

What Was/Is God Saying to Us in 2020 and Through Into 2021?



1. What was/is God saying to us as Individuals?

Although we were all in the same pandemic storm in 2020, we were all in different boats in the storm and were impacted very differently.

Although my wife and I have been restricted in some of our activities and have had, like everyone else, to get used to much less direct face-to-face contact time with family and friends, in other ways our lives have been enriched, spending more time talking and praying together, doing more reading, and for me, more writing.

I would say we have been brought to a place where we have been able to evaluate what are the most important things to us, and been able to listen to, pray for, and give to all those who have been more adversely affected by Covid-19 than we have.

Being in 'lockdown', although limiting, can also be a time of revelation, as it was for Paul when he wrote his 'letters from prison', especially Ephesians, and as it was for John, 'distanced' from his beloved Church family on the Island of Patmos, but where he received that wonderful vision of Jesus, described in Revelation.

Both Paul and John remind us that Christianity must always begin with a transcendental relationship with our Father in heaven and that He, having raised Christ from the dead and seated him at His right hand in the heavenly realms, has also seated us with Christ in those same heavenly realms. This means that we are far above all rule and authority, power, dominion and pandemic ~ even though we ourselves may catch Covid-19.

We miss out if we are exclusively preoccupied with our 'earthbound' circumstances.

Having thus looked ‘upwards’, we can then look around us in order to assess and discern what is happening in the Church and in our own nation. What is God saying to us?

2. What was/is God saying to us as a Church in Britain?

There is no doubt in my mind that God has been, and is, shaking the Church. Are we experiencing a God-given opportunity to be set free from the chains of ‘Institutional Christianity’ with which we have been bound for some time, becoming complacent and even ‘at ease’ with the situation?

But what do I mean by ‘Institutional Christianity’? For me, it has various characteristics. It tends to replace reality with ritual, concerns itself with its own perpetuation and preservation, is tied to money, power, position and status, is restricted by bureaucracy and hierarchical structures, is wedded to traditionalism and legalism and is often identified with, or even identical to, political or social programmes.

Of course, Christians and Churches should be acting as salt and light in political or social programmes, but it is also an absolute necessity that our gospel, our good news, must include the need for repentance and a return to God in Christ.

It is not sufficient, thinking of the prodigal son, just to help him make his pigsty more comfortable without also helping him to see that some at least of his demise is because he has left the care, protection and provision of his father [God] and has been worshipping the gods of consumption and hedonism instead.

Any form of ‘Institutional Christianity’ which ties itself exclusively to, or becomes identified with, any political party or social programme but fails to address the needs of the soul as well as the body, is failing to proclaim the whole Biblical gospel.

Another area we may wish to consider is why, when the prodigals do return home, they can sometimes be met with rejection and coldness from ‘already members’ of the Church who display the same reaction and attitude towards them as those of the elder brother in Jesus’ parable (See Luke 15).

Shut Down

For the first time ever in this country, God caused, or at least allowed our Churches to be closed. Is this a reflection of how He views the current situation?

I am reminded of these words from the Lord in Malachi: “Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you,” says the Lord Almighty, “and I will accept no offering from your hands.” (Mal. 1:10)

But, as Church leaders and members, we don’t like such prophetic warnings and utterances, so we would rather just manage the ‘new normal’ (whatever that means) and make adjustments, ensuring that, as far as possible, we return to ‘business as usual.’

[Maybe a bit like the moneychangers and robbers in the Temple in Jerusalem who, after Jesus had thrown them out, presumably returned the next day to set up their stalls once more.]

Tom Holland picked up on this state of affairs when he wrote these words in the Daily Telegraph on 3rd May 2020: -

“The sweep of corona virus should present Christian leaders with an opportunity, yet it is one that mainstream churches in this country seem to be fumbling. Rather than speaking with the voice of prophecy, rather than explaining to a grieving nation, an anxious people how the dead will be raised to the blaze of eternal life, and rather than proclaiming the miracles and mysteries that they uniquely exist to proclaim, Church leaders now seem to have opted instead to talk like middle managers.”

