s hand.

But let’s go back to Isaiah’s astounding insight, that a man would be the sacrificial lamb. All through Jewish history God had been steadily introducing the idea of sacrifice. Sacrifice was central to the operation of the temple. It was central in the Feast of Passover and in the Day of Atonement. Often a lamb was sacrificed. But until Isaiah, no prophet that I can think of had had the revelation that a man would be the lamb. But because Isaiah had grasped this, when Jesus came into the world, believing Jews were prepared. John the Baptist saw Jesus and cried out, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’ He understood Isaiah’s prophecy. He understood Jesus’ mission.

The New Testament writers grasped the significance of this prophecy. They quote from Isaiah 53 again and again, and they often say explicitly that they’re quoting Isaiah. Isaiah’s prophecy convinced them that it was God’s plan from ancient times that his servant should suffer and die for us. It wasn’t simply something someone they had dreamed up. And given that it’s God plan, what should we do? Obviously – we should accept it!

Tomorrow, we turn to the New Testament.

Have a good day!

Simon

Reflection #11 / Monday 6th April 2020

A reflection on Easter

A three-minute read

Have you ever watched British Olympic sportsmen and women being interviewed after winning an event? They typically say a number of things. They say, ‘It’s surreal’. They thank their coaches, families and teams. And they say, ‘I executed my plan’.

God and Jesus also had a plan. To say that Jesus ‘executed’ the plan sounds flippant when the plan required Jesus to be executed. But that’s the reality. There was a plan. It required Jesus to be executed. And Jesus executed the plan. The plan would bring victory. But it didn’t look that way to Jesus’ disciples as they watched it unfold. Death on a cross looked like a complete failure, not victory.

It's in the nature of things that a plan has to be drawn up before it's 'implemented'. (Perhaps in this case we shouldn't say 'executed'!) Then we can show that events are all part of the plan.

On the cross Jesus had a very clever way of showing that what was happening was the plan. Almost the last words he uttered on the cross were, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mark 15:34). They sound like words of defeat. But they are not. Jesus took these words from Psalm 22, a psalm of David's. But they are just part of verse 1! We have to see how the Psalm continues. The psalm tells the story of the cross. It's extraordinary what an accurate prophecy it is!

⁷ All who see me mock me ... ⁸ "He trusts in the Lord; let him deliver him; let him rescue him, for he delights in him!" ... they have pierced my hands and feet ... ¹⁸ they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots ...

But at verse 23, the tone changes:

²³ You who fear the Lord, praise him! ... ²⁴ For he has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted ... ³⁰ Posterity shall serve him; it shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation; ³¹ they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn, that he has done it.

What a note to finish on! 'He has done it!' Mission accomplished! The psalm shows us the plan. Although it looks very bleak at the beginning, the end is victory. When Jesus quoted these words from the cross, he gave his disciples a hook to draw them into the rest of the psalm. In effect he was saying, 'Look! It's all going according to plan. See how it finishes!' What an extraordinary, loving, courageous plan! Why was it even necessary?

A long time ago someone explained it to me. 'Here is God, up here', he said, and pointed upwards. 'And here we are.' He pointed to his hand. At this point he took a book and put it on his hand. 'This is our sin. Our sin has separated us from God'. He showed his other hand. 'This is Jesus. There was no sin in him.' He took the book off his first hand and laid it on Jesus. 'On the cross, God laid my sin – and the sin of the whole world – on Jesus. Now, for the first time, Jesus experienced what it's like to be cut off from God. And so, he cries from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"'

Many years have passed and I see nothing wrong with that explanation. On the cross Jesus fulfilled the plan. He bore my sin, clearing the way for me to be in relationship with God again. Thank you, Jesus!

Reflection #10 / Sunday 5th April 2020, Palm Sunday

A reflection on Easter

A three-minute read today!

Yesterday we started to look at a remarkable declaration by Job. It's Job 19:25,26:

I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth. And though worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God.

