



Lessons from Lockdown

A summary of sermons by John Macleod recorded at Allander Evangelical Church during the Coronavirus lockdown in March, April and May 2020 taken from synopses written each week in the church's Newsletter.

Prologue

The coronavirus pandemic in the Spring of 2020 caused the suspension of church gatherings during March, April and May, depriving congregations of the opportunity to physically meet for worship. However, one of the very positive features of this period was the way churches responded to the challenge and found innovative ways to overcome the handicap of not being able to meet formally by streaming services and taking full advantage of modern technology to continue functioning.

Allander Evangelical Church made good use of Zoom for its Prayer and Bible Study but retained the long-established practice of recording its Sunday sermons for access through its website. Yet, it was different because the sermons, due to the lockdown, were preached in an empty sanctuary building. Far from diminishing their value, this generated another difference. Because of the situation and its uncertainty, and increasing apprehension regarding what was happening, there was a seeking for, and a growing awareness of, God using this crisis and speaking very clearly to His people, as well as to the nations.

The ten sermons preached during this period certainly had the mark of divine anointing and, together, constitute not only a coherent sequence, but also a clear and timely – almost prophetic – message calling for an appropriate response.

This booklet is an attempt to capture the essence of that message, using synopses which appeared each week in the Church's Fellowship Newsletter.

It is being made available as required as a reminder for those who listened to the sermons and a token version for those unable to do so.

The sermons themselves were preached by John Macleod and are available as audio recordings on the church website. www.allanderchurch.org.uk

SERMON SUMMARIES

Truth for Troubled Times Psalm 46 (March 22)

Inspiration comes through the ministry of God's Word. The last two Sundays' ministry in recorded form have highlighted that hope that comes from Scripture. On Sunday 22nd March the sermon on Psalm 46 reminded us of the powerful assurance of an almighty God who is both a refuge and a strength. He is ever present so that we need not fear. It also leads us into a divine perspective and an instruction to see these crises as theatres where the works of the Lord – his victorious redemptive work - can be seen.

Strength for our Struggles John 11: 1 -16 (March 29)

Yesterday's sermon, continuing the series on John's Gospel, highlighted some powerful truths. Being loved by God – which we undoubtedly are – does not mean we are exempt from life's difficulties. We all need to pray and trust. And, delay on God's part does not mean rejection, for it is often in these uncertainties that we come to learn to trust, even when we don't understand what is happening. Yet, even though we don't understand what He is doing, He is still worthy of our total commitment.

Compassion in our Crisis John 11: 17 – 37 (April 5)

In a powerful and passionate message, John, completing the story of Lazarus in yesterday's Palm Sunday sermon, developed the idea, shared last week, that delay on the part of Jesus was not rejection but deliberate. There were lessons to be learned of more value than temporary comfort. It was more than a genuine offer of help to a grieving family.

Seeing their confusion and distress that this had happened because He wasn't there, Jesus shares their grief but assures them that he is capable of more and better than they expected. He is the Resurrection and by in believing in Him there is power over death. That echoes Paul's assurance to the Colossians: *Christ in you, the hope of glory.*

Nor was it a dispassionate truth for He grieved over the sin of man that was the cause of such distress, as He set His face towards Jerusalem to pay the ultimate price and gain the Victory. That is the confidence that can take us through the present crisis.

Reality of Resurrection John 11: 38 – 41 (April 12)

It is not insignificant that the next episode in the series in John's Gospel, due on Easter Sunday, was the raising of Lazarus – the seventh Sign marking the climax of Jesus' ministry. And, like the other signs, it was intended that "you might believe".

He is seen at the graveside with Martha and the other mourners grieving because death has taken its inevitable course - ultimate devastation because of sin. In this situation, Jesus is "deeply moved" that sin exists but, different from the other bystanders, He sees resurrection not just as restoration of the old but the achievement of the new – if only they believed.

As Martha and the others are caught up in the limited reality of the present, Jesus reminds her that He is the resurrection and that if she believed she would see the glory of God in what was about to happen. The key lesson is: believe. So, we should turn our eyes from the immediate and appreciate the One standing beside us and believe that He is the One who brings, not restoration, but resurrection and new life. In response to that belief His Voice will breathe new life through resurrection power to God's glory.

Looking for Life John 11: 45 – 47 (April 19)

The powerful ministry over three Sundays on the raising of Lazarus has shown that, within the compass of a loving God, Jesus, while clearly showing deep feeling for the grief being experienced, deliberately delayed His response in order to encourage faith and belief so that they would come to appreciate the purpose of God in it all and see his glory.

Yesterday's sermon was concerned with the aftermath which was something of an anti-climax and yet was critical. Making several observations, John pointed out that miracles do not guarantee belief, but that belief is a personal commitment to trust. Those who don't believe are not neutral but become aggressively anti, fearing for their own 'freedom' and independence. Yet, in it all God is working out His own purpose of redeeming a people for Himself.