We are all reluctant to see, and ascribe to God, things which happen on earth that we don’t like, and which disturb us and our sometime liberal theological understanding of who God is and how He should act.

I became a Christian in Yorkshire in the early 1970’s when David Watson was Minister of a Church in York. He was a fine and exceptional man of God. I remember going to occasional services in York Minster, that he and his team presided over, together with coach loads of people arriving from all over the north so that York Minster was filled to capacity. They were very special occasions where God’s power and presence were almost tangible.

But then something happened in the Minster on the night of 9th July 1984, a couple of days after David Jenkins had been installed as Bishop of Durham. He was, at that time, one of the most liberal and outspoken theologians, someone who neither believed in the Virgin birth nor the bodily resurrection of Christ.

At 2am on that Monday morning the Minster was struck by a lightning bolt. The bolt was so powerful it overrode the newly installed lightning conductor system and caused a fire which resulted in the roof of the south transept being completely destroyed.

It was a clear night with a cloudless sky, except for one small cloud which hovered over the building. No thunder was ever heard and none of the smoke alarms went off.



Even the secular press could see the correlation between the appointment of David Jenkins and God's Divine judgement on unbelief, but not the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, who said that God doesn't do things like that and doesn't directly control the weather anyway.

Had he never heard of the Flood, or the strong wind which blew back the waters of the Red Sea, or Elijah's prayer concerning rain, or Jesus stilling the storm on the Sea of Galilee? [I would recommend that you trace through the whole Bible how God controls the weather ~ it's a fascinating study.]

Some even thought that if the Archbishop had conceded that the event **had** been an 'Act of God', they would not have been able to claim the insurance money, not only for the building (which cost £2.25 million to repair) but also for the new, but now shrivelled and defunct, lightning protection system!

Neither was the then Archbishop of York, John Habgood, who had consecrated David Jenkins, willing to countenance any possibility of God's involvement.

He wrote a letter to The Times stating: - "To interpret the effect of a thunderstorm as a direct divine punishment pushes us straight back into the kind of world from which the Christian gospel rescued us." In other words, straight back into a world of superstition and mumbo-jumbo!

It's surprising how all these people seem to read the Bible with a pair of scissors! Billy Graham had a different perspective. He said: "This event served to shake people from their apathy and caused them to consider what the Bible really does have to say about life and God."

As it happens, Stephen Cottrell, the new Archbishop of York, was enthroned on July 9th 2020, 36 years to the day since the fire! Perhaps God wants to remind him, and us, of what happened then.

In his enthronement speech, Stephen Cottrell, whom I have spoken to on several occasions when he was Bishop of Chelmsford, said: - "The Church of England should let go of so much of our pomposity, privilege, position and power to become a simpler, humbler Church."

It remains to be seen whether this actually happens.

New Opportunities & New Challenges

Although 2020 was a taxing and stressful year for many, it has also presented us with new opportunities. I think this section of a poem called 'Christmas 2020' by a friend, Jane Jackson, captures the tension well: -

'Confused, we have floundered, chasing a chime
with reality, normality – hives
of angry, buzzing bees; or could we
have been making honey, golden bowls
sweet with service or opportunity,
seeking for fresh flowers, untrodden paths, new goals?'

Remembering that God only allows what He can use, we can see some of the benefits of what has happened in 2020. Different kinds of media on the internet have resulted in the Word of God being heard by many people who would not normally go to a church building.

Both recorded and live streaming of services into people's homes have made them available to a wider congregation.

The Anglican church I am a member of is seeking to link with CV Global who have had many more online enquiries from people asking the big questions about what is happening and what the Christian faith has to offer.

For those who already attended 'church', the shock of closure has taken away the traditional structures and the human contact and has made us all seek the Lord alone as the basis of our faith. This is surely a good thing.

For those in leadership positions, it has caused them to re-examine the structures, nature and mission of the church.

I remember once heading up a church-planting project on two new housing estates. At that time, we had no building of our own and were meeting in the local Primary school hall. Although supported by a variety of denominational churches in the town, we ourselves were non-denominational.

