



Andrew Murray Pretoria
2nd of August 2020
Liturgist:
Rev. Stefan Botha



† **Invocation and Greeting:**

Lord, we come into your presence,
aware of your holiness but drawn by your gentleness.
We come because we have heard of your mercy,
and we come bringing our sinfulness.
We come confessing that you are Creator,
aware of our need of your re-creation.
We come declaring your sovereignty and majesty
and ready to offer thanksgiving and glory.
We come knowing that you are our judge
but trusting your mercy and the grace of Christ.
We come because you are worthy of our worship and commitment;
we come because you called us;
we come because in you we have life, hope, and eternal life.
We come in Christ's name.

**Family of God, it is with joy that I greet you all in the Name of the Sovereign God.
I greet you in the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

† **Scripture Reading and Sermon: “*God and the pandemic.*” The Old Testament.**

Good morning to all. Last Sunday we started a series on “God and the pandemic”, based on the book of NT Wright. We started by looking at the Church’s task and calling. This week we will turn to the Old Testament to help us understand our life and times.

The prophet Amos said that whatever God was doing, he would reveal his secrets to “*his servants the prophets*” (Amos 3:7). We have had plenty of prophets telling us what those secrets were. These range from:

- the cause-and-effect pragmatists (it’s all because governments didn’t prepare properly for a pandemic) to;
- the strikingly detached moralizers (it’s all because the world needs to repent of sexual sin) to;
- valid but separate concerns (it’s reminding us about the ecological crisis).

We sometimes have the impression that the coronavirus is providing people with a megaphone with which to say, more loudly, what they were wanting to say anyway.

In the Hebrew scriptures, the greatest disaster of all was the Babylonian exile. And the great prophets interpreted that event in terms of the large-scale punishment for Israel’s sin. This goes back to the covenant promises and warnings—the blessings and the curses—in Deuteronomy.

Books like Jeremiah and Ezekiel made it shockingly clear: Israel had done what Deuteronomy said they shouldn’t (particularly, worshipping pagan idols and the behaviour that goes with that), and God had done what God said he would do in consequence.

The book called Lamentations, one of the most moving long poems ever written, looks out upon a city from which people have vanished. That image is haunting, especially remembering the beginning of

lockdown, and the empty streets. And the prophet weeps for the innocent children, crying for food and finding none: *“The parched tongues of their little ones stick to the roofs of their mouths in thirst. The children cry for bread, but no one has any to give them.”* (Lamentations 4:4)

“But Lord, you remain the same forever! Your throne continues from generation to generation. Why do you continue to forget us? Why have you abandoned us for so long? Restore us, O Lord, and bring us back to you again! Give us back the joys we once had! Or have you utterly rejected us? Are you angry with us still?” (Lamentations 5:19–22)

The great prayers for restoration elsewhere are quite explicit: here we are in exile because we sinned; so now we turn to you and ask for forgiveness. Daniel 9 is perhaps the clearest: *“But the Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him. We have not obeyed the Lord our God, for we have not followed the instructions he gave us through his servants the prophets.”* (Daniel 9:9–10; the whole chapter is important)

And if that’s how it works on the large scale—or how it worked with the Babylonian exile, at least—then on the smaller, personal scale it sometimes looks as though it ought to be the same. There’s an awful moment in First Kings when a widow, losing her only son, assumes that it’s because of her sin, so that by having the prophet Elijah staying under her roof she has somehow triggered her son’s death as a punishment (1 Kings 17:18). Elijah, raising the boy to life, puts that suggestion back where it belongs.

But the rumour persists that ill fortune and ill behaviour are always linked in a straightforward causal chain. The very first Psalm informs us that good people will flourish, and wicked ones will come to a bad end.

Psalm 37, which in some ways is an extended meditation on the same theme, has the striking verse: *“Once I was young, and now I am old. Yet I have never seen the godly abandoned or their children begging for bread.”* (Psalm 37:25)

Cue sharp intake of breath. We have seen them. On our streets. On our screens. On our hearts. We should probably allow the Psalmist the benefit of the doubt here: he is describing normal times. Play fair and things will work out; mess around and trouble will come.

