

# A Lament for the Pandemic ...

*... the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words*

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*A sermon given on the Third Sunday Before Advent 7<sup>th</sup> November 2021, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster*

*Matthew 5:1-12; Romans 8:18-27*

The thinking behind this service this morning is that we need to acknowledge the impact which the pandemic has had and is still having on all of us. Some of this impact is obvious: lives have been lost to the coronavirus, and that includes quite a few in our own community; there are people in our midst who are still grieving for the loss of those they loved, and that kind of loss is very real; others have had COVID-19 and survived but still suffer from the after effects - 'long COVID' is no stranger to this community, and several people we know are still struggling with it.

And whilst our usual pattern of services has more or less resumed, not everyone has come back to church yet: some are still cautious about coming out; some are conscious of vulnerable members of their households, and they still need to be careful; some have got used to watching services at home online on the sofa with a cup of coffee, and perhaps they haven't yet recovered the habits of gathering with the church community again; some have had the pattern of church-going completely disrupted and haven't missed it - after all, there are other things you can choose to do on a Sunday morning.

But even among those of us who have more or less recovered a pre-pandemic level of activity and worship, there is often still a feeling that not all is well. For many, there is a feeling of heaviness, tiredness even, where we seem to have lost some of our former joy. There may be all sorts of reasons for that, but part of it will be the realisation that this pandemic isn't going to have a proper ending. There was a time when I naively hoped that at some point this autumn we would all have been vaccinated and the crisis would have passed and we would be able to say, "It's all over! We can draw a line under it. The virus is under control. It's safe to come out now. Let's have a big celebration to welcome everybody back, and we can all move on into a new season in our life together."

But it's now clear that we shall never have a clear milestone like that, which we can celebrate reaching. We're going to have to live with this thing for the foreseeable future, so everything still feels a bit subdued: congregations are smaller, and emotionally, psychologically and spiritually, it can still feel like hardgoing - and that's why it seemed important to have a service to express this theme of lament, not just to acknowledge the grief of bereavement (which will be the more particular focus of this afternoon's Memorial service) but to name this state in which we find ourselves where we're wondering why the glory seems to have departed and we're not sure what to do about it.

So in this situation, what does the Word of God have to say? How does the Lord speak into this situation? Our two readings this morning may resonate with us in different ways.

The Gospel reading, where Jesus pronounces certain kinds of person to be blessed, includes a number of categories with which we might identify. *Blessed are the poor in spirit*, for example - that might describe how some of us are feeling, not exactly overflowing with spiritual life and vigour. Does that describe you? Jesus says, "*You will be blessed and that yours will be the Kingdom of heaven. And blessed are those who mourn*" - those who have lost loved ones, certainly, but also those who just long to reset the clock and to go back to those pre-pandemic days when everything seemed much freer and more predictable. And we've lost that, and we mourn for it. And Jesus says, "*Those who mourn are blessed, for you will be comforted. And blessed are those who are meek.*" I've never been entirely sure who that's meant to include, but in our situation I take it to mean those who feel vulnerable and not very confident about their ability to make things better; those who have been confronted by a sense of our own helplessness and who feel the future is full of uncertainty. But Jesus says "*The meek are blessed, for they will inherit the earth.*" They don't need to worry about the future, and "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.*" - those perhaps who are conscious of all the ways in which the pandemic has exaggerated so many of our social evils. The rich have got richer, and the poor have got poorer; children's education has suffered hugely, and the ones who suffer most are the ones who don't come from supportive, stable and well-resourced family backgrounds. Death rates for COVID have been far higher among people of colour.

So there's a lot about this pandemic that just isn't fair. And Jesus says, "*Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are blessed, for they will be filled.*"

And as I read the Beatitudes, this set of blessings, one of the things which strikes me is the gap between the present reality we experience and the future which Jesus promises.

