

Sermon May 10th 2020 – Pope Gregory and the plague

Earlier in the service we read from **Genesis** 2:4-17 and the story of the Garden of Eden and the Tree of Knowledge. Genesis is the first book of the Bible, and I will come back to it right at the end of this sermon, but to begin, I want to talk about the last book of the Bible, Book of **Revelation**.

For in the Bible it claims that there is nothing new under the sun – if we are facing something, then sometime in history others have faced something similar as well. So it is with the Corona virus. This kind of thing is spoken about in the Bible, and this kind of thing has been faced by Christians over history. So today I want to look at how the Bible depicts 'this kind of thing', and how a particular Church leader called Pope Gregory the Great faced a time of contagion with faith and hope.

(He has been referred to as the leader in Church history most acquainted with plagues, and so is being looked at afresh these days).

So, first up, Revelation chapter 6 and its depiction of **the four horsemen of the apocalypse** riding out over the earth, a scene made famous by various paintings over the years.



(Woodcut: Albrecht Durer, 1513AD / Painting: Victor Vasnetsov, 1887AD)

Read Revelation 6:1-8

Now there are many ways to interpret this vision; Revelation isn't totally clear on what it means. The imagery it gives us is a bit freaky, but it is a tool to help us get a handle on life and the things that come our way, and we are given flexibility in how we can use and understand it.

Also...the horsemen appear in some Old Testament books as well, so I don't see them as just an 'end times' thing as some people who read Revelations would understand them to be. I think these four horsemen are scourges that have afflicted humanity throughout history and will continue to do so.



This painting by Matthias Gerung, 1532AD, shows how the image can be interpreted in different ways with the bow the white horseman is carrying being a rainbow. However, this is my take on them and how they speak to me...

1. The **white horseman of conquest**.

This I understand as being the desire of one country to extend their borders by invading and taking over another, bringing oppression and hardship for the citizens of that other country. This used to be very common: countries would always invade each other at some point to expand their resources and wealth, but we don't see much of this behaviour anymore, not since WWII.

If you want to take over another country, these days you just buy it.

2. The **red horseman of war**.

The white horseman of Conquest also involves war, but the red horseman invokes greater bloodshed, like a civil war: brother against brother, soldier against civilians, insider against outsider.

Now, although wars of conquest are rare, the kind of war represented by the red horseman is still common.

We think of Rwanda, Algeria, Yugoslavia, Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, the Troubles in Northern Ireland of my childhood... the list goes on. This horseman is still very busy on the earth.

3. Third is **the horseman of famine**, a scourge that was once only a harvest away. Now we are able to preserve food really well and to transport it around the globe, so we don't expect famines as a natural part of life; famines are a *failure* and we try to stop them.

4. And fourth and last is **the pale green horseman**, a colour that invokes illness and decay. He is called death in Revelation, but I associate him with **Pestilence** or Plague.

Again, as with these other horsemen, plague "plagued" humanity throughout history until modern times.

We thought that science, antibiotics and better hygiene had got rid of this horseman in our day, but now we find him back and stalking the earth as Covid 19...

Once again, just when we think we have transcended our limits, that we have evolved to a higher plane, that we have more control over ourselves and the earth – then something happens that reminds us of our dependency, of our frailty, and of the reality that we are *creatures* inhabiting God's wonderful and mysterious *Creation*...

We are not God; we *are* loved, but we have limits.

And with pestilence back stalking the globe, could this image of the four horsemen help us get a handle on what is going on?

Pestilence has ravaged humanity and changed the course of history in the past.

Today I want to go back 1,500 years and talk about 542AD when Rome was Christian, and when the **Black Death** first appeared in Europe. This plague hit the Roman Empire hard, killing around 1/3 of the population and severely weakening them *just* as they came under attack from hordes of barbarians. People then had no antibiotics and they didn't understand how the plague was spread, so it took them 200 years to eradicate it! It would start tapering off, then spring up again somewhere new and cause devastation again for a time.

This was a season in history of fear and disruption, which the accompanying barbarian invasions only added to. The Roman Empire was falling after 1,000 years of power; the works of 'Man' were passing away and it felt like the end of the world...

In the midst of all of this a baby boy was born to a rich and devout Roman family.

Babies always bring the promise of a new beginning, and this baby was called **Gregory**.

Gregory was a direct descendant of two Popes (which was okay because priests could still marry at this time) and his family had a lot of land, especially on Sicily. He got the best education money could buy, came first in his class, and by 33 was serving as prefect of Rome – he was said to be an outstanding organizer.