No one knows who Job was or when he lived. Various references in the book of Job fit with the time of the patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac and so on. So, the setting is very early. But when the book of Job was written is another question!

Job is recognized in the Bible as an outstandingly righteous person. However, he suffered greatly. That flew in the face of the wisdom of the time: suffering is evidence of wickedness! One of Job's so-called friends, Bildad, certainly thought that. The wicked, he tells Job – and he clearly has Job in mind – will be forgotten forever (see e.g. 18:5). No doubt in response to Bildad's unhelpful remarks, Job makes his extraordinary declaration.

Why is it so extraordinary?

(1) Job says, 'I know that *my Redeemer* liveth'. Job recognizes a personal redeemer. Presumably he has a redeemer because he needs one! 'Redeem' means getting something back by paying something, and a redeemer is a person who redeems something or someone. The word 'redeemer' comes in the Bible quite often, almost exclusively in the Old Testament, although Jesus talks about giving his life as a ransom. But most people today don't imagine they need a redeemer. If they believe in God at all they think, God is merciful; he'll just overlook my sins. Or they think, I'm basically righteous. Either way, there's no need for anyone to pay a price, no need for a redeemer. Job, however, knows that he has a redeemer, and I assume he recognizes that it's because he needs one! Great insight!

But as we look deeper, we appreciate Job's insight even more. Job is convinced that he's righteous (see e.g. 27:7). His friends are convinced that he isn't. This may seem very puzzling to Christians today too. Surely, we think, Job *wasn't* righteous: no one is righteous! And yet there is a sense in which God's people *are* righteous. The New Testament refers to believers as 'saints' about 60 times. Job is correct in his belief that he's righteous. That might have led him to imagine that he didn't need a redeemer. It seems paradoxical that he could be righteous and yet need a redeemer, but he is correct on both points.

(2) Job says, 'I know that my Redeemer *liveth* ... and that *He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth.*' This is an extraordinary insight. Job's redeemer (whoever he may be!) was alive in Job's day, but clearly *not standing upon the earth* – since he would stand on the earth 'at the latter day'!! Baffling! Who could be alive, but not on earth? Surely the only possible explanation is that the redeemer is divine, and that this divine redeemer would one day come into our world? Amazing!

(3) And there's more! Job expects a resurrection. He says, 'And though worms destroy this body...' (note that Job doesn't say, 'And though I die' – spot on!) '... yet in my flesh shall I see God.' Job expects his body to physically die and decompose. And yet he believes that in his flesh he will see God. The only possible explanation is that he is expecting a physical resurrection. Another extraordinary insight!

So, did Jennens make a good choice of these verses? Most definitely!

What can we take away? First, Job's remarkable declaration encourages us in our faith. Job knew he had a divine redeemer 1000 years or more before Jesus stood on earth. It's relatively easy to fit a theory to the facts once we know the facts. It's much harder to present the theory *before* the facts are known. When we find later that the facts fit perfectly, we're encouraged that our belief is correct.

Second, Job's declaration is a wonderful statement of our belief. We thank God from the bottom of our hearts that we have a redeemer, Jesus. We thank God that we too will see him in the flesh. I'm sure Job got great comfort from this belief when he was tested. We can take comfort from it too, when times are hard for us.

You might want to listen to 'I know that my Redeemer liveth' on YouTube – it's only about five minutes long – and say 'Amen' in your hearts.

Have a good day.

Simon

Reflection #9 / Saturday 4th April 2020

A reflection on Easter

A two-minute read.

Charles Jennens? Who's he? Born 1700, English landowner.

It was the time of the Enlightenment. Reason reigned supreme and 'revelation', especially revelation from the Bible, was in the doghouse. Jennens, however, loved the Bible. The Bible he knew was the King James Version. It had been published 100 years earlier and had gained acceptance as the standard English Bible. Jennens had a friend. A certain German, later naturalised Brit. Name of Handel. One day, Jennens had a chat with Handel.

