

Year A Trinity 4 HTK The Rev'd Robert Holland

Yes, you are correct, there is a pink elephant on the altar. For there is a pink elephant in our world currently but we're not really talking about it. I am referring of course to COVID 19 and the pandemic associated with it. Oh, we do talk about it but generally only in very guarded terms and more in terms of its effects especially on our daily lives. Rarely about the very nature of the disease and certainly even more rarely about the "why". That is the real pink elephant in the room. Let me remind about the current figures 15 million people infected, over half a million dead and growing, if not accelerating, in an utterly frightening way.

A few weeks ago the Vicar sent out in his weekly letter an article written by Bishop Tom Wright, titled *The Pandemic and the Will of God - The purpose of suffering may be mysterious, but the search for meaning is obligatory*. Some little time later a generous donor sent the parish multiple copies of Wright's recent monograph *God and Pandemic - A Christian reflection on the Coronavirus and Its Aftermath*. Here it is.

I have placed our remaining copies on the table in the Memorial chapel adjacent, somewhat ironically, but quite deliberately, adjacent to the bottle of hand sanitiser. You

*are most welcome to take one and, if possible, recycle it among friends or return it. Much of what I will be saying this morning draws on Wright's work.*

*But first a little from today's gospel. For if ever there were words of Jesus which are both appropriate and reassuring it is in this extract from St Matthew.*

*"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."*

*Let me come back to those words later.*

*In his original article in the New York Times Wright quotes a Dominican theologian Father Thomas Joseph White who suggested*

*there is a religious duty to interpret the present moment, not just seek to endure it or escape: "What does it mean that God has permitted (or willed) temporary conditions in which our elite lifestyle of international travel is grounded, our consumption is cut to a minimum, our days are occupied with basic responsibilities toward our families and immediate communities, our resources and economic hopes are reduced, and we are made more dependent upon one another? What does it mean that our nation-states suddenly seem less potent and our armies are*

*infected by an invisible contagion they cannot eradicate, and that the most technologically advanced countries face the humility of their limits? ... We might think none of this tells us anything about ourselves, or about God's compassion and justice. But if we simply seek to pass through all this in hasty expectation of a return to normal, perhaps we are missing the fundamental point of the exercise."*

I apologise for the length of the quote, but it summarises much of what Wright attempts to tackle in his book.

Wright begins by suggesting that rather than trying to answer the WHY question, we as Christians should focus on the WHAT. What can we do?

As way of answering that question Wright spends a great deal of time analysing Romans 8 and concludes that:

*God always wants to rule this world through human beings that is part of what it means to be made in God's image So what does this mean in practice. It means that when the world is going through great convulsions the followers of Jesus are called to be people of prayer at the place where the world is in pain.*

For by praying about the conundrum that is COVID-19 and asking God what we should do, we may well hear what God actually wants us to do rather than what we think is appropriate.

He continues:

*The thing above all which the church should be doing at the present time is praying but this is a strange prayer indeed St Paul seems to be saying, we don't know what to pray for us we ought. We're at a loss. He implies that this isn't something we ought to be ashamed of. It is the natural place to be in. It is a kind of exile, a kind of fasting, a moment of not knowing, not being in trouble, not sharing what we might think of as glory at all.*

One of the strangest aspects of the current situation is we as a church have meekly accepted that our church buildings should be closed. Faced with a major crisis we have followed a secularised lead. I note in passing that no major shopping centre has been closed or is likely to be!

Wright then moves on to how we move back to whatever the *new normal* is going to be whatever that means. He gives no easy answers but rather encourages us all to use this time of lament as a time of prayer and hope.

I suggested earlier that the verses from Matthew offer us a real perspective on our current situation. For the words of Jesus are extraordinary in their simplicity and their power. For Jesus says his yoke is easy, unlike the yokes that seem to drag so many people down today and his burden is light. Again totally at odds with what hear and see each day with our own eyes and in the media.