However, in his early 30's, his father died. This seemed to make him question the meaning of his life and the direction he had taken. *What were all his achievements and wealth worth at the end of the day?* The world and everything in it were passing away, but Gregory felt strongly that things eternal and spiritual would endure.

So, Gregory quit his job, started a few of these new-fangled **monastery** things that had just come to Italy, used his land to support these monks and the local poor, and he himself entered the monastery he started in Rome as a common brother. He embraced a life of prayer, manual labour, serving the needy, and study.

He *wasn't* a common brother though! He didn't like abstract thought, but he was brilliant and capable, he loved his Bible and had a heart for God. And so, after three years, the Pope asked him to be his ambassador in the court of the Roman Emperor which had by then moved to Constantinople.

Gregory *hated* it there: Greece was full of theologizing and court intrigue which didn't suit his simple and direct faith (and he maybe developed a bit of a bad attitude towards the Eastern Church and the

Emperor because of this). To help him get through, he moved half of his monastery with him so that he could keep up praying the hours and living the monastic life as a backdrop to his duties. This life of prayer fortified him for that job, before he could return to his monastery in Rome for another 6 years. At that point though, the plague broke out in Italy again, killing many in Rome including the Pope.

Gregory was the only **bright shining star** in the dark time of history in which he lived, and was the obvious replacement – he tried to run away, but they caught him and duly elected him Pope.

He became known as **Pope Gregory the Great**, a Pope who was even respected and accepted by Reformers like John Calvin.



(Here we have 2 paintings of him as pope. Jacopo Vignali, c. 1630AD, portrays him in a more mystical light as one imbued with Divine Wisdom. However, Carlo Saraceni, c. 1590AD, gives a more gritty portrait. Here Gregory is in darkness with his back part-turned to the world. He has the shaved head of a monk and is hard at work with his papal crown put off to the side, while the Holy Spirit emerges behind him out of the darkness.)

Gregory felt that to be a true Pope he should immerse himself in the spiritual life without having to worry about worldly concerns, and with this aim he again brought his monastery with him so that he could pray the hours and live as a monk while being Pope.

But the Four Horsemen ruled the land - the Roman armies had been defeated and pulled back to Greece. There was little to stop the barbarians; famine was on the prowl; pestilence was riding across Italy, and there was no civil service any more. Who was there to help but the Church and the Pope?

So, with a background of prayer, rooting himself in daily monastic disciplines, he took on the job of saving as much of Western Europe as he could save. *How did he do this at such a dark time, and what can we learn from him?*

1. First up, we need to emphasise that **he kept living as a monk!** A life soaked in worship and prayer and study – this was the foundation of everything that he did, and this foundation needs to be kept in mind. He also didn't just pray alone, but rather he gathered a *community* around him who prayed alongside him and for him, who chastised him if he missed a service, and who kept him centered.

2. Secondly, **his focus was always on the reality of God** - his true citizenship centered on the Kingdom of God. Heaven and earth might pass away; the works of 'Man' were coming to an end... but *God endured*, and in God we have hope for eternity. We are creatures in the hands of God, reliant on God's mercy, and God is powerful.

It is said that when the barbarians were encamped ready to attack Rome, he preached that morning on Ezekiel 40 and a vision of the heavenly Jerusalem, reminding the people that God is great, and that even if the city fell, the eternal endured. This is said to have given people heart and a sense that there was order and hope for the future in a time of chaos and fear, when they were tempted to just give up.

3. The barbarians didn't attack though. This is because **he focused all the assets of the Church onto helping those in need.**

There was a lot of poverty as the breadwinner in the family died, as the economy was shaken, as people fled their land to escape the barbarian hordes. The Church however had a lot of land, especially in North Africa. *Pope Gregory then focused all the wealth and crops from those assets into feeding and sheltering those in need*, directly saving thousands of lives. He even sold Church land, if he could, to refugees to help them start again, and he had a dozen homeless or refugees dine with him every night.

Everything he had was put at the disposal of the call of God on his life.

(Controversially? He also used Church money to pay the salary of the soldiers trying to hold back the barbarians as the Emperor was busy putting all his resources into defending the East; and he paid off the barbarians twice when they were poised to attack Rome, averting disaster.)

4. But fourthly, he didn't hold back the barbarian hordes just by giving them **money**. He also treated them with **respect**.