But we don’t live in normal times (perhaps we never really have). What do we say then? Try explaining to someone dying of coronavirus in a crowded squatter camp that all this is because of sin. Blame the victim, in other words. That’s always a popular line. A popular lie.

Fortunately for our sanity (and our view of biblical inspiration) there is a more rounded picture. Take Psalm 73. The writer knows the ‘normal’ line: good things come to good people, bad things to bad.

But it hasn’t worked out like that. The wicked are flourishing, and the righteous are crushed under their feet. It’s only when the poet goes into God’s temple that a larger, healing viewpoint can be glimpsed.

Then go to Psalm 44, which specifically denies the ‘good-brings-good, bad-brings-bad’ viewpoint. The poet knows that God has looked after his people in time past. But now truly horrible things have happened, despite the fact that, as he insists,

*“All this has happened though we have not forgotten you.
We have not violated your covenant.
Our hearts have not deserted you.
We have not strayed from your path.*

*Yet you have crushed us in the jackal's desert home.
 You have covered us with darkness and death.
 If we had forgotten the name of our God
 or spread our hands in prayer to foreign gods,
 God would surely have known it,
 for he knows the secrets of every heart.
 But for your sake we are killed every day;
 we are being slaughtered like sheep.” (Psalm 44:17–22)*

Paul quotes that in Romans 8, one of the most important places for understanding this whole mystery. We'll come back to that later.

There are other Psalms which state the problem and leave it with a kind of puzzled shrug of the shoulders. Psalm 89 is like that.

*God has made wonderful promises;
 we basked in their sunshine for a while;
 but now the sky is dark,
 and everything has gone wrong and there is no hope in sight.*

End of Psalm. There's a refreshing honesty to that.

Or—the darkest spot of all—there is Psalm 88. This was my work Psalm in the years when I was a hospital chaplain. Its raw honesty with God still moves me.

*“For my life is full of troubles, and death draws near.
 I am as good as dead, like a strong man with no strength left.
 They have left me among the dead, and I lie like a corpse in a grave.
 I am forgotten, cut off from your care.
 O Lord, why do you reject me?
 Why do you turn your face from me?
 I have been sick and close to death since my youth.
 I stand helpless and desperate before your terrors.
 You have taken away my companions and loved ones.
 Darkness is my closest friend.” (Psalm 88:3–5, 14–15, 18)*

Those Psalms are the foothills, already gloomy and frightening. Yet we sense a darker mountain looming up behind them. It's called the Book of Job. Whenever anyone tells you that coronavirus means that God is calling people—perhaps you!—to repent, tell them to read Job. The whole point is that that is not the point.

It is Job's “*comforters*” who tell him it's all about sin. They are absolutely clear that God must be punishing Job for some secret misbehaviour. Job is equally clear that if that is so then God is being unjust.

The reader, in on the secret from the start, knows that both are wrong, but that the “*comforters*” are a whole lot more wrong than Job. Quite a different battle is going on.

The book of Job rattles the cages of our easy-going piety. It reminds us that there are indeed more things in heaven and earth—more pains and puzzles in heaven and earth—than are dreamed of in our philosophy. Even our “*Christian*” philosophy.

The book of Job doesn't really have a "*resolution*". Not a satisfactory one. There is a short "*happy ending*", but it's only partially happy: Job gets more sons and daughters to replace the ones he lost, but does that make it all right?

God has revealed his power and might to Job, and Job realizes he can't compete; but does even that make it all right? That might conceivably just leave you with the Stoics: It's all fixed, you can't do anything, you might as well put up with it.

I think part of the point of Job is precisely its unresolved character. Sermons have been preached, and whole books written, on the ways in which the story of Jesus provides a kind of resolution for Job. Well, maybe.