'See here', he said. 'I've written something you might put to music.'

'Oh yes?' said Handel.

'It's a collection of Bible verses.'

Handel looked at the first line. 'Comfort ye, comfort ye my people', he read. 'Nice.'

Handel got to work. Two-thirds of the way through he'd finished the Hallelujah chorus. He called out to his servant, 'I did think I did see all Heaven before me, and the great God Himself.' 23 days later, 'Messiah' was complete. Handel had hardly eaten during that time. He commented later, 'Whether I was in the body or out of the body when I wrote it, I know not.'

Part 1 of Messiah covers Jesus' birth; part 2, his death; and part 3, his resurrection. To begin Part 3, Jennens chose two verses from the book of Job, Job 19:25,26:

I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth.
And though worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God.

Was Jennens right to use this declaration by Job to start Part 3 of Messiah? I knew these verses before I came to prepare for this Reflection. But as I've reflected more on them in the last day or two my appreciation for them has really grown. Job's insight is extraordinary, and these two verses are really helpful for our faith. We will see why tomorrow!

Have a good day.

Simon

Reflection #8 / Friday 3rd April 2020

A reflection on Easter

A two-minute read...

Today is our third Easter reflection. Easter is, of course, about Jesus' death and resurrection. In my first Reflection I thought about death. Why do we die? I looked at Genesis 2 and the answer it gives to that, namely, that it's the result of sin. In my second Reflection we looked at a story from the early days of recorded history, the story of Abraham and Isaac. A loving father was about to sacrifice his only son! It's an amazing picture of what God would ultimately do. God anticipated the death of *his* son; he knew it would be necessary. We haven't yet offered an explanation of why it was necessary. We will come to that later. These are, after all, two-minute reflections!

In those long-ago times God also presented mankind with a picture of Jesus' resurrection. The event is Jonah's visit to Nineveh and being swallowed by, in Hebrew, 'dag gadol', a giant fish. This story is one of the predictable tropes which sceptics use to dismiss the Bible, or the Old Testament at least, as unbelievable. 'The Old Testament to me is almost pure fiction', someone once told me – and then asked if I believed Jonah. Many Christian scholars (well, they identify as Christians) think Jonah is 'ahistorical'. That's a nice way of saying, 'not true'. There's a joke about a lecturer in a Bible college

encountering a young, Bible-believing student. 'Do you really believe that Jonah was swallowed by a whale?!' he asks. 'No sir, I don't', the student answers. 'I believe he was swallowed by a great fish, like the Bible says.' Well, Jesus also believed the story of Jonah. He said (Matthew 12:40):

For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

Jesus said, 'just as Jonah was ... in the belly of the great fish'. He didn't say, for example, 'just as in the story of Jonah'. [Hmm ... how do Christians who don't believe the account of Jonah square things up? They believe in Jesus. Jesus believes the account of Jonah. But they don't? There's a difficulty, I think!] But – Jonah is impossible! People cannot be in the belly of a big fish for three days! And that is exactly the point! Which is more impossible? That Jonah could remain in the belly of a big fish for three days and emerge alive, or that Jesus could be dead for three days and be resurrected? In one 'impossible' event – the story of Jonah, God portrayed another 'impossible' event – the resurrection of his son. Was that really impossible? Not for God. Here's what Jesus had to say (Matthew 22:23,29):

The same day Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection ... But Jesus answered them, 'You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.'

Have a good day!

Simon

Reflection #7 / Thursday 2nd April 2020

A reflection on Easter

A two-minute read...

Yesterday we had the first of our Easter reflections. We need to understand why Jesus died on the cross, and to approach that question, we need to understand why anyone dies. From Genesis 2 we saw that when Adam and Eve disobeyed God, the result was death. According to the Bible, the fundamental cause of death is sin.

In Genesis 4, we come to the story of Cain and Abel. Abel makes an offering to God of an animal, and 'the Lord had regard for' his offering. In this way, God starts to show humankind that a sacrifice is needed.