Despite all the killing hardships being inflicted by them, his hope was still on God *for all humanity!* He saw all people as equal in the sight of God (incl the barbarians), and because of this he had a real heart for **evangelism**. He believed that God had the power to change hearts, that God loved all people, and that all should have a chance to be reconciled with their Creator.

So, in the midst of all that was going on, he sent out missionaries, with the most famous being St Augustine of Canterbury, going to England and bringing our faith to the Anglo-Saxons. He also played a big role in the barbarians ruling France, Spain and northern Italy accepting Jesus as God.

So, a recap...

1. His foundation was a community of prayer
2. His heart was set first and foremost on God and God's Kingdom
3. He put all that he had at the disposal of God's call on his life, and helping those in need
4. And he emphasised evangelism, believing that God loved all people, that God had the power to change hearts, and the eternal was of the most value.

What lessons can we take from him today?

- As we re-emerge from lockdown can we imagine ourselves praying more with each other and encouraging each other to prayer?
- As the things of the world have been shaken, what place do we find that 'worldly' things have in our heart? What comes first for us: the Kingdom of God, or our own kingdoms?
- And what about that dreaded word *evangelism*?

One more anecdote about Pope Gregory on that word...

Now Gregory didn't let plague and crisis and busyness define him or the work of the Church. His focus was on God and prayer, **onbeing** before **doing**.

- And so Pope Gregory also sought to foster the discipleship and spiritual life of ordinary believers by doing a lot of work on liturgy and church services, and on developing worship through music (Gregorian chants and attributed to him).
- He wrote books and letters educating Church leaders on pastoral care, and the interpretation of the Bible.
- And he was a keen and innovative preacher. He was novel in that he spoke directly into the lives of his listeners. He was honest about his struggles, and he is attributed as the first person to use stories from everyday life to illustrate his sermon points: up until then preachers just used stories from the Bible to illustrate *other* stories from the Bible.

But... in speaking directly to his listeners, he would call them to *repent and believe* the good news, and then to demonstrate their faith through action! And **repentance** was his response to the plague...

When the plague again ravaged Rome, he ignored social distancing and got the whole city to wear sackcloth and ashes and to process together from the main churches. They walked in silence and in repentance, because he believed that the plague was God's punishment on the sin of Rome and the Empire, and therefore repentance was needed to stop it.

This story is being used these days by some traditionalist voices to berate the current Pope and Church authorities for giving in to state restrictions on services and submitting to the lock down. Some feel a real Pope would fight the virus with worship and the sacraments.

I do not agree!

I *do not* share the traditional belief that things like the horseman of Pestilence are sent by God to punish us, but I *do* believe that human sin is a contributing factor in what goes on.

For, as a race, we often don't like to believe the story of Genesis 2 that we are creatures, living by grace in God's Creation, and living with *limits* placed on us – "you have this whole beautiful garden to explore and enjoy - just don't eat from that tree, maintain this *one* boundary."

In the imagery of that story, Adam and Eve had the freedom of the whole Garden, with just one restriction: "don't eat from that one tree."

However, it seems to be in our nature to try to be God, to always try to push the limits further and further. Curiosity and exploration are good and godly, but too often we want to control, to push boundaries to give ourselves more power and wealth and pleasure, without concern for the

consequences – and so, human sin is a factor in what is going on today because of how we have treated **Creation**, how we have treated **each other**, and how those in power have sought **to hold on to their power** despite the consequences. I think a call to repentance is very valid at the moment.

And repentance is the heart of evangelism! For to repent means to stop and to turn around – to change your mind and follow a *different* path. An evangelistic call to our world to pause, to turn around, to center themselves on God and find a new road forward is needed for the well-being of the planet and all that live upon it.

We're not going to march down the road all squished up together to do that like Gregory did, but how might we model such a call to repentance in our lives! How can we express the call of God in word and deed, together as a church and as individuals?

I believe that if we have a foundation of prayer in our lives, and a focus on God, then God will lead us and make this clear to us – as God did for Pope Gregory 1,500 years ago.

So then, the end!

- We give thanks that our times aren't as bad as times past,
- but we still pray that we can manage the changes ahead with faith, hope and love as did Pope Gregory;
- and we pray that God would raise up visionaries and leaders among us who can see to the heart of human sin in what is plaguing us,
- anointed men and women who can lead us in a call to repent, believe, and re-orient ourselves in the light of God's eternal will, God's love for all people, and God's plan for the salvation and redemption of this world.

Amen?

