

A Message for Today from 75 years ago

We are entering unprecedented times. Most of us don't remember the Great Depression of the 1930s and the Second World War of 1939-1945. While there have been significant crises and epidemics, for those of us living in Australia and New Zealand, nothing in our time has approached the last couple of weeks. And it hasn't really begun yet. It is obviously going to get much worse before it gets better.

I have been reflecting on where we find ourselves. It made me think of another time, before I was born. A series of sermons that were preached at the Church of the Hospitallers, in Stuttgart, Germany, during the height of WWII. Helmut Thielicke, a Lutheran theologian, is preaching on the Lord's Prayer. When he gets to the second petition, "Your Kingdom Come", he can no longer preach it in the church, because it is no longer there, so the service is held in the "choir", the only part of the church still standing. Bombs during the week had destroyed the rest, and much of the city, including, no doubt, many people's homes.

He begins the sermon:

"Isn't there a comfort, a peculiar message in the fact that, after all the conflagrations that have swept through our wounded city, a sermon can begin with these words: "We shall continue our study of the Lord's Prayer"? We don't need to interrupt and search the Bible for texts appropriate for catastrophe. The words of the Lord's Prayer are immediate to every situation of life. The farmer can pray it at the close of the day's work and let him wrap him round with the evening hush of its great tranquillity. The mother can pray it with her children in an air-raid shelter as the cargoes of death fly past overhead. The little child, experiencing the first presentiments of fatherly protection, the aged person, going through the trials and pangs of his last hour, both can say it."

I want to share with you some of the things that Pastor Thielicke said to his congregation in this sermon during that fateful time. You can read all these sermons in his book ***The Prayer that Spans the World: Sermons on the Lord's Prayer***. Here are some more excerpts.

"Only the Bible helps us to understand the present hour because the Bible knows the quintessence and the measure of every hour, because it knows the eternal. [He speaks of God's judgment in leaving rebellious people to the consequences of their own actions.] ... And I would assert that now that the floodgates of heaven are beginning to open and the great tribulations have begun, we Christians can breathe more easily despite everything, because after a great and oppressive silence God has again begun to speak even though it be in a voice of thunder. ... But alongside it there is another message. And this message is represented by the *coming of the kingdom* which goes on simultaneously within the other process.

"We know we must not think of this mysterious growth of God's kingdom (it really is a mystery!) as a kind of evolutionary development. We must not think of it as a gradual Christianisation of the world, which will increasingly eliminate evil. Such dreams and delusions, which may have

been plausible enough in more peaceful times, have vanished in the terrors of our man-made misery, ... We cannot explain it; we can only interpret it and follow out its main lines. The kingdom of God is where Jesus Christ is. But Jesus Christ always lingers in the darkest places in the world. ... And what this message means is that the kingdom of God appears precisely at the very place where there is blindness, lameness, leprosy and death.

“And yet I am not telling Christians anything when I say that we have learned more, and probably also experienced more, about the kingdom of God in the crash of air raids and the terrors of our cellars and underground shelters, than those peaceful and almost utopian times of comfort and well-being could ever suggest. ... Even the forms and structures of the church sink and pass away. Here we are gathered in a ruin and here I am standing before you in my old army boots, because I no longer possess the proper clothes for services.

“The greatest mysteries of God are always enacted in the depths; and therefore it is the cry from the depths that always has the greatest promise. ... I have known moments – like everyone else – in which discouragement crept into my heart and I felt utterly stricken. ... On one occasion when I was absorbed in these gloomy thoughts. I was looking down into the concrete pit of a cellar which had been shattered by a bomb and in which more than fifty young persons had been killed. A woman came up to me and asked whether I was so and so, since she was not sure who I was in the clothes I wore. Then she said, “My husband died down there. ... We were there the last time you preached in the Cathedral Church. And here before this pit I want to thank you for preparing him for eternity.” ... That’s how God can comfort; that’s how he can let his kingdom come. ... Now God’s rule is hidden beneath the Cross, and only he who accepts the Cross knows its secret. (What could you do with that bomb crater without the Cross?) ... Therefore: “Look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” [The end of Thielcke’s sermon]

His next sermon on “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” was interrupted by air-raid sirens and the subsequent bombing. Shortly after that, a second attack destroyed what was left of the church, and so that was the last sermon to be delivered there.

My point here is not to say that others have suffered more than we are – that is never much help or comfort. However, it is good to know that God has sustained Christians through times in the past. But it is more than that. More than just being sustained.

I was struck by the words, “Jesus Christ always lingers in the darkest places in the world.” Thielicke tells us that he has learned more, and probably also experienced more, of the kingdom of God in the roar of the air raids and the terrors they experienced in their cellars. And finally, “God’s rule is hidden beneath the Cross.”

For Christians, it can never just be about surviving what is to come. First, we know, that even if we die, we will live. Secondly, it is precisely in our suffering and anguish that God’s grace and healing are hidden. God’s work in Jesus is hidden under his humanity, and his death on the cross appears, at first sight, to be defeat, not victory. Likewise, we experience God’s presence and work in our fear and weakness. When we know that we have come to the end of our own strength,

when we finally understand that we can't control our own lives, and when our feelings betray us and fill us with dread; it is just then that, if we look, we see Jesus.

God "has made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But," Paul continues, "We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down but not destroyed," (2 Cor 4:6-9). Paul summarises this as "always carrying around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body," (2 Cor 4:10), and as outwardly wasting away while being renewed inwardly (v16). "So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal," (2 Cor 4:18).

So do not run from your fear and worry; embrace it, and let God minister to you in it. You are not alone. You are part of a vast army of people across the world and through all time, who have walked this path before. God is with you. His Spirit lives within you. He will not leave you. You can count on that!

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