

Message for March 22, 2020

John 9:1-7

My first indication that it would no longer be business as usual was when my daughter-in-law told my wife and I that her mother had been out shopping and there was no longer any toilet paper available. Then, a short while later, my sister who lives in Oakville phoned with news that she felt she had to share: she and her husband had decided to go out to buy some groceries. They went to the local supermarket where, much to their surprise, the parking lot was virtually full. To their even greater surprise, the parking lot was being patrolled by the police but even that didn't prepare them for the shock that awaited them when they entered the store. The place was crammed with people loading their shopping carts with everything imaginable. They took one look at the long check-out lines and decided to leave reasoning that they would pick up the few things they needed at a neighbouring Shopper's Drug Mart. There they were greeted by a similar scene. Not long after that phone call I received a text message from one of my daughters and in it she passed along some pictures of what was happening here in Milton. As in Oakville, the grocery stores were jammed with people, many of whom had filled up carts. And this of course was just the beginning; indeed the speed of the changes in the world around us in the week and a half since then is positively dizzying and life as it was before the Covid-19 outbreak almost seems to be a distant dream.

Inevitably perhaps when something like this happens some people try and make sense of it all; is there a point, a meaning or a purpose to what is taking place? Almost inevitably, there are also some people who proclaim that whatever is happening is the judgement of God and that God is punishing the world for its sins. Thankfully I haven't heard many of these self-styled prophets of judgement and I must confess that I am glad as I have long had real difficulty with their theology and their very understanding of God himself.

Over the years I have seen too many bad things happen to good people to believe in an easy co-relation between sin and punishment. Indeed if bad things are sent as a punishment, then what does it say about the nature of God? Rather

than being a being of love and compassion, God is reduced to little more than a judge watching us and waiting to slap us down if we break the rules. And yet, perhaps because it does provide an explanation for the bad things that happen in the world around us, sometimes people do like to think that there is a co-relation between sin and punishment. Certainly the first disciples thought there was.

One day Jesus and his disciples encountered a man who had been blind since birth. The disciples wanted to know; who had sinned that he was afflicted in this way? Since the man had been born blind it didn't seem likely that he was being punished for his own sins. Perhaps, they wondered, it was his parents. Was it possible that they had done something wrong and their son was being punished for their misdeeds?

In reply Jesus totally rejected the notion that the man was blind because he or someone else had sinned. Jesus then made a paste with some dirt and spittle, put it on the man's eyes and told him to wash it off in the Pool of Siloam. The man did as he was told and he was cured!

During the past week as I thought about today's scripture passage in light of the times we are now living in, I kept coming back to Jesus' response to the blind man and his plight. When asked why he was blind, Jesus didn't engage in a long theological conversation about the why or the meaning of it all, rather he did something to help him.

We are of course living in a time of great uncertainty and even fear. In fact it seems as if almost overnight the familiar world that we are used to has disappeared; indeed in many ways the world around us now seems to be somewhat alien and even threatening. And in these changed circumstances the question is how should we live as the people of God and the disciples of Christ?

Every morning my email inbox contains an email entitled "Presbyterian Daily Devotional". These are written by different people and I found the words of the one posted on March 6th by a Vincent Walter of Toronto very thought provoking. It was posted before our lives were gripped by the Covid-19 crisis and in it he wrote:

“A friend recently sent me a quotation that I found helpful. ‘When you can’t control what’s happening, challenge yourself to control the way you respond to what’s happening. That is where your power is’”.

How very true. Right now we may feel powerless with little if any control over what is happening around us but even so, we can control our responses. In my message posted on the church’s website earlier this week when I announced that the worship services are now cancelled, I noted that when asked what religion and by implication life itself are all about, Jesus responded with the words of what we call “The Great Commandment”; we are to love both God and our neighbours just as we love ourselves, love simply being treating others as we wish they would treat us. At this time love of our neighbours means that we can no longer gather together as a community of faith to worship but even so, our love of our neighbours still means the church’s ministry, our ministry, continues.

We can and should minister through such as prayer, phone calls and keeping tabs on people. We can and should minister by making sure that those around us in isolation have needed supplies. Indeed I am sure that we can all add to these suggestions. The truth however is that at this time the ministry of Christ’s church and His people are needed more than ever before. And of course we must never ever forget too that Christ, the one who ministered to that blind man so long ago, is present and ministering both with us and to us as well. “Lo, I am with you always” said Jesus, “to the end of time” or, as I have said before in so many sermons; no matter where we go, no matter what we do, no matter who we are or what does or does not happen, God is with us and his love will never let us go. And that is enough, even in times such as these.

Amen