

Merrylea Parish Church, Glasgow.

Pastoral Homily by the Locum the Revd Jim Gibson.

Sunday, 5th July 2020

Fourth Sunday after Trinity.

“Come to me, all you who are tired from carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke and put it on you, and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit; and you will find rest... “ (St Matthew 11: 28-29).

This morning I listened to a very unhappy lady on television. She was bitterly complaining that her city of Leicester was being locked-down for a second time. Asked why she felt so upset she replied she feared her city might become tainted in the minds of others and people would not wish to visit. Emotions everywhere run high. No-one wants to undergo a second period of hibernation. Yet, reality probably has it that such an occurrence may well prove necessary should the virus spike in specific locations: schools closed, businesses shut and people’s movement restricted. Sadly, intensive testing in Leicester resulted in 10 per cent coming back positive, five times the rate for England. One thing for sure: as far as whatever the future might hold there are just so many imponderables.

In my reading this week I came across an article by Dr Alastair Dobbin of Edinburgh University. He relates how a friend and colleague of his Karl Friston, professor of neuroscience at University College London, is championing the use of *Bayesian Statistics* in an effort to better understand *the science* behind Covid-19. If, like me, you have not heard of Bayesian Statistics then you may be interested to know they are based on the theories of an otherwise obscure English theologian and mathematician, Thomas Bayes (1702-1761). Bayes was a non-conformist minister of a church in Tunbridge Wells and was educated in London and later at Edinburgh University where he graduated in theology and logic. His theorem was published only after his death by a friend who went through his papers and sent it to the Royal Society in London.

In 2016, Friston was described in *Science* academic journal as *“the most influential brain scientist of the modern era “*. He has come up with a new model of the coronavirus plague, by reverse engineering the data from studies all over the world. Recognising the potential value of Bayes’ work in the 18th century, Frison has developed the process of Dynamic Causal Modelling (DCM) which now has applications in all fields of science. DCM apparently works like this: based on how the virus behaves in terms of infected cases and deaths, you can create different models of how it spreads and see how it is likely going to affect different environments, countries and continents. This helps provide the best data for advising government interventions etc.

It's all heady stuff to those, such as myself, unfamiliar with the intricacies of statistical science. But Dobbin claims this may help answer questions like why it is that Germany has had such a low level of deaths, while the UK and Sweden’s is so high; and how come Sweden which has not had lockdown, whose outbreak closely resembles the UK, has the same level of deaths? Friston’s conclusion is staggering: suggesting that 80% of the population is actually not susceptible to the virus! Why this can be, Friston can only speculate. Most interestingly, he thinks that the varied responses to the virus made across nations have actually impacted no differently. The good news from this study is that if only one in five people are susceptible, then the pandemic may be close to being defeated. Certainly, as I write, in Scotland there have been very few deaths in hospitals from Covid-19 over the past week. Something which ought to give us hope.

Another consequence of the use of Thomas Bayes' theories holds a particular interest for me. When applied through the work of behavioural science to human beliefs and behaviour, Bayesian methods have been used to explain how adverse childhood experiences can have an enduring effect resulting in distress and recovery levels in later life. If your experiences have led you in early or pre-adult years to expect that everything is your fault, that you are in some way a flawed person, then that belief may dominate your remaining life – sabotaging your confidence and positive feelings. I believe this to be highlighting a profoundly religious matter.

So often have I heard people say, "I'm not good enough to come to church"; "People won't welcome the likes of me"; "I am not a good person" only later to discover such feelings of inadequacy and lack of self-worth stem from a deeply ingrained and unjustified feeling of personal guilt. Over decades and, indeed, centuries the Church itself has played its part in deliberately toying with an individual's propensity for feeling 'guilty' and 'unworthy', simply to hold control and wield influence - in some cases, even, fear - over people. It placed an inhumanly heavy load placed upon the conscience of generations of faithful people. Thankfully, times have changed. We need, to have the courage and integrity, to acknowledge for that ever to have happened in the name of Jesus was, and is, an inexcusable scandal and a denial of the love of God.

The teaching of Jesus centres on a personal grace and graciousness which he showered upon every human being. No more so than through his readiness to show forgiveness. He was able to look through the eyes on an individual and see such feelings of guilt and unworthiness lurking deep in their soul that enraged him. He would become angry that any individual should be made to feel inferior to any other. None of us is perfect. That is true. We all have our own flaws of which we are usually only too aware. But our integrity as a human being, made in the image of God, is something inviolate. Forgiveness is always possible. Therein lies our greatest hope.

Prayer:

Loving God, for many people a gradual release from our recent lockdown at home is getting underway. Yet many are anxious after such a long period of isolation. May the loving support of family and friends and the guidance of government grant us all the reassurance people may need to begin the slow return to whatever normality is going to be in the short term. May the recent burden of worrying over the boredom of children or dependence of parents or others be transformed by our ability to move out of our homes and meet up again. For the continuing work of all who care for the elderly, the sick, the vulnerable, gratitude is voiced and the hope expressed that a vaccine may yet be discovered to protect all people from this global life-threatening virus. For good times on the horizon, enabling life to be celebrated and shared, thanks is offered. For even in the midst of all that would weary and oppress, love lives.

Our Father in heaven. Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sin as we forgive those who sin against us. Do not bring us to the time of trial, but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours. AMEN.