

**Matthew Henry Evangelical Church – Sermon from Sun 28/3/20**  
**Nathan Paylor – “Coronavirus and the Throne of Christ”**

*“How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations! ... The roads to Zion mourn, for no one comes to the festivals; all her gates are desolate, her priests groan; her young girls grieve, and her lot is bitter” [Lamentations 1:1+4]*

Brothers and sisters, we are living in frightening times. These times are unprecedented, unknown, in our lifetimes. No one, unless you're over the age of 90, has seen *anything* like this! (I'm referring of course to the war.) We are in this together, young and old alike.

Whilst they may be unprecedented, God's people have known such times before. Scripture describes God's people in a state of catastrophe over and over again, be it the plague after the Golden Calf, or the fiery serpents in Numbers 21. How about the Assyrian Captivity of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, or the Babylonian Captivity of the Southern Kingdom of Judah? What about the plague that God sends amongst the Corinthians for not respecting communion? (You can read about this in 1 Cor 11.) God's people have found themselves in a state of catastrophe *many* times before.

And not just in Scripture – throughout Church history, if you're in any way a student of Church history, you'll know that God's people have witnessed this sort of crisis or something similar over and over again. In the third century there was the Plague of Cyprian, and a Christian called Dionysius wrote: “Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in the name of Christ.” And again, in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, during the Reformation period, plagues hit Geneva repeatedly. In 1541, Calvin wrote this to his friend Bucer: “The plague creeps toward us; if it has spared us for this winter we shall scarcely escape in the spring. What, therefore, can we do but betake ourselves to prayer, and to seek for the spirit of godly sorrow and confession of sin in the sight of God?”

Brothers and sisters, we are surrounded by a great cloud of heavenly witnesses. They are cheering us on in this! They are saying, ‘We have been here before – you are not on your own! Come on, you can do this!’ But they also provide us with two reminders.

First, in the words of the Psalmist: “*The LORD will not forsake his people, he will not abandon his heritage*” [Ps 94:14]. Paul says something in 2 Timothy: “*He remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself*” [2 Tim 2:13]. God is faithful during this crisis. He will not give up on us. Just as he did not give up on the Church in the past, he will not give up on us now. This will not end us! The gates of hell will not prevail against us. Second, in the words of Ps 103:14: “*He knows our frame; he remembers we are dust*”. God sympathises with us in our weaknesses; he knows that we are scared. He knows that we are afraid. He knows that you are anxious. He knows that you're worrying about what the shop is going to bring, he knows that you're worrying about what the next paycheck is going to bring – he knows all of these things, he knows your frame, he is faithful to you, and he loves you.

Brothers and sisters, I'll be honest with you: I have agonised over this sermon. This is maybe one of the hardest sermons I've ever had to write. It's also hard to deliver, for obvious reasons – I want to be *with* you in person, and no doubt you want to be with me as well. (Or maybe not...!!) But it's also hard, as a preacher, to quiet the billion things I'd *like* to say at this time, and to amplify the few things that God *commands* me to say. I have loads of opinions, as will you. You have ideas about where this came from, and where it's going. Maybe you're optimistic or maybe you're pessimistic. I am no different than you in this respect, but I need, as a preacher, to amplify that which *God* himself is saying. It's more important than ever that we understand what preaching is today. I've said this sort of thing before, but it's going to be harder for us to internalise now, because of the distance between us. I come to you not as a radio host, even though that is what this looks like! I come to you not as a podcaster, or as a politician, or as a medical health professional. I come to you as an *ambassador of the living God*, speaking to you using these 21<sup>st</sup> Century methods that God has in his providence provided for us. I come to you as an ambassador of Christ, whose hand is laying heavy upon us. If today you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts! God would speak to you today. The only question is: what would he say to us?

Turn with me to Matthew 8:

*“And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him, saying, ‘Save us, Lord; we are perishing’. And he said to them, ‘Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?’ Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. And the men marvelled, saying, ‘What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?’” [Matt 8:23-27]*

The wave comes, the disciples are on the boat, and they panic. In their own words, they feel like they are *“perishing”*. We can relate to this, perhaps more than we've ever been able to relate to it as 'first world' westerners. They feel like they're perishing, they feel like the waves are going to overtake them. Indeed, the politicians are now describing the coronavirus as like a wave that's approaching us and then might recede for a time before approaching us again. Have we not watched the news over the past week with that sinking feeling? A feeling that many of us have not felt before, as if a wave is about to crash over our heads?

In that very moment of panic, as the waves crashed and billowed around the disciples, and as they felt like they were perishing – who was Christ in that moment, but very God of God and Light of Light? This is what the disciples could not fully comprehend as yet. He was Sovereign over the waves that were crashing over the boat. He was even sovereign over the seaweed! He was sovereign over the seas and all that teem in them. He was *God!* He was God over the sky, over the stars, over everything. The disciples are the ones who are panicking. What is Jesus doing? He is *at rest!* He is *reposing!* He is *sleeping!* And at a **WORD**, the majestic theatre of creation... obeys.

Listen, friends, brothers and sisters – Christ is sovereign over this coronavirus. It's called the 'coronavirus' because the word 'corona' is Latin for 'crown', and when you look at the virus flat-on in a microscope it has a crown-like appearance. If you will, the coronavirus **WILL** cast its 'crown' at the feet of Jesus! *“You who have made me see many troubles and calamities WILL revive me again!”* [Ps 71:20] He is sovereign, and this little

virus has not unseated the King of Kings from his throne. But right now, what is he doing? He is at REST! *“When Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God”* [Heb 10:12]. Right now, at this very moment, the Lord of Lords and King of Kings is risen, he is ruling, and he is reigning. He is unsurprised by this. He is undefeated by this. And he is SEATED! He is sovereign, and he is at rest!