The Beatitudes may speak to us because we recognise that Jesus might be addressing you and me. We are those who are poor in spirit, who mourn, who are meek, who hunger and thirst for righteousness. We see something of ourselves in these categories. But there's a huge gap between the now and the not yet. Jesus may be promising the Kingdom of Heaven and future comfort and the inheritance of the earth and so on. But we're not yet seeing it.

So why should we believe Him? The passage itself doesn't answer that unless we look again at who it is who is making the promises. Jesus Himself is the bridge between heaven and earth, between our earthbound present and God's future; Jesus is the incarnate Son of God who stands alongside us but also stands on the other side of death; Jesus is the one we have learned to trust in this world, so perhaps we can go on trusting him for the future.

And the first reading from St. Paul's letter to the Romans, I think, is saying something similar, but in a very different style. Paul talks about all of creation, groaning with longing to be set free from its bondage to decay. In other words, the whole world knows that things aren't right, and it groans with a deep longing for the day when everything will be healed and restored and made complete. And within creation there's a smaller circle where the church also groans. Christians don't watch the sufferings of the world from a safe distance - we're part of it, groaning inwardly, says St. Paul, as we await the redemption of our bodies, hoping patiently for what we do not yet see.

And then the church is sustained itself in its weakness and in its groaning by the Holy Spirit who. Paul says, intercedes with "*sighs too deep for words.*" - God, the Holy Spirit is also groaning in a world longing for healing. So it's almost like a series of Russian dolls: the whole of creation groans and laments under its sense of brokenness and helplessness; and within creation there's a smaller doll, which is the church, groaning and lamenting because things are not yet what they should be -

and yet we have a sense of how things ought to be - we have hope, but our patience is being tested; and within the church, there's the smaller-yet doll of the Holy Spirit of God Himself, the Spirit of Jesus, standing alongside us, sharing in our sighing and lament, and helping us to pray when we don't know how, helping us to reach out to God and be renewed by His love and his promises, so that we can share our hope with the world.

So in our lament today, we are profoundly aware of the huge gap between the promise and the reality, between how things are and how we all instinctively feel they should be. And we may feel that the gap is unbridgeable, that we're stuck, lost and lamenting in our present state of trouble.

But these two texts offer us a way forward: look to Jesus, says Matthew's gospel, look to the one who pronounces blessing, not as a matter of empty words, but as the one who stands beside us, comforting and strengthening; who goes before us to cavalry and death; who breaks through to resurrection and eternal life; and who invites us to follow him there - not to give up, but to trust him to show us the way.

And then Paul, in the letter to the Romans says don't forget the Holy Spirit: you may feel you're on your own; you may feel the world in its groaning is a meaningless mess; you may feel your prayers are bouncing off the ceiling and that no one is listening. But the Spirit is within you, He shares in your groaning and in the groans of all creation, so don't worry about finding the right words to pray, simply listen to the longing and the lament welling up inside you; recognise that those feelings have their roots in the compassion and justice of God Himself.

When you feel helpless and hopeless, you are sharing in the pain of God's own heart and he is sharing in yours. And as you name the things which are not right in your life and in this pandemic - this stricken world - let those feelings connect you to the Spirit who intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words and with the God who searches our hearts and who is calling us to find Salvation in the hope which he offers.

It's all been rather beautifully summed up in the words of a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins, a poem called The Grandeur of God. And it finishes with these lines:

*And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.*

# Reading Texts

## Matthew 5:1-12

<sup>1</sup> When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. <sup>2</sup> Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: <sup>3</sup> "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup> "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. <sup>5</sup> "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. <sup>6</sup> "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. <sup>7</sup> "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. <sup>8</sup> "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. <sup>9</sup> "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. <sup>10</sup> "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>11</sup> "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

## Romans 8:18-27

<sup>18</sup> I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. <sup>19</sup> For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; <sup>20</sup> for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup> that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. <sup>22</sup> We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; <sup>23</sup> and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. <sup>24</sup> For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? <sup>25</sup> But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. <sup>26</sup> Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. <sup>27</sup> And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.