But later in Genesis, God calls for a sacrifice of a completely different order. It is one of the most extraordinary – and difficult – stories in the whole Bible. It's in Genesis 22. Here's how it starts (v.1-2):

After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here am I.' He said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.'

When I was about 21 one of my uncles recommended me a book, *Fear and Trembling*, by the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. The entire book was Kierkegaard's reflection on this event in Abraham's life. Was Abraham right to do what God asked? I remember being totally perplexed by it, and a key phrase of Kierkegaard's – 'the teleological suspension of the ethical' – has stuck in my mind my entire life. In other words, was it acceptable for Abraham to do what was ethically wrong in order to bring about a greater ultimate purpose?

What was going on? What was God up to? With the benefit of hindsight, we see that God was presenting mankind with a picture of exactly what he would have to do. God himself – God the Father – would have to give up *his* only beloved son. But whereas God then told Abraham 'Do not lay your hand on the boy', God gave up his son. Paul made a strong allusion to this event in Abraham's life in his Letter to the Romans. He wrote (8:31,32):

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? *He who did not spare his own Son* but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

God's son – his only son – is, of course, Jesus. God gave him for us not on the wood of a fire but on the wood of the cross. And these verses give us a clue as to why God's action was not unethical. God gave his son *for us*. And Jesus was fully in agreement.

Have a good day!

Simon

Reflection #6 / Wednesday 1st April 2020

A reflection on Easter

A two-minute read...

As promised, I am now switching from reflections on coronavirus to reflections on Easter.

"If you could meet any person in the past and ask just one question, whom would you meet and what question would you ask?" When asked this, Professor Joad, then Professor of Philosophy at London University, and not a Christian, answered: "I would meet Jesus Christ and ask him the most important question in the world, 'did you or did you not rise from the dead?'"

That is how Nicky Gumbel starts his booklet, 'Why Easter?' Hmm!? If you can actually ask Jesus this question doesn't that mean that he *has* risen from the dead? But the question is a good one. We could argue about whether it is the *most* important question, but it's certainly a really important one. If it *is* true that Jesus rose from the dead, well then ... he *is* the Son of God. There *is* life after death. And if those things are true, lots of other things follow on. It's really important to know the answer to this question. But another question which I think is just as important, is why Jesus had to die at all. Over the coming 12 days we'll take a look at how the Bible answers those two questions: 'Did Jesus rise?' and 'Why did Jesus die?'

To answer the question 'Why did Jesus die?' we must first ask the question, 'Why does anyone die?' That may seem like a very foolish question. A scientist will tell you that you die because your cells die. An evolutionist might say we die because once you've got children and grandchildren you are (from an evolutionary point of view) no longer needed! In short, it's obvious why we die. But the Bible gives a very different answer. This is Genesis 2:16-17. God is talking to Adam – Eve isn't around at this stage.

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, 'You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.'

It's the first reference to dying in the Bible. Later in chapter 2 Eve comes on the scene, and it's clear from what follows that she understands God's instruction. It's extraordinary to think that there were two people on earth who, potentially, could have lived for ever. But their state is not secure. God tells them that if they eat from this particular tree, they will die. It doesn't say it's an apple tree, by the way! Surely eating a piece of fruit is not a heinous crime? Was this really a particular tree at all? I don't know! But what *is* clearly significant is that God told Adam *not* to eat from that tree, and he and Eve went ahead anyway. By their action they made it clear that they didn't acknowledge God's authority. God then ejected them from the garden and from his presence – and that, ultimately, would lead to their death.

So, we see in Genesis 2 that sin resulted in separation from God, and that led to Adam and Eve's deaths. In short, sin and death are connected. That is essential to understand if we are to understand why Jesus had to die. Tomorrow, we will look at how God introduces that.

Have a good day!

Simon

Reflection #5 / Tuesday 31st March 2020

A reflection in response to coronavirus

A three-minute read...

