

Release From a COVID Christmas Moderator's Comments Posted 12 December 2020

By Rev Dr Peter Barnes

The book of Isaiah is commonly understood to contain four Servant Songs, the best-known being Isaiah 52:13-53:12, which is that of the Suffering Servant. However, Isaiah 61 is surely a fifth Servant Song. Amongst other things, it prophesies that the Spirit-anointed Messiah would proclaim liberty to the captives (Isa.61:1). In His first recorded sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus drew attention to this prophecy – including the proclamation of liberty to the captives – and then added: ‘Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’ (Luke 4:16-21). The Messiah had come!

In 1943 Geneviève de Gaulle Anthonioz, a niece of General de Gaulle, was arrested as part of the French Resistance, and eventually sent to Ravensbrück, the notorious concentration camp where Corrie and Betsie ten Boom was also to be incarcerated. Geneviève oscillated between despair and holding onto the belief that ‘God was not absent’. At Christmas she remembered: ‘Today we are celebrating the Word of God which became a small child, who came to live among us. Yes, even in this desolate place ruled by wickedness and fear.’ Yet she struggled, and could not hear the voice of the Word of God above the moaning and screaming in the camp. It is a horrifying account, but not always an inconsolable lament. The title of her memoirs is *God Remained Outside* – which is understandable, but not quite fitting. God is not only outside, but inside too.

On 21 November 1943 another prisoner, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was in his Nazi prison cell in Tegel, and he wrote to his fellow pastor, Eberhard Bethge: ‘A prison cell is like our situation in Advent: one waits, hopes, does this and that - meaningless acts - but the door is locked and can only be opened from the outside. That is how I feel just now.’ One can empathise with him.

We have experienced nothing like what Geneviève de Gaulle Anthonioz and Dietrich Bonhoeffer experienced, but 2020 has brought with it a sense of being locked in and restricted. Our world has suddenly become smaller. Some of the old confidence is more muted. There has been no revival of faith as yet, but slogans like ‘We are Australians and Australians get through this’ sound rather hollow, even ludicrous. No one is sure, no one has answers. Is it nearly over? Will there be another wave? How serious is it anyway?

Martin Luther lived through the plague in 1527, and drew the obvious lesson: ‘Death is death, no matter how it occurs.’ We have statisticians trying to work out whether the coronavirus was more virulent than the influenza of previous years. Whatever the case, the mortality rate is, as Luther said, still 100%. To those with ears to hear and eyes to see, Covid-19 has simply reminded us of this.

The pre-covid, covid, and post-covid worlds have striking similarities: we are imprisoned in a world of sin, pain, and death, followed by the judgment of God. The good news of the gospel has come to take on this bad news. The human race cannot produce its own Saviour, so the Saviour has come from another world. He who was rich in glory became poor for us that we who are poor might become rich in Him (2 Cor.8:9). He emptied Himself and took on the form of a servant to die the worst of deaths for the sake of sinners (Phil.2:6-8).

To the world, the best news would be the discovery of a vaccine. But what then? More life in all its mixed quality – ‘joy and woe are woven fine’, to cite William Blake. Still the end is the same, and ‘what will you do when the end comes?’ (Jer.5:31) G. K. Chesterton pointed to the brutality of Herod in his attempt to

kill the Christ child, and then added: 'For those who think this a discord, it is a discord that sounds simultaneously with the Christmas bells.' So it does – the prison door slams, but there is a key. We cannot save ourselves except in our own imaginations, but there is one who can save. His work is written into His very name: Jesus (Matt.1:21). Lockdowns, no matter how temporary or mild, point to the greater lockdown. We are slaves to sin and death, but the Messiah has come from heaven to release the captives. God is above us but not outside. He has come as Immanuel (Mat.1:23), as the Word made flesh (John 1:14). Even after His return to glory, He has sent His Spirit that we might not

be left as orphans (John 14:18). This is true release for captives like us.

Happy Christmas to all,
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