

## Sermon Archive 461

Sunday 3 December, 2023

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: Isaiah 64: 1-9

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



When Covid-19 began to spread around the world, and people found themselves asking "what happens to the world" when pandemics rage and people get frightened, historians found themselves poking back into the example of the Black Death in Europe in the Fourteenth Century - when an estimated 50 million people died, along with an unquantified large number in the Middle East, central Asia and parts of China.

Because the disease tended to be brought into semi-isolated communities by travellers, strangers, many communities closed the doors - inter-regional as well as international trading practically ceased. Some communities committed themselves to fasting, praying, bargaining with God, so there was a momentary increase in religious fervour - and the economic benefit that that tends to bring. Superstition flourished, since when nothing rational is working, maybe there's a temptation to try anything (rational or not). The arts community produced a whole lot of works about death and mortality. Skeletons, rotting fruit, flies - art became extremely dreary. Everyone knew someone who died - most knew many - so there were tears. As huge numbers of the agricultural workforce died, many farms ceased to function - and the decrease of crops harvested added hunger to the whole experience. Now you could die not just of the Plague, but also of starvation.

Then slowly, the Plague was over. Now the historians have told their story, the economists begin theirs. They note that with a vastly reduced workforce (particularly around food production), those who wanted workers naturally had to pay more for them (supply and demand). It is reckoned that this is one of the major causes of the collapse of the feudal system. Workers were no longer willing to work for nothing. Money now needed to enter the workplace. Europe's old economic structures were basically never again the same.

It was also noted that a number of revolutions occurred around Europe after the plague. Plague had made people rather more demanding, rather less inclined to be pushed around, rather more hungry for their own power - a

power that made sense in a more equal world ("equal" in that the plague had killed rich as well as poor. In the century after the plague, religious fervour not only subsided, it almost disappeared. After all, the church's efforts to halt the pandemic showed it not to have any magical powers that could preserve us. People became angry at the church's perceived failure. It was particularly poor P.R. when whole monasteries of monks themselves got wiped out. It is surmised that this general spirit of disappointment with the church gave some momentum to the reformation, after which the church (in terms of its claim to authority) was never the same. Pandemics destabilise the power balance; they bring out the revolution; even once they're technically over, they leave the world rather more tempestuous.

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People talk about our times (Covid times) as possessing a new ill temper, an argumentativeness, a heightened nastiness. It's as if we're acting like frightened people. Well, if the historians and economists are right about the on-going effects that tend to follow plagues, perhaps we shouldn't be surprised. And if the psychologists could also contribute their two cents, perhaps they would say "well, of course, trauma takes a toll, and this is just how frightened people live".

What would the theologian add?

The theologian might read a passage from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. He'd note that the passage comes from a time where society has collapsed, not because of fleas and rats and plague, but because of culture war and military force. Babylon invades, takes the cream of the population away into exile, and leaves the cities in ruin. It's a time of high trauma, where nothing works anymore. There is plenty feeding the people's fear.

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What do they do when they're full of fear? When they are full of fear, they start talking to the interventionist god who kindles fire in the brushwood - who causes water to boil, who shouts his name at his adversaries. They talk to a god who makes mountains shake and nations tremble. They talk to a god who tears open the heavens to teach the ignorant a lesson. "O, that you would tear open the heavens and come down" Isaiah says.

The King of love shepherd may well be, but when I'm frightened, my human nature seems to want a war lord. If my enemies have had power to take away my power, I want my god to escalate the power grab. In my

disempowerment, I'm kind of cemented in my thinking that the solution must be a great power. Fighting fire with greater fire. In my being frightened, I can't quite find a poise of mind to frame the reasoning of a Martin Luther King (*"Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."*). No, when I'm frightened, I want the water to boil.

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What do we do when we're full of fear? When we're full of fear, we give ourselves to despair. Maybe it's all our fault, something we've done to ourselves. Maybe we deserve no better than what we've got. Isaiah says "we have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth". It's a fine line, isn't it, between acknowledging responsibility, and falling into despair. For despair debilitates, it does not solve. Despair closes doors, it does not open them. Despair hears not the words "you are forgiven and you are free to live". It hears only "to hell with you - off you go". And where do you go from there?

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What do we do when we're full of fear? When we're full of fear, we get angry at Babylon - and I can understand that. When Babylon has been the active agent of our misfortune, the other human beings who have killed our children and bombed our buildings, well, it's easy to hate them. Isaiah talks about adversaries. He speaks of the nations that need to learn to be frightened - whom we wish fright upon. "They don't call upon your name. They don't grasp your magnificence. They're just a withering wind - full of destructive force and evil. Let them be destroyed! - he says.

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What do we do when we're full of fear? When we're full of fear, we've been angry at Babylon, but Babylon persists, sometimes we'll get angry at the God who should have stopped them. Blame God! But you, O God, were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed. If you hadn't hid your face from us, we'd have stayed on the straight and narrow. How could you do that to us - be our God but hide your face?

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What do we do when we're full of fear? The theologian contends that we do all these things of fury and fire, and despair and confusion, and grasping at the straws of a power that never will work. That's what we do.

But maybe there are seeds of a better way - a way less filled with fear.

Isaiah calls upon God to not remember iniquity forever. Let go, he prays, of that record of wrong. And in that small prayer, there's an acknowledgement that "letting go" may be a thing of critical importance. Can we do that?

Isaiah reminds God "now consider, God, we are all your people". Does Isaiah mean to include Babylon in that? Surely not! But if so, perhaps also of critical importance is the rehumanising of the enemy, the accepting of the third culture in which we all are one. Can we do that?

Isaiah also begins to explore the idea that we are the clay, and that God is our potter - that human people can be the work of God's hands.

There are hands in which we become art. There are hands in which we become useful. There are hands in which we find a form that may be even beautiful. If humanity allows itself to be malleable, to be fashioned skilfully, to be made right for whatever the potter would - plates for a table of grace, trays for the bread of life, cups for the wine of the new covenant . . .

To give ourselves to the loving and creative fashioning of the God who doesn't tear open heavens, but is born in a stable. The God who doesn't burn the brushwood, but kindles the candle of peace. What do we do when we're frightened? A better question might be "what do we do when, in Advent hope, we no longer are afraid?" Could Christmas be the story that enlivens this better God in whom we no longer are afraid?

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This Advent, we are exploring our Advent longing. In the fright of the world, do we long to be useful and beautiful - in a new Advent hope and vocation? We are all your people. We let go of the wrong. We are clay in the hands of the potter . . .

We keep a moment of quiet.

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