We're rapidly approaching Easter, but we're not thinking much about it 😊. That doesn't seem right, so from tomorrow I will switch to reflecting on Easter. But today I will have one more Reflection on coronavirus.

There are many ways to 'see' things, not with our physical eyes, but with the eyes of understanding. Yesterday I reflected on Jesus' sensitivity to different people he met: a leper, someone who was deaf, someone who was blind. Jesus 'saw' each person as an individual and treated each one accordingly. A hard act to follow. But Jesus also 'saw' the big picture. He told a group of Pharisees and Sadducees, 'You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.' Jesus, however, 'saw' what was coming.

This is similar to how we 'see' coronavirus. We 'see' how our family and friends are dealing with it. We 'see' something of the bigger picture in the news: hundreds of thousands of lives at risk, businesses closed, the global economy at a standstill. But is there an even bigger picture to 'see'? Is God behind coronavirus?

Yesterday the Daily Express ran an article with the headline 'What does the Bible say about COVID-19?' They put the article under 'news', but in a sub-category for 'weird'. OK, so the Bible doesn't mention COVID-19. But it mentions plagues and pestilence. It's a perfectly sensible question. On the other side of the Atlantic, the Washington Post ran an article last Friday about a White House adviser who suggested that coronavirus is due to God's wrath. Clearly, some people are wondering: is God behind coronavirus? After Easter, I plan to tackle the question the Daily Express asked. It's a good question! But I'd like to say something brief now.

The Bible consistently says that God blesses the righteous and brings distress to the unrighteous. A famous statement of this principle is in Deuteronomy 28. In most Bibles the first part of the chapter has the heading, 'Blessings for Obedience'. The second part of the chapter has the heading, 'Curses for Disobedience'. The message is simple: obedience brings blessing; disobedience brings curses. Jesus said much the same. Responding to a woman in a crowd who called his mother blessed, Jesus said, 'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!' That's Luke 14:28.

However. There is a big and important 'however'. The Bible also has a 'Minority Report'. The 'Minority Report' is that things don't always work that way. Job, though righteous, suffered. In Psalm 73, the arrogant and wicked prosper, for a time at least. Some people told Jesus that Pilate had had some Galileans killed. In the Jewish way of thinking they must have been particularly bad sinners. But Jesus said that wasn't so.

The Minority Report warns us against forming a hasty opinion about what we 'see'.

May God guard us and guide us.

Simon

Reflection #4 / Monday 29th March 2020

A reflection in response to coronavirus

A three-minute read

Yesterday we heard that Boris Johnson is sending a letter to every household in Britain. The very fact that he is doing this, and the content of the letter (it's available online), highlight the gravity of our situation. Boris Johnson's key instruction is: stay home. We stay home in order not to pass on, or pick up, the virus.

After the service yesterday morning I went for a run along the promenade. There weren't many people about. As I approached Bournemouth Pier, I saw two men talking, standing three or four metres apart. It struck me that they were behaving like the lepers in the Bible. Indeed, that's how we should all be behaving. Coronavirus isn't leprosy, but it's like leprosy in the way it's preventing us from coming close to each other. We are all, I thought, lepers now.

That made me think about Jesus healing people. There are times when God distances himself, and perhaps in future Reflections, we need to think about why God does that. But God and Jesus' default desire is to heal. We can be in no doubt about that as we look at Jesus' life. He healed. Among those he healed were many lepers. Jesus didn't heal everyone he came across. For example, he healed only one person when he visited the pool in Jerusalem. That's in John 5:1-9. But he clearly wanted to heal. He also wanted his disciples to heal. When Jesus sent out his 12 disciples on mission, he instructed them to heal, and he specifically included lepers.

Knowing that God and Jesus, by default, wish to heal, encourages us to pray for healing.