One day, an Anglican clergyman asked me if I thought we were a 'real' church (emphasising the word 'real')! I explained to him that a church was simply an assembly of believers who were committed to obeying the Lord's Great Commandment and the Great Commission and that it was not necessary to be either part of an Institution or even to have a special building in order to be a fully-fledged 'church' in the Biblical sense.

But I don't think he was convinced!

One thing which I think the Lord is pointing out to us is that we are going to have to be able to identify much more clearly what the church is. We must be able to distinguish, on the one hand, between the true 'ecclesia' as 'communities of believers' and, on the other, 'institutions' which may sometimes masquerade as churches.

Something, I believe, God does at times like this is to sift, sieve and shake what purports to be the 'church'. He did this in the time of Amos: "For I will give the command, and I will shake the house of Israel among all the nations as corn is shaken in a sieve..." (Amos 9:9).

He did it in the time of the exile to Babylon when kings, princes, priests, prophets and people alike were torn away from their worthless, institutionalised religious buildings and activities.

He did it through the ministry of Christ as John the Baptist proclaimed: -

"He [Jesus] will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." (Lk. 3:16b &17)

And He is, I believe, doing it now.



It will be interesting to see who returns to our congregations after the pandemic, who has been retained and who has been blown away.

The faith of genuine believers can never be dented or destroyed by the closure of buildings, or even the loss of corporate worship or fellowship, desirable as they may be.

When lockdown hit, I was mid-way through attending a 20- week Course called “The Way”; I have missed the other folks on the Course and the stimulation of meeting together each week with my fellow believers, but it hasn’t affected my faith.

However, the ‘fallout’ from this pandemic, especially for institutional churches, both in terms of ministry, buildings and even membership, will be considerable.

Another question ‘established’ Churches need to ask is why some committed Christians have been drifting away from them for some time. Reasons for this are being well researched at the moment and it is something I may write about in the future.

And it remains to be seen whether those new folks who have been introduced to our ‘virtual’ services at home and online will result in their attending in-person services after the pandemic is over!

Some folks have told me how they now like/prefer online services because the quality and variety of worship and teaching is better than what they have experienced in their local church; also, they can be ‘doing other things’ whilst they lend half an ear and half an eye to what is happening on the screen!

And of course, the collection plate never comes round!

Meanwhile, those churches who are in tune with the Lord will have ample opportunities to care for the needs of the whole person - body, mind and spirit - and demonstrate God's love.

Paul reminds us that this care is to be directed to all people, and especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

He also reminds us that when the needs are great, weariness can set in, so perseverance is necessary and we are to 'live by the Spirit', 'keep in step with the Spirit' and 'sow to the Spirit'. Then, the harvest is assured. (See Gal. 5:16 to 6:10).

Church leaders, however, are to avoid the trap of devoting more and more of their own time to providing food and 'waiting at tables' (which can be delegated) at the expense of the 'ministry of the word of God' (Acts 6:1-4).

Their priority should remain the study and proclamation of the Bible and prayer, otherwise there could be a 'famine of hearing the words of the Lord in the land', as in the time of Amos (Amos 8:11&12).

3. What was/is God saying to us as a Nation?

As the Church is being shaken, so is the Nation. The Archbishop of Canterbury agrees. He said recently: "The foundations of our society have been shaken to the core by the ravages of the coronavirus."

It is always good to read the Bible not just from a Church or a personal perspective, but also from the point of view of nations. As we do this, we discover that God is as interested in nations as He is in Churches and individuals!

Although God has a specific covenant relationship with His people, He still has a concern for those who are not His people. OT prophets did not only address the nation of Israel, but they also spoke to other nations (See Isaiah chapters 13-23; Jer. chapters 46-51; Ezekiel chapters 25-32; Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum etc.)

Nations are accountable to God. Ultimately, all their political, economic and military power are subject to His scrutiny and sovereignty. God is the Judge of all nations and uses them for His purposes.

Question: Where are the Christians today who are speaking, not just to Churches and individuals, but to the Nation(s)?

