

LANGBANK CHURCH  
Sunday 15 November 2020

*On Sunday 15 November, Rev Stuart Stevenson conducted worship, as Pulpit Supply. He has kindly sent his sermon for the website, for the benefit of those of you at home..... Liz*

### Sermon

I have to admit that I have struggled with making a decision on whether to speak about the ongoing pandemic, or not to. On the one hand, you're probably so fed up with the ongoing restrictions on our lives that you'd rather hear any other subject rather than one about COVID-19, or on the other hand, perhaps you want to know what God has to say about it?

COVID-19 is the biggest thing, disease wise that's ever happened in generations, and quite possibly ever. This is a worldwide disease and it has impacted on millions of people across the world. There is a tentative vaccine although it may be some time before it works it's way down to us individually. Because it's a brand-new disease, the challenge has been immense.

The restrictions have taken their toll on us. Lockdown was really tough and we all felt it. However, there was something of a novelty to it all at the beginning. Something nice happened. Neighbours started acting like neighbours again. People seemed to look out for each other. People would check on the folk next door. Human beings realising that the things we thought we could forever take for granted could be stopped immediately by an invisible virus we had never heard of in our lives.

We reevaluated our place in the world. For the first time in history, churches closed. Those of us with a living faith in Jesus had to find new ways of worshipping our Lord. I've got to be honest. Much as I've appreciated all the online sermons and get togethers, not one of them compares to the real thing. Sitting with Christian friends in the church, singing and praising God is a luxury we took for granted, but we worry that we might not be able to do so again, at least not in the way we once did. But there is no doubt that being able to meet online is incredible. Imagine if this disease had struck 5 or 10 years ago, this technology wouldn't have existed and imagine how hard that would be.

Some churches are still not meeting together. In Johnstone where I live none of the three churches of Scotland have started meeting for regular worship, so it is a pleasure for me to share with you today. Those of us who have started meeting again are allowed to meet with strict guidelines, but we can't sing because speak-

ing and singing can eject the virus a considerable distance from our mouth and others can become infected, if God forbid, one of us has it.

Today we ask,  
What is God saying to us through this pandemic?  
What are we to take from this situation?  
How are we to go forward?

I couldn't help but think that world had gone completely out of control before the pandemic. I'm not going to get into the finer points of why I think the world had gone out of control, but I think if we search our hearts we know why. The people of the world have gone astray in numerous ways. Governments at home and abroad were out of control. Unspeakable cruelties were going on in terms of poverty, starvation and wars. Many of these things are completely avoidable if the resources are directed properly and care is the priority of governments everywhere. The United Nations always promised big things but delivered little. Corruption in political life is a given. We have lost trust in those who lead us and so many lies are told that our heads can't make sense of it all.

People talk about things going back to normal. Well, I don't want things to go back to normal if that's what normal is! I want a new normal. A normal that sees fairness and integrity returned to politics and fair treatment to those impoverished and out of work. The way the humanitarian crisis has developed with millions fleeing from war-torn countries seeking refuge. I'd like to see them treated properly and perhaps if we sowed the seeds of peace in their homelands it would be worth going back. A new normal where countries pool resources to fight famine and wars, instead of causing them through greed and avarice.

I know what you're thinking... Stuart, you're a dreamer! These things will never happen because this world has departed from God in such a massive way it's impossible to think like that! But, is it?

In the NT Christians were noticed because they were different. During times of trouble, famine or war, Christians were noticed by the way they behaved and acted toward others, even to people outside their faith.

Christians in those days were so used to persecution that they expected hard lives, and they developed stronger faith and greater commitment. There must have been times that they felt like giving up. Yet if they had given up we wouldn't be the church that we are today.

Likewise, throughout this ordeal we have been in for 6 months you must have felt a bit fed up with life and maybe even with God. I know many of you are fed up with these restrictions on our family lives, and to be honest I'm not in the least surprised. I'm tempted to make you all feel even worse by comparing what I could say are trivial complaints compared to what people endured through 2 world wars, but as my lovely wife pointed out to me, at least those folk had each other to hold and love! They might have been dragged out of the beds in the middle of the night to huddle together in a cramped Bomb Shelter, but they were together!

Our ordeal of lockdown was tough, then it relaxed a bit and life seemed to heading back to normal, then the virus started infecting again because people let their guard down a bit. Now the local authority we are in is back in a mini-lockdown. You wonder where it's all going to end?

In the Exodus Scripture the people were very impatient because Moses was away so long they thought he wasn't coming back! They had little faith and their heads were easily turned to other ideas for belief. So, they turned to Moses' second in command, Aaron and bullied him into changing their religion! They began to worship an idol in the shape of a calf! They had promised to obey God's law, but in making a golden calf and indulging in a mocking celebration, the people broke the first, second, and seventh commandments God had given them<sup>1</sup>. It was a great sin because of what they had already experienced of the power and mercy of God: the judgments against Egypt, the deliverance at the Red Sea, the provision of food and water, and the gracious leading of God by the pillar of cloud and fire. What they did was rebel against the goodness of the Lord.

Now we could sit here and criticise them but can we really?

Isn't it the case that we christians often turn a blind eye to what's going on in our personal lives, the lives of our families and friends? Do we make excuses for our behaviour justifying it on incredibly weak and pathetic excuses in order that we can indulge in sinful behaviour? Are we no better than the people in Exodus who caved in at the first sign of weakness in God's provision?