There is something further we can see in the way Jesus healed. When Jesus met people with an illness or infirmity, he was very sensitive. Jesus met a man with leprosy. This is Luke 5:12-13. The man begged Jesus to heal him. 'Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.' Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him – a leper! What would that mean to a person whom no one ever touched? A lot, without doubt. When Jesus met a man who was deaf, he looked up to heaven, sighed and said to him, 'Ephphatha' – 'Be opened'. The deaf man would have had no doubt what Jesus was doing. When Jesus met a blind man, he took him by the hand, led him out of the village, and spat on his eyes. So, we see that when Jesus healed, he was very sensitive to each person's situation.

We are not on the frontline in the battle against coronavirus. We don't encounter patients in intensive care. We are not NHS doctors and nurses in protective suits. But we can pray that God will heal, knowing that by default, God wants to heal. And even if we are not on the frontline, even if we are self-isolating, the telephone and internet may bring us

into contact with people who are finding the situation hard. Then we can try to be like Jesus and show something of the sensitivity that he did. It's something I know I'm not good at. But I can aim at it.

May God guard us and guide us.

Simon

P.S. I wonder what Jesus would do if he was alive today, and met someone with coronavirus? He'd want to touch him or her, I think, but then there's Boris Johnson's instruction!

Reflection #3 / Sunday 28th March 2020

A reflection in response to coronavirus

A three-minute read

In my first two Reflections I considered prayer. I believe that our first response, as a church and as a nation, should be to pray. As a church in Boscombe, we should especially pray for Boscombe and Bournemouth. I hope very much that in the coming week we will be able to pray together much more.

But that will not be our only response! Another response we must make is to grieve. Paul wrote in Romans 12:15, 'Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep'. Today I travelled up to Cardiff and Bristol to pick up Sophie and Daniel. On the radio, I listened to journalist Zeinab Badawi speaking of the death of her cousin, transplant surgeon Adil El Tayar, to coronavirus. There was no doubt about the grief in his family. We are to grieve with people who grieve. We cannot be unmoved.

In comparison with some other subjects, Scripture doesn't say a great deal about mourning and grieving. In fact, I can think of only one place where Jesus speaks about it. That is in the Beatitudes. Here are the first two beatitudes (Matthew 5:3,4):

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Someone called the Beatitudes the blueprint of the Christian. They show what a Christian should look like. There are only eight Beatitudes so if something is included it means it's important. Beatitude number two is that the Christian mourns. This isn't only when someone dies. The world is full of sad things, and we should be saddened by them.

Recently, Priscilla and I have been reading Ezekiel. We've reached chapter 12. Some people consider Ezekiel to be the most difficult of the prophets to understand, and I wouldn't argue with that. Ezekiel *is* difficult, but some things come across loud and clear.

Here, Ezekiel passes on a message from God to the Israelites. This is 6:8-9.

When you have among the nations some who escape the sword, and when you are scattered through the countries, then those of you who escape will remember me among the nations where they are carried captive, how I have been broken over their whoring heart that has departed from me...

God says, 'how I have been broken...' Wow! God can be broken?! Clearly, God is deeply grieved. And God wants to find people who also grieve. This is 9:4.

And the Lord said to him, 'Pass through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it.'

After that, God gives an instruction to kill everyone who doesn't have that mark! Gulp! But once we've got over the shock, we hopefully get the picture. God grieves, and the true follower of God also grieves. This is a time for grief.

May God watch over us and keep us.

Simon

Reflection #2 / Saturday 27th March 2020

A two-minute read

This daily reflection is in response to coronavirus. There is much that we can reflect on. Earlier this week the former astronaut Chris Hadfield, who's spent five months in space, shared some advice on making the best of being in isolation. It's well worth listening to. Some Christians are asking why we're experiencing this pandemic. Is coronavirus a judgement from God? Are we living in end times? Interesting questions! But I started yesterday on the subject of prayer and I want to continue with that theme a little longer. First and foremost, we as God's people should be earnestly praying at this time. Today, I'm going to look at some instances when God's people specifically prayed in the context of a plague.