And, so, being presented with what God is wanting to see accomplished in our situation, we are challenged with the need to "*look for Jesus*" and to believe. The secret of this final Sign in John's Gospel is the same as that in the first when Mary said: Whatever He says to you, DO IT.

Looking for Jesus Phil 1: 29 – 2: 5 (April 26)

Following on from the phrase cited at the end of last week's sermon on the action of Mary and others after the Lazarus incident – *They looked for Jesus* – John took us to Philippians and Paul's very personal plea to a church that was showing signs of issues which might affect its testimony. Christian life in an alien environment was becoming a challenge. Yet, echoing previous sermons, they had been "*called to be saints*" and to be part of His purpose. Being loved by God did not exempt them from facing hardships. Indeed it was a privilege to be 'witnesses' in such a context. Constantly, he echoes a note of joy and rejoicing. How can that be?

The answer is not to look at problems but to look to Jesus: to share His mind-set.

Paul reminds them that, having Jesus, they should be **encouraged** because of their union with Christ; **comforted** in being loved by God; enjoy **fellowship in the Spirit**; and appreciate experiencing and expressing **tenderness and compassion**.

Why were they in danger of becoming disintegrated? It wasn't the enemy or circumstances but their own self-centredness. So, for us, having Jesus, then let us "*forget about ourselves and concentrate on Him*" thus walking worthy of our vocation and reflecting His purpose.

The Mind-set that Matters Phil 2: 1 – 11 (May 3)

Drawing attention to the fact that one of the features of the current situation is the anxiety that people feel and express, wondering what is going to happen, why, for how long, etc, John powerfully reminded us of the principle that our way of thinking is critical to our way of living.

That is clearly manifest in the world where, currently, its traditional values, such as possessions, position, and lifestyle, are being challenged and shown to be a 'house of straw'.

What of the Christian? Should we not be thinking differently from the way the world thinks? The Bible clearly thinks so and has much to say about the importance of the mind and 'thinking Christianly'; seeing things '*from God's point of view*', '*having this mind-set in you that was in Christ Jesus*'.

Romans 12's: "*Be not conformed to this world but be transformed **by the renewing of your mind***", like the Philippians 2: 5 exhortation, is not only addressed to the individual believer but to the church as an entity so that what should be our guiding principle in the present (and any) circumstance is: What is God's purpose in all of this? What is God saying? How does God want me / us to respond and live? That means turning from what comes naturally, to a deliberate adoption of Christ's mind-set as evidenced in the Incarnation when He humbled Himself knowing that what He was going through was in pursuit of God's purpose and glory.

The Pathway of Godly Thinking Phil 2: 5 – 13 (May 10)

Last week, John reminded us of Paul's exhortation to the Philippian church to adopt the mind-set of Jesus. That mind-set was based on two key principles:

- Jesus lived for the glory of Another. His sole and consuming concern was to "do the will of Him who sent me".
- Jesus trusted His life to the governance of this Other: He became obedient. He willingly accepted whatever the will of God entailed in practice.

That mind-set is spelled out in detail in this wonderful 'hymn' (Phil 2: 6-8) adopted by the early church, for it showed that:

The supremacy of His status was not something that Jesus sought to use for his own advantage.

From a position of power He chose to be weak, humbling Himself by becoming a man.

And, from that place of humility, He embraced further humiliation for the sake of others: He became "*obedient unto death*".

That is the attitude and these are the actions that we should adopt as we follow the commands of Jesus and "*take up our cross*", "humbling ourselves under the mighty hand of God" knowing that "*he who keeps his life will lose it but that he who loses his life for my sake shall find it*".

Trust Vindicated Phil 2: 5-11; Hebrews 11: 30 – 12: 2. (17 May)

In a week where governmental declarations intended to provide clarity have caused confusion because of uncertainty regarding the sources informing such pronouncements, John reminded us that God has an eternal plan in which we can have total confidence.

That plan is executed through and by Jesus Christ and displayed in both His 'mind-set' and in His incarnational example; both of them in complete contrast to this world's attitude and stance.

The two transformational principles underpinning Jesus' work: living for the glory of Another and entrusting Himself to the governance of His Father, led Him to an experience of condescension and deep humiliation. Yet, that trust was vindicated, for God has "*highly exalted Him*" and given Him "*a name above all names*". And, at that name, "*every knee will bow ... and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord*".

Meanwhile, the challenge for us is to willingly and gladly acknowledge that absolute Lordship by adopting the same mind-set and accepting the humiliation, for it is all for the glory of God the Father.

And that means practical outworking.

Godly Workout Phil 2: 12, 13 (May 24)

We were reminded again that, despite restrictions and lockdown, God is still at work – at a cosmic level, in us personally, and corporately through the church. His objective is still to bring us into conformity with Jesus, as presented in the picture of condescension and accomplishment spelt out in the earlier verses of this chapter. (Phil 2)

The theological truth presented here emphasises His being an example. But theology itself has a purpose. It is intended to be practical and have an outcome in real life. That means two things for us, as individuals and as a church.