Job longs for someone to stand in the middle, between him and God, so that the case could be heard, so that both sides could be represented.

- There is no umpire between us, he complains, who might lay his hand on us both (9:33).
- He questions whether mortals can live again, after they die (14:14).
- He longs for ultimate justice, a putting-right of things which goes way beyond what this life seems to afford (21; 23–24).

All of these things are spoken of in the New Testament in connection with what the same God, Israel's God, has done and will do through Jesus.

- Jesus stands between God and humans.
- He has shown the way through death to renewed life.
- He has put all things right, and will work that out in the end.

Yet this is anything but straightforward. The book of Job is a standing reminder that the Old Testament operates on at least two quite different levels.

There is **the story of Israel**—or rather, of God-and-Israel. This is the covenantal story: the narrative of how the Creator God called a people to be his partner in rescuing the human race and restoring creation.

It tells of how that people—themselves "*carriers*" of the disease that had infected the whole human race, the proto-virus called "*idolatry and injustice*" which is killing us all—how that people themselves had to go into the darkness of exile so that, somehow, new life might emerge the other side.

That whole story, seen with hindsight by the followers of Jesus, has its own dynamic. Many Jews in Jesus' day were very much aware of the great story of God and Israel in terms of the "*covenant*" in Deuteronomy 27–32, which promised blessings for obedience and curses—ultimately, exile—for disobedience, followed in the end by a restoration when Israel finally repented and turned back to God.

This story is picked up in the great prayer of Daniel 9. The extraordinary poem we know as Isaiah 40–55 tells the same story, of God's healing, rescue, restoration and new creation following after a time not only of judgment but even of despair.

Seen from the perspective of a first-century Jew, these scriptural traditions all belonged together. Jesus and his first followers drew liberally on that whole story to explain what was now happening.

Alongside this Israel-and-God story there runs **the deeper story of the good creation and the dark power that from the start has tried to destroy God's good handiwork.**

I do not claim to understand that dark power. As I shall suggest later, I don't think we're meant to. We are simply to know that when we are caught up in awful circumstances, apparent gross injustices, terrible plagues—or when we are accused of wicked things of which we are innocent, suffering strange sicknesses with no apparent reason, let alone cure—at those points **we are to lament**, we are to complain, we are to state the case, **and leave it with God**.

God himself declares at the end that Job has told the truth (42:8). He has clung on to the fact that God is just, even though his own misery seems to deny it.

Jesus not only drew on that story. He lived it. He died under it. That brings us, then, to the story of Jesus himself. Which we will look at next week. Amen.

† **Prayer**

Almighty God, our heavenly Father,
we praise you for your extravagant love that gives us hope, joy, and courage.
We praise you for your love that never lets us off, never lets us down, and never lets us go.
We praise you for your sovereignty and your holiness and that they are saturated in love.
We praise you for dealing with our fears, touching our lives, and healing our brokenness.
We praise you that in your wisdom and grace you did not leave us to try to find you in our own strength
or to doubt the reality of your loving-kindness and mercy.
We praise you for always being there when we needed you most,
for being there when we least expected it,
for being with us when no one else could be there and no one else wanted to be there.
We praise you that every time we look to Christ,
we are reminded there is nothing he does not know about us and
nothing he does not understand about our lives.
We praise you that you come to us again and again.
You lift us when we are down and hold us when we are hurting;
you fill us with your grace and share all the twists and turns of our lives.
Mighty God, wonderful Saviour, living Lord,
by your Holy Spirit enable us to give you the praise and glory you deserve.
May the song we have begun ring out through all the world and to the end of time.
Through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

† **Benediction (Amen)**

Whatever we face, we do not face it alone.
Wherever we go, we do not journey alone.
However we suffer, we do not bear it alone.
Whoever we are and wherever we go and however we journey,
we go in peace, in hope, and in faith
for we go with Christ, who always goes with us.
Go...
(+) In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.