I admit it that the most difficult thing for me during this period has been not getting to church. I had no idea how much I would miss church until it was taken from me. Worshipping at home isn't straightforward and even when you've cracked it, it's not that great. I'm not blaming ministers for this because they've been caught on the hop just like everyone, but our sudden online awakening has led to a multitude of differing experiences and quality. Some ministers are just not cut out for it, or just aren't getting the knack for it. I haven't had to do it because I don't

have a congregation, so I have no idea how I would do but am pleased in a way that I haven't had to.

When Moses came back down the mountain from his one-to-one communion with God he found a mess. A physical mess no doubt would have littered the ground revealing visually what had gone on, but nowhere as bad as the spiritual mess of the people's lives. God was angry and told Moses these people should be punished for their sins but Moses begged God to forgive them. This is the basis for our relationship with God. None of us, not even Mother Teresa was or is good enough to earn God's love. Moses begged, or to use a big church word, interceded, on behalf of the people. This is what Jesus did for us too, he came to intercede on behalf of people who otherwise would have no hope of being saved from their sins. God's plan for us since we sinned in Eden was to bring us back into the fold like sheep who had gone astray with a loving shepherd who cares for us, be it Moses or Jesus or any of the hundreds, thousands of Godly leaders who have pointed the direction to the sheep-fold over the centuries past and present.

Thanks to Moses' intercession on the behalf of the people God forgave them all. After destroying the false idol and setting the people straight once more Moses' continuing intercession for them replaced God's anger with love.

What is God saying to us all through this pandemic? Let me state I do not believe it is God's doing. Our Creator loves us and would not do this to us. Disease, all disease is a work of sin. I don't mean that you are a sinner if you catch a disease but that disease entered this world as a result of the sin of Adam & Eve. I absolutely guarantee that if we ever find out what was behind this outbreak, were it a malicious work as some propose, or a naturally occurring disease that the background of its origins is rooted in the sin of humanity. When we originally sinned, we chose to follow the sleekit ideals of the devil who promised wondrous things but instead produced results that were anything but wondrous. Our history since that Fall has been one that a quick consultation of any history book will confirm. Humanity has let itself down horribly ever since. As I once said my first memory of watching the news on the telly at six or seven was war in Beirut and challenge you to think of a single year when the news has not had some war, uprising, massacre or famine featuring in its headlines? Does it have to be like this? NO!

Essentially, the people of the world pay lip service to God, the same God who forgave the people at the foot of Mt Sinai. Moses left Aaron in charge to hear their prayer and heed God's teaching but they rebelled against him. Our intercessor is Jesus and so many rebel in their hearts against him. The gospel reading assures us that those who call on him are guaranteed forgiveness and love. In the story of the

wedding banquet the invites are sent out by the King and many people don't even bother to reply or show up! This is what I love about Jesus the most, is how he shocks people with stories that would break social etiquette in a way that they would never imagine possible. To be invited to a wedding by a monarch would be a no-brainer, even nowadays that would be a great honour, imagine getting an invitation to a royal wedding! To ignore such an invitation would be incredibly rude then as today! Some invitees had better things to do at home and some even beat up and killed the messengers who came to offer the invites. So, the King in the story sent his messengers out to the streets inviting in all who would come, the poor and dispossessed and undesirables. Unfortunately, I can't see that happening in our modern setting but that what the King in the story did. These folk came and enjoyed his hospitality and were raised above the great and good who so flippantly rejected his invites.

That folks is in essence, the story of the gospel! God issues the invites and sends his messengers to deliver them. Are we going to take up the invite and enjoy God's love for us, or are we just a bit too busy for God that we reject the greatest gift we could ever get? Some people spend their lives praying and paying a small fortune for a winning lottery ticket as a sort of salvation for their lives, yet here is God offering real salvation and it's absolutely free!

You might be one of the messengers? You might be charged with issuing the invites to the people. Langbank has been issuing the invites for well over a 100 years. Sometimes we can get a bit forgetful about doing the inviting. I hope not. It is hard work but as the Exodus makes clear it was never going to be easy. People will ignore you, some will not. Some may abuse you some will not. But the greatest sin is not doing the inviting. If you do the inviting the blessings of God will be on you all.

At a time like this the people of Langbank need to know God cares for them and loves them if they would only respond to the invitation. Sometimes we care more about buildings rather than the gospel invitation. I know that buildings are important but do not let love for buildings be greater than your love for Jesus. And if you really love the buildings the best way to ensure their longevity is to do the inviting anyway! If people respond it'll be bigger buildings that are required! Imagine going to presbytery to ask permission to build bigger buildings because you can't get all the people in! It's not even a fantasy or a wild dream! It's entirely possible if you have the vision and keep on doing the inviting!

Offering the invites is so much more difficult at this time as well but please keep supporting Liz. Pray for her and her work both spiritual and pastoral. Don't let your guard down, don't be limited by the world or the pandemic. Don't go wandering off God to do other things without him. Value the messengers and pray for them and their work. Turn the negatives of this pandemic into positives.

I've been a bit annoyed with the national church at this time. Sure, they've been really busy dealing with the multitude of changing rules and regulations and keeping us all right, and to be fair they have issued many resources and advice to Christians through their website, but as usual I feel there is a big let-down in terms of the gospel message to the wider people of Scotland. The Church of Scotland is Scotland's national church and I feel that most people don't even know it exists. So please pray for national church and all churches of Christ likewise that they find a way to share their invitations far and wide during this time and in the future whatever the future turns out to be like. Most of all, stay faithful to the God who forgave us and keep doing the work he has set out for us to do, in the name of the Father, the Son & the Holy Spirit, Amen!

***"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me.***

***"You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My Commandments.***

***"You shall not commit adultery.***