

SERMON – 5 JULY 2015

2 Chronicles 7: 11 - 22

If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land. (verse 14)

Many feel the world is frightening and unpredictable.

24 hour news bulletins bring atrocities into our living rooms every day.

In Scotland we have been rather immune from personal danger, relatively untouched in our lifetime.

Even when the IRA was bombing England we were fairly relaxed here, we felt the Irish grievance was mainly with the English.

But last week a couple from the little village of Bankfoot, just north of Perth and a couple from Cumbernauld lost their lives as they were sunbathing on a beach on holiday, along with many others.

One gunman in the space of a few minutes has shut down European tourism in Tunisia.

My sister and her husband are somewhat adventurous, they go on numerous holidays, hire cars in dubious countries and drive around, they have been on that beach in Sousse. But last week my