

May the words of my mouth and meditation of all our hearts be always acceptable to thee my strength and my redeemer

Saint Paul must have been on a roll when he was writing to the Romans. Rather than sitting at his desk quill in hand I can picture him in the pulpit shouting the rallying cry for the church. 'If God is for us... Who can be against us?' I think it is meant to be a rhetorical question. For if the omnipresent, omnipowerful, omniscient God is on your side what enemy need we fear? But I would like to suggest an answer anyway. To quote the venerable comic strip Pogo who was in turn quoting an American naval officer during the War of 1812: "We have met the enemy, and it is us. "

St Paul goes on to say: Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword ...or pandemic? If God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life then we can take comfort that nothing can, or will, separate us from the love of God.

Just because we will always have the love of God to support us does not, however, mean that our life will be easy or without suffering. The list is long: racism, sexism, ageism, discrimination, intolerance, pollution, unemployment, global warming, overpopulation, poverty, starvation, homelessness, war, natural disasters, mental illness, family dysfunction, sickness, death, grief and pandemic. Luckily we will not all suffer all of these torments but none of us will go unscathed. Who is responsible for most of this suffering? Certainly not God. And If God is for us who can be against us?

The second of the Great Commandments is “love thy neighbour as thyself”. And in psalm 8 we read, “ What is man that thou art mindful of him. Thou hast made him but little lower than the angels and hast put all things in subjection under his feet.” Much of the suffering in this world be it personal or global is of our own doing either personally or corporately, by the failure to live up to our responsibilities to be the stewards of creation and to care for our neighbours as ourselves

The winter and spring and perhaps the summer and fall of 2020 and 2021 will be something that will be talked about long after many of us are gone. Covid 19 will make its way into history books. It has been hard on all of us both here and around the world. Schools closed, workplaces shuttered, no hockey or baseball or tennis, no theatre or concerts, no visiting or entertaining or going out to dinner, no travel. But some have had it much much worse, lost jobs, bankruptcies. Elderly relatives in harms way with no family to support them, hospitalizations, deaths, and no church. Just when the world most needed the support and caring of the church the doors are barred.

But wait a minute is the church really the building at Duke and Water? No, Christ tells us that we are the church and the building is just a place to gather to hear the word of God, to share the sacraments, to pray and to sing. It is painful to do without the sacraments and we miss the vestments, the procession, the hangings, the flowers and more importantly being together for worship and for me the singing. But while these are all important, they are not essential. The church today is errand buddies, calling shut-ins, checking on friends and acquaintances, virtual picnics, dinners, zoom meetings for the choir and worship services on Facebook, providing some hospitality to the homeless and destitute through meals not

bombs.... loving our neighbours as ourselves. Our vocation at this time is to be in prayer, perhaps wordless prayer, perhaps solitary prayer at the point where the world is in pain – it may be grieving the death of a friend or family member, or the impossibility of having a proper funeral, or the horror of millions of the world’s poorest being at risk, or simply because being in lockdown is depressing.

But If God is for us, who can be against us?

God did not cause the pandemic and no one else either designed it or caused it on purpose. It developed in Wuhan province in China, as many of our influenza epidemics do because of overcrowded populations of people and over crowded markets selling live birds and animals that allow viruses to move from one species to another. International travel did the rest. Do you realize that since 1950 the world population has doubled? This is not the first pandemic we have known. The plague of Justinian in the 6th century killed 50m half the world’s population. The Black Death in the 14th century killed 200m. Smallpox killed 300m people world wide in the 20th century alone. The Spanish flu of 1918 killed 50 – 100m people more than died in the war to end all wars.

By the way speaking of the Black Death, did you know that ten years after nailing his 95 theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Martin Luther was confronted by the plague? He wrote a pamphlet discussing whether it was morally permissible for religious and civic authorities to flee from a deadly plague, in which he advocated social distancing and wearing masks and went on to say that the worst people were those who, knowing they were symptomatic continued to infect others. Or those who passed the disease to others before they were completely free of the germ out of an attitude of

laziness or recklessness. To those who refused precautions he commented, “ This is not trusting God, but tempting him. God created medicines and provided us with intelligence to take care of ourselves so that we might remain in good health.” Things haven’t changed much in 600 years!

He went on to say that if Christ were the one suffering everyone would rush to help. But since Christ is in every stranger we must help everyone, as we are able. It was likely during this crisis that Luther penned our gradual hymn today “A Mighty Fortress is our God.”

For all the pain, suffering, and inconvenience that we have endured already with Covid 19 there have been some positive developments. Even after a few weeks of lessened traffic and industry the hole in the ozone layer was closing, the fish were back in the canals of Venice and the water was blue again. Air pollution was greatly improved over major world cities. People found they could work quite well from home and have productive meetings virtually. This should tell us something. If we continue to follow the rules we will survive Covid 19 but what about Covid 27 or Covid 32? The new normal may not look like the old normal. The new church may not be like the old church but we are adaptable as a species and whatever changes, I hope we will be able to sing again. The crisis of lockdown and the suspension of our everyday social worlds also give us the opportunity to think creatively about what is most important and how we might do things differently. It is not too late to seriously look at some of the huge threats to the natural world and our ability to coexist with each other in peace and harmony as Christ commands us to do.

We have seen more international cooperation and common goals throughout the world and at home in the past few

months to battle a common enemy, than we have for decades. In the city of Jerusalem, Christian, Muslim, and Jewish leaders are coming together to pray for the end to the coronavirus pandemic. So it can be done. If God is for us, who can be against us?

Paul closes the 8th chapter of Romans with a whirlwind tour of the universe just to make sure we understood him. To underline that despite all our shortcomings, our misguided nationalism, our need to save face, and our selfishness, God will always be there for us. “For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” We can take comfort in those words.

If God is for us who can be against us It is only us. I am persuaded that, with God’s help, we can, we must, and we will do better.

Amen