In the first place we must shoulder our responsibility in that outworking. As stated in so many scriptures, the onus is on us to *work out our salvation*, to adopt Jesus' mind-set, with fear and trembling, and evidence our obedience to the manifest will and purpose of God. That won't happen without our voluntary, disciplined, and consistent endeavour.

There is also a need to acknowledge the reality that in that process – however difficult, painful, discouraging, or faltering it may be - it is God still at work accomplishing in us, with our active engagement, the purpose of God in our lives, both personally and corporately.

What God wants you to do? Phil 2: 15 – 18 (May 31)

In concluding the series on Philippians 2: 1 – 18, John asked us to imagine the scene where the Philippians, encouraged by all that was being said, were excitedly anticipating details of the practical outworking.

To their surprise, the reply was abrupt, simple and stark: Stop practising those ordinary aspects of behaviour, like grumbling and arguing, that are instinctively natural in the world but not appropriate for the child of God who has adopted the "mind of Christ" as the governing principle in everyday living as a Christian. The reason for doing that is that they – and us – may:

- Grow in their identity as children of God in ordinary aspects of behaviour.
- Glow as Christians in their testimony to the world.
- Gear themselves in this life for living in eternity.

By doing that they would not only fulfil Paul's ministry to them but also, as faithful stewards, be a pleasing 'sweet savour' to God who would "*see of the travail of His soul, and be satisfied*"

Epilogue

These separate sermons form a developmental sequence and a coherent whole, in which there are four distinct phases.

Understandably, they began with a reassuring message. The situation was undergirded by the fact that, for the Christian, "*God is our refuge and everlasting strength*". Whatever was happening was within the context of the providence of a God of love. In contrast to the world's fear, the believer could rest assured in the sovereignty of an almighty God. It offers unique peace and rest.

Within that compass of assurance and comfort, the question arose of what is God saying to us in these circumstances, just as He has used situations in the past to further His purposes. That focused on the resumed series from John's Gospel which featured the story of Lazarus. A delay in response, that was disastrous in human terms, turns out to be a deliberate strategy by the Lord Jesus to show that, although He could (and did) respond to immediate need, His concern was with them learning and accepting His ultimate ministry of resurrection and victory. Faith would benefit from such a delay and grasp an important lesson to be learned: not **why** this but **what** this? What is God teaching us?

The series then reverted to a resumption of the Philippian studies. (Both these – John's Gospel and Philippians - were ongoing series at the church when the lockdown occurred). To learn the lesson fully meant looking to, and at, Jesus. In contrast to the temptation to address "*the things which are seen*" and focus on negative factors, the difference between default natural thinking and transformational spiritual perspectives is exemplified in Jesus. His mind-set manifested an understanding of the priority of God's purpose despite any personal cost, yet with an assurance of subsequent victory. It meant a path of humiliation which was then followed by glorious vindication yet to be realised fully when "*every knee would bow*". Having been through the Lazarus orientation, they were now to adopt the principles and "*have this mind-set (i.e. of Jesus) in you*" in stark contrast to the world's principle of self-interest and aspiration.

That, however, has to be applied and implemented in real practice, which led to the concluding phase of "*work out your own salvation with fear and trembling*", and asking the question: what does God want me to do? Like that of the Lord Jesus, it will mean humiliation, 'death to self', misunderstanding, and maybe worse but, hard though it might appear, with discipline, it will be "*God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good pleasure*". And that will be seen in appropriate human behaviours in what may be described as the 'mundane' aspects of ordinary living among ordinary folk; yet enabled by a divine power.

The remaining issue is: response. How do we respond to such a message? Will we learn the lesson? Will we put it into practice? The sphere for that outworking is not any grand theatre but in the ordinary walk of life; nor is it the province of the few but the responsibility of all for none is insignificant or exempt. Our testimony

and effectiveness, whoever we are, will depend on that. It is a glorious prospect as the hymn assures us that *"listening to His voice new life the dead receive"*. But, equally Hebrews warns: *"See that you refuse not Him who speaks from heaven"*. It is an obligation to *"walk worthy of the vocation to which you have been called"*.

It will not be easy. There will be stumbles and inadequacies. God understands that and encourages those who *"look to Jesus the author and finisher of our faith"*. Faltering is accommodated but refusal will lead to the same situation as obtained when *"men preferred darkness rather than light"*. That could lead to condemnation, but that is not what God wants: He is a redemptive God.

That is why God speaks creatively. The God *"who spoke unto our fathers by the prophets"* is speaking today and longs to see that Word taking effect: *Christ in you*. When He sees that, He will *"see of the travail of His soul, and be satisfied"*

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