

Covid Letter 17

Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

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

Paul writes to the “church of the Thessalonians”, describing them as “in God”. That is the clearest definition of what a Christian is – someone who is “in God”. This is not because God has dragged us in – indeed the story of the fall is of humanity turning our backs on God and running away. He doesn’t force us, but invites us – “come to me all who weary and are heavy laden”. What a privilege to be ‘part of’ God, to be drawn in despite our own failings and sin, but drawn in through the love and selfless sacrifice of Jesus Christ. And our challenge is to share this good news with others, so that they too can know the grace of being “in God”.

Spring

Spring now seems to be well and truly underway. The weather is warming, trees are greening, flowers are blooming in a display of colour and I have seen the first migrant swallow winging through the air. This is a wonderful time of promise and potential, and the creation displays something of the glory of God.

But, at the same time, the news is full of stories of the creation being dragged off course through human action. There are wild fires around the world that are bigger than before, floods have ravaged various countries and had people holding a wary eye on the Three Gorges Dam; storms – which are setting new records in terms of severity – are battering various parts of the world, and new temperature records are being set more and more often. Plastic continues to poison the environment and wash into the sea.

This is not the intention God had for the world at creation.

The Bible tells us that God put people into “the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it” (Gen 2:15). This we have not done. As Christians we need to listen to God more closely and be challenged – holding all of our lives up to the scrutiny of his word – which is a light, highlighting where we fail and also where we are getting things right.

Changing World

As we consider how the environment is changing through human action, so much else is also going to change. Where we live, the work we do, where we get our drinking water from is all in the balance. (If not for us immediately, certainly for many millions of people around the world).

We have seen society change dramatically as a result of Covid, and now the change continues, even as the threat of Covid seems to be easing somewhat. The BBC reported that many firms are saying half their labour force or more (some say two thirds!) will not be returning to their offices, but will continue to work from home. This will be good news for traffic congestion, but bad news for those who have invested in office blocks. It will also impact public transport – which will impact those who work in that industry.

So, even if Covid does become a manageable part of daily life – rather like the annual flu epidemic that affects different people in different ways, but is generally quite easily managed – the world will not be the way it was.

Church: Is 'normal' normal?

As the local lockdown levels drop – we are now able to consider meeting in person for worship. What is known as “contact worship”. (We have developed a whole new vocabulary and descriptions for the new world we live in!) We are considering what meetings will look like. There will be limitations – everyone will need a mask, no singing, no shaking hands or hugging people, no tea, keep 1,5 to 2m distance etc. The kind of limitations that are already part of so much of life. We would also need to meet in the hall to start with – as it allows more spacing and better ventilation.

But the question I am wrestling with is “What will church look like in 6 or 12 months time?” is what we have always considered to be “normal” actually normal?

At the start of the pandemic as we entered lockdown, I had a sense of God moving us into a new space – rather like the church found itself in during the post Pentecost persecution that scattered the church through the world. It disrupted how they ‘did church’ – but it also served to spread the Good News far and wide.

So, where do we go from here? It may feel a little like the Israelites on their way from Egypt to the promised land. They had an assurance that the land they were heading to was good – flowing with milk and honey. But they were in a desert drinking water (albeit miraculously from a rock) and eating manna and birds. How often don't we read of them being tempted to go back to Egypt. It wasn't great (it was actually awful as they were slaves), but so often what we know (even if unpleasant) seems better than a future we don't know.

I do not believe we can go back – we need to go on, to keep following God who is our Good Shepherd. Where will this be and what will it look like? I have no idea.

The leadership of the parish – Clergy, council, worship leaders and others – are wrestling with the issue. Please keep us in prayer that we will be able to hear more clearly what God's voice is calling us to do.

The Bible is clear that we are called by Jesus to ‘take up your cross and follow me’. This is not a call to ease and comfort. It may be difficult, it may be costly, it will be challenging and unsettling – but if it is where God is leading, we know that he leads us to a better place. A place of blessing. A land flowing with milk and honey.

This is a challenge to us individually, it challenges the church and it is a challenge to us as St. Luke's Parish.

But it is a challenge we enter into with joy and expectation, knowing that our God – the Ancient of Days – has all of time in His hands. So we are safe.

Blessings!

Ian