

12 June 2020

Covid Letter 11

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—

To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul writes to the believers in Rome, whom he did not know personally, but for whom he had a deep concern, and to whom he gave a call to be “holy people”. As we recognise that we are “loved by God”, our striving to be “holy people” is a response in love. Then we will know His “grace and peace”.

Covid

As we watch the news we see countries reporting dropping rates of infection and fewer Covid deaths as the days pass. South Africa seems to still be on the ‘up side’ of the “Covid Curve” with rising numbers of cases and deaths. It would appear that we have not yet seen the worst, that still lies ahead. And as a result, ongoing vigilance is called for – which impacts what we do and how we live out our faith day by day, and Sunday by Sunday.

So we continue with our “Church Unusual” online, and meetings on zoom and via WhatsApp. I have been amazed at how things that were virtually unheard of 2 months ago, are now very much part of everyday life. And this ‘new’ everyday life will continue for a while still.

Protests

And now in the midst of the challenges of Covid, we are further challenged by the protests that are taking place around the world, spurred by the killing of George Floyd and encouraged by the #BlackLivesMatter movement. What started as an American protest has spread around the world, with protests from London to Lagos highlighting the issues of Racism and police brutality. In South Africa we have all been confronted by Collins Khosa’s killing and the way police have treated so many other, usually poorer, people – like Azarrah Karrim (a reporter) who was shot at in Yeoville and Siyasanga Gijana who lost an eye while fetching water in her yard on the Cape Flats.

As the protests have spread, some people have responded that All Lives Matter, which is obviously true, but confuses ‘value’ with ‘focus’. Certainly all people are important and valued and have rights, but where there is a problem, it needs to be the focus of attention. In a similar way, our focus is on coping with people who are dying of Covid, but that doesn’t mean that those who die of cancer or heart attacks do not matter. Of course they do – it’s just that we need to address Covid urgently today. Once Covid is managed, we will continue to look at cancer and hypertension and diabetes as health problems.

So yes, our premise is that All Lives Matter. But where the police, or indeed education systems, or arts or other aspects of society, operate in a way which does not reflect this truth, or seem to suggest that it is not true and some lives matter less than others, then that problem needs to be focussed on. And hopefully that focus will help us to see and understand and change.

Years back Bernice was working from home and had someone working with her. We are keen(ish) bird watchers, and Jesse, still a toddler, had been dragged into the activity. So he would point out the robins and doves and starlings in the garden. And the lady that worked with Bernice suddenly realised that she had noticed the birds in the garden, but had not “seen” them. With a toddler pointing them out she saw the

differences and wanted to know more and so she got a bird book and began to identify them herself. Her eyes were opened to the fact that 'birds' were in fact all quite different and were actually sparrows and weavers and kestrels. In a similar way, by having our attention drawn to the issue of how society is often skewed and unjust; hopefully our eyes will be opened and we will "see" in new ways. And "seeing", we will live differently.

Bible

As Christians, we do not just listen to the voices in society, no matter how strident, shrill or self-assured. We listen to God through his word.

As I have looked at society and listened and read, I have tried to bring scripture to bear on the situation. The perspective I have gained is that it is fundamentally true that "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:6). It is clear that God's love is universal, and so must ours be.

But I was struck by the fact that at the start of his ministry Jesus quoted Isaiah and said:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." (Luke 4:18-19)

Now he clearly didn't *only* minister to the poor and prisoners and blind – but they were a focus, and they received special attention. Indeed, when the Pharisees challenged him about fraternising with unsavoury individuals and eating with "sinners", his response was "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:17). His attention was focussed where the need was.

A Challenge to the Church

The prophet Isaiah is inspired to speak of the coming Servant of the Lord, the 'Suffering Servant' who we, this side of the cross, know is none other than Jesus, our Messiah, Lord and God. And God says the following about him:

"Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen one in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will bring justice to the nations.
He will not shout or cry out,
or raise his voice in the streets.
A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out.
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;
he will not falter or be discouraged
till he establishes justice on earth.
In his teaching the islands will put their hope."

We so often focus on his compassion, gentleness and love: caring for the "bruised reed" and "smouldering wick". But as I read it a few days ago, I was struck by what his mandate is. It is justice! *Three times* God says it.

Back in the 80's when the struggle against apartheid was gaining momentum, the church was forthright and outspoken about injustice in society. The leaders marched with the masses and synod resolutions called for change and the end of the iniquitous system.

Subsequent to the beginning of democracy the church has been largely silent. I would suggest that the clamour on the streets today should focus our attention on God's word, and the church should rediscover its voice and work to "bring forth justice" and not stop or be discouraged until "he establishes justice on earth".

As a parish, we need to pray to see as Jesus does. Pray that we may be aware of where we may reflect some of the injustice and discrimination in society, where people may possibly not feel loved and held and belonging to St. Luke's. I do not believe that this would be intentional, but I am aware of just how blind I (personally) can be, especially having grown up during apartheid and being taught that a divided society was normal.

Having just celebrated Pentecost, we noted that everyone in Jerusalem heard the disciples "declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!". No one was left out. Everyone was included and welcomed into God's family. We need to make sure that everyone knows that when they accept Christ (as the three thousand did in Acts) they are a beloved child of God, that everyone is part of His body, and everyone has a valuable part to play. Less than this and we will be ignoring scripture and will all be poorer.

A Challenge to Individuals

I find it easy to nod along to the shouts in the street and agree with what scripture may teach. It is all good and well and gets my full support. But then the Spirit brings 'sawdust' to mind and I am forced to remember Jesus saying "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" (Matt 7:3). And this surely is our challenge.

Knowing that in God's eyes 'all lives matter' I need to recognise that society falls short and does not operate in accordance with this ideal. And as long as a person's skin colour affects how they are 'valued' by the system, I must agree that Black Lives Matter and support those highlighting this failing. But more than that, I need to examine myself. How do I value people? Does a person's race affect how I treat them? Do I treat the wealthy benefactors of the parish in the same way I treat the ground staff? When I go to the door of the office is my attitude different if at the door I see the bishop or a beggar?

At that point, Jesus' words have a particularly challenging ring: I have been sent to "proclaim good news to the poor".

Blessings!

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