At the time of the plagues of Egypt, Moses often prayed that God would remove a specific plague. For example, in Exodus 8 God has brought a plague of flies. In verses 30-31 we read, 'So Moses went out from Pharaoh and prayed to the Lord. And the Lord did as Moses asked, and removed the swarms of flies.'

Later, during the Exodus from Egypt, a man called Korah and some friends of his rebelled against Moses. God dealt with them: 'And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up' (Numbers 16:32). But the people weren't happy. 'You have killed the people of the Lord', they complained (v.41). God started to deal with them by sending a plague.

But Moses took action and we read (vv.47b, 48) 'And he put on the incense and made atonement for the people. And he stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was stopped.'

Much later, David, the king of Israel, ordered that a census be taken. God was not happy about this. We can find this in 2 Samuel 24. God sent a pestilence (v.15). But David prayed to God (v.17): 'Behold, I have sinned, and I have done wickedly. But these sheep, what have they done? Please let your hand be against me and against my father's house.' He also built an altar to God. At the end of the chapter (v.25) we read, 'So the Lord responded to the plea for the land, and the plague was averted from Israel.'

So, here are three examples of prayer which brought an end to a plague or pestilence. Does that mean that prayer will bring an end to this plague? I don't know the answer to that. But in these passages, God responded to his people's prayers and that should encourage us to pray.

At the end of 'Reflection 1' I wrote, 'This is a time for us to be urgent in prayer. Praying on our own is very good. Let's do that! Praying with others is even better. We can't physically meet, but we can meet using the internet or telephone. So please do join me in getting our communications working better, and then let's join together in prayer, as we should.'

In this coming week I plan to open up a 'meeting room' on a regular basis so that whoever is able can join me, and we can collectively bring our situation before God. There is certainly more we can do, but this will be a very good start.

May God watch over us.

Simon

Reflection #1 / Friday 27th March 2020

A two-minute read

This daily reflection is starting in response to coronavirus. Worldwide, the number of people infected has passed 500,000 and the number of deaths is a little over 24,000. The graph of infections against time is almost vertical. Businesses are unable to operate and large numbers of people have lost their incomes. There is huge suffering. As Christians, what should our response be? There is work to do, but our first response should be to pray.

The prophet Isaiah lived at a time when the Assyrian Empire was expanding. He foresaw a time when Jerusalem would fall and he prophesied how people would respond. We can read his prophecy in Isaiah 22. Isaiah sees the people of Jerusalem preparing for the attack they know is coming. He prophesies from a future perspective, and so writes in the past tense:

They prepare (verses 8 to 10)

... you looked in that day to the weapons in the Palace of the Forest ... you stored up water in the Lower Pool. You counted the buildings in Jerusalem and tore down houses to strengthen the wall. You built a reservoir ...

But they don't go to God, grieving (verses 11 and 12)

... but you did not look to the One who made it, or have regard for the One who planned it long ago. The Lord, the Lord Almighty, called you on that day to weep and to wail, to tear out your hair and put on sackcloth.

They despaired (verse 13)

But see, there is joy and revelry, slaughtering of cattle and killing of sheep, eating of meat and drinking of wine! 'Let us eat and drink,' you say, 'for tomorrow we die!'

How does this compare to us? We are preparing, and that's good. But do we go to God for help, grieving over what is happening? We must! This is a time for us to be passionately interceding with God on behalf of our nation and other nations, for our leaders, for NHS staff, for our communities, our families and our church. Do we despair? Not yet. But what will happen if a nation's health system is overwhelmed? We hope that won't happen. But even if the situation looks very black, as Christians, we mustn't despair: our God is very great.

Let's go back to the subject of prayer for a moment. This is a time for us to be urgent in prayer. Praying on our own is very good. Let's do that! Praying with others is even better. We can't physically meet, but we can meet using the internet or telephone. So please do join me in getting our communications working better, and then let's join together in prayer, as we should.

May God watch over us all.

Simon

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