God has told us that: “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people” (Prov. 14:34), so when God looks down on our own nation, what are the things He sees which must displease Him? Here is a list: -

False religion – people worshipping other gods.

Injustice – the oppression and exploitation of the weak and vulnerable.

Immorality – deviation away from God’s order for marriage & sex resulting in high numbers of divorces, sexually transmitted diseases, abortions and confusion over gender identity.

Violence – abusing one another physically, emotionally, racially, sexually, financially.

Self-indulgent luxury – acquiring more and more and failing to share with others.

Occultism in all its different forms.

Lying, robbery, deceit and fraud.

Alcohol & drug abuse – using natural and synthetic substances to mask reality, produce an artificial ‘high’ and cover pain (Scotland currently has the highest death rate from drug abuse of any nation in Europe).



(Check all this out in passages such as Prov. 6:16-19; Jer. Chapter 7; Amos 6:4-7 and 8:4-6; Mal. 2:11-16; 1 Cor. 6:15-20; Rev. chapter 18 & 22:15.)

The problem is that through a combination of secular humanistic thought, deliberate government policy, an influential media, a weakened police and criminal justice system, and technology, it is now much easier for our fallen human nature to be seduced by these sins. In fact, they have become common place in our nation and even, sadly, in some of our Churches.

So, another contributory factor in the shaking of the nation must be the relative weakness and ineffectiveness of our witness as Christians. When people cast off restraint it is because there is no revelation of God and his requirements (Prov. 29:18a).

Question: Do you think it was right, during lockdown, that we were singing and pronouncing ‘the Blessing Song’ over our nation, a nation which has now aborted more than 9 million babies since the 1967 Abortion Act?

It seems to me that there are 3 things that we need to be clear about: -

1. **The present evidence of God’s displeasure and judgement upon us.** Even a casual understanding of the Bible reveals that God’s anger has always been, and is being, revealed through destructive disease, economic hardship, fires, floods, plagues, increased anxiety, depression and other forms of mental ill-health, social-breakdown and civil unrest.

(Read Deut. chapter 28; Psalm 2; Rms. 1 :18-32; Rev. 9:20&21.)

However, whenever this link is made between God’s anger and these sorts of physical, mental, social and meteorological consequences, it is easy for us, as Christians, to sidestep the issue.

We can do so in several ways: -

By saying, correctly, that people who experience these things are no worse sinners than anyone else, (this is exactly what Jesus said but with the added warning that if we don’t all repent, we will all perish - Lk. 13:1-5).

Or by saying that the God we worship is not “this sort of vindictive, bad-tempered, angry old man” – this was what David Jenkins said after the York Minster fire.

Or by saying that we bring these things entirely on ourselves and God is not involved at all, e.g., the belief that global warming is entirely due to human activity and is therefore something that we can cure and correct.

Or by saying that these things are just ‘natural’ phenomena, part of the fallen world in which we live.

There may be some truth in some of these statements, but not the whole truth. Sometimes there **is** a direct causal link between an individual’s personal sin and their own suffering (E.G. Ps.107:17) and sometimes ‘natural’ phenomena **are** allowed by, or are caused by, God’s direct ‘supernatural’ involvement (E.G. Ex. Chapters 7-11).

We cannot just dismiss difficult and disruptive events as though they have nothing to do with God. Rather we must listen and respond to what He is saying to us through them.

We should also beware of just reading the 'nice' parts of the Bible. For example, we often turn to chapters 40-55 of Isaiah for comfort and consolation but avoid chapters 1-39 and 56-66 where judgement, rebellion and punishment are in the foreground and hope in the background.

2. God will hold us responsible if we fail to be salt, light, watchmen and watchwomen in our nation.

"But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet to warn the people and the sword comes and takes the life of one of them, that man will be taken away because of his sin, but I will hold the watchman accountable for his blood.



Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel, so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me." (Ezek. 33:6&7)

3. If there is going to be any meaningful hope for the future, there needs to be a clear understanding of how and why we have got to where we are now.

This was the big lesson everyone had to learn when they were in exile in Babylon. How come we are here? Where did we go wrong?