The Book of Hebrews also says that *“a sabbath rest still remains for the people of God”* [Heb 4:9] – and he bids us now, this Lord of rest, this Lord, this sovereign Lord who holds all things in his hands but RESTS in his sovereignty, this sovereign God is now inviting us into that rest. *“Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest!”* Not just for one day, not just for next week, not just for next month, but for this entire process – and if you’re not a Christian, for the rest of your lives.

Let’s move on. Turn with me to Isaiah 8:

*“Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. But the LORD of hosts, him you shall honour as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread”* [Isa 8:12-13]

Again, for the first time in our lives we’re experiencing fears we have never felt before. All of us are scared, and it’s understandable. For many of us, it’s a fear that grips us in our very souls – it is, to use philosophical language, an ‘existential’ fear. It makes you think, ‘What if this civilisation crumbles? What if I can’t get food? What if tomorrow is not promised?’ Jesus addresses this subject of fear a couple of times in the Gospels. Turn with me to the Gospel of Matthew:

*“<sup>31</sup> Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ <sup>32</sup> For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. <sup>33</sup> But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you”* [Matt 6:31-33]

Does Jesus say ‘some of these things’? No, he says ‘all these things’! What is the first response to existential dread? To the kind of fear that makes you think, ‘What shall we drink, what are going to wear, what are we going to EAT?!’ According to Jesus: *“Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you”*. If I can give us any encouragement at this time, it is this: seek God’s righteousness! In old world language: repent! Turn from the way in which we were living before and look to a new tomorrow that God has prepared for you. Bow the knee to God – the only one who can help you, the only one who can give you rest, the only one who can provide, the only one who can provide for you not just in this life, but when you pass from it! In the face of catastrophe, we need to turn to God. In Luke 13, Jesus mentions the Tower of Siloam which had fallen and killed people. It was a local catastrophe, akin to what we’re going through in microcosmic form. What does Jesus encourage his disciples to do? He says, *“Repent lest ye also perish”*. This is our first response – to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and then all these things will be added unto you. That is the first ‘antidote’ to existential dread!

Turn with me to Matthew 10, just a few chapters later.

*“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows” [Matt 10:29-31]*

What is implicit in Matthew 6 is explicit here. What is the basis of Jesus’ response to fear? It is to assure you – as he does right now, seated on the throne – that the God who is sovereign over all these things is not just ‘God’, but in Jesus, he is your *kind Father*. He has led you to this, not because he hates you, not because he despises you, not because he is pushing you under his thumb or punishing you for something you did a few weeks ago or because you didn’t go to Church enough. If you’re in Christ today, he has led you to these things because he is your kind Father – and all things come to you from his hand to disciple you, to discipline you, to sanctify you, and to give you an endurance that produces character, and a character that produces hope.

The Heidelberg Catechism is a 16<sup>th</sup> Century text, and it’s beautifully written. It asks all sorts of questions about the nature of the Christian faith, and then provides all sorts of answers. One of the questions is this:

“Q. What do you understand by the providence of God?

A. God’s providence is his almighty and ever present power, whereby, as with his hand, he still upholds heaven and earth and all creatures, and so governs them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed, all things, come to us not by chance but by his kind fatherly hand”

Your Father is *kind*. If he has led you into this, he will lead you out.

Let us now finally turn to Matthew 5.

“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” [Matt 5:14-16]

Brothers and sisters, we tarry for now in this earthly city - and it is precious to us. This nation is precious to us, this town, this city, it is precious. It is where we grew up. It is where we take our children to school. Within its walls, men and women meet, fall in love, and get married. Families with their own traditions. Memories of Christmases and birthdays. Rolling English fields, Sunday afternoon with the grandkids, dogs and cats with silly names. This is our earthly city – and we lament, for a virus is wrapping it in *thick night*.

BUT - into this darkness, God has sent a light. On the horizon is a city, and its beacons are burning brightly. In this city, “the dwelling place of God is with man” – he is our Immanuel, God with us, a very present help in times of trouble. In this city, God himself is with us as our God and we are his people. In this city, “death shall be no more” – we do not grieve as those without hope. In this city, there is “no need of sun or moon to shine”, for “its lamp is the Lamb”.

*“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” [Rom 8:35-39]*

In God’s good time, a new world, a new city, with all its power and might, is stepping forth to the rescue and liberation of the old! That is his providence for us. If our earthly city is to burn, brothers and sisters, then let it be said of us in future generations that we *shined!* That after everything else, we *stood!* That we did not retreat, that we were not cowards. That we acted like men, bold in the Gospel. That we acted like women of faith and character. That we did not shrink ‘at such a time as this’ from proclaiming the *whole* counsel of God. May it be said of us by future generations that we poured ourselves at a time of crisis, all for glory of our coming King – who is the Lamp in this city, the Light in which we see Light!

So I want to encourage you – you watchmen at the gates, those of you who are older and wise in years, those of you who are mums struggling to take care of your kids, those of you who are teachers going into schools, those of you who are doctors going to heal people in God’s name. You city on a hill! You Kingdom of Priests! You body of many parts! You crown in the hands of a living God! Listen to me: you *cannot lose!* God is faithful to us. Nothing can separate us from him. Go out. Pour yourselves out. ‘Awake, awake, O Zion, and clothe yourself with strength!’

We will get through this. Turn to God today – he loves you, and he can give you rest. Be strong. Be courageous. Be still. Know that God is God, and we are not.