It is not sufficient for us only to be aware of what we have lost during this pandemic (though grief and lamentation are a necessary part of this process) but we should also ask God **why** this has happened.

Hope for the Future.

I am confident that for those of us who love God and are called according to His purpose, this pandemic will work out for our good and for our ultimate benefit, hard as the present circumstances may be.

What happens to us as a nation will be influenced by what happens in the Church.

I am reminded of the prophecy given to a Russian monk, Seraphin, in 1911, and brought to the West by Mother Barbara. The part of it which relates to Britain says: "Britain will lose her empire and all her colonies and will come to almost total ruin but will be saved by praying women."

As we pray, hard hearts can be softened, blind eyes can begin to see, and deaf ears unstopped. Only repentance, release, rebuilding, restoration and renewal will lead to ultimate rejoicing and reward.

Jesus came, not to condemn, but to save, and we live now in these times of grace where all who ask will receive, all who seek will find, and to those who keep on knocking the door will be opened.

And we need to be sure in whom or in what our hope rests.

Are Vaccines 'Vials of Hope'?

Perhaps I should first explain that I am very much in the 'pro-vaccine' camp having been a 'pin cushion' for vaccines throughout my life including whooping cough, diphtheria, measles, smallpox, polio, tetanus, typhoid, yellow fever, hepatitis, flu, shingles and on and on.... and I await with eager expectation the Covid-19 vaccine.

The scientists are to be congratulated on producing this vaccine so quickly (4 years was the previous record) and one which also seems to be effective in combating the disease.



But I would never describe the Covid-19 vaccine, as I heard someone describe it recently, as a 'Vial of Hope', certainly not in the long term.

According to Steve Dunham, Associate Professor of Veterinary Virology at Nottingham University, unless we change course on the processes that drive pandemic outbreaks, we are probably heading for a 'pandemic era'. The Covid-19 coronavirus is only the tip of the iceberg.

There are 10's of millions if not 100's of millions of viruses in animals which are just looking for an opportunity to leap into the human population. The HIV virus (for which there is still no effective vaccine) jumped from primates to humans.

The Menangle virus in Australia went from bats to pigs to humans, similarly with the Nipah virus in Indonesia. Avian flu can move easily from ducks to chickens to humans, and the Covid-19 virus seems to have originated in live animal markets in Wuhan in China. Insects can also play a part in transmission.

As human beings interact with animals more closely, e.g., through the cutting down of the rainforests in Brazil, increased eating of bushmeat in western Africa, intensive factory farming etc., so there is a greatly increased risk of disease outbreaks. And because we now live in a globalised world, transmission from country to country and continent to continent is harder to stop.

With all this potential for mayhem, it seems to me that God must be 'holding back' what could be an even more catastrophic situation for the world's population. But for how long?

God is surely the one who controls all viruses and their distribution, so my hope, ultimately, is in Him.

Biblical Hope.

Christianity is the one religion that holds out for us a stupendous hope. Biblical hope is to do with confidence, expectation, trust, boldness, patient waiting, taking refuge and rejoicing.

It originates in God's word: "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have **hope**," (Rms. 15:4) and it is sustained by the God who is hope and by the power of the Holy Spirit: "May the God of **hope** fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with **hope** by the power of the Holy Spirit." (Rms.15:13)

Hope rests in God, in His word, in His Holy Spirit and in His Son. Christ is our hope (1 Tim. 1:1) and Christ in us, the hope of glory (Col. 1:27).

Finally, I love the phrase 'prisoners of hope' which occurs in this passage from Zechariah. We may be in 'lockdown' and our freedoms may be curtailed, but we are, by God's grace, most certainly 'prisoners of hope'! Good times are ahead!

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, daughter of Jerusalem!

See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation,

Gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the war-horses from Jerusalem,

and the battle-bow will be broken.

He will proclaim peace to the nations.

His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.

As for you, because of the blood of my covenant with you,

I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit.

Return to your fortress, **O prisoners of hope.**

Even now I announce that I will restore twice as much to you.” (Zech. 9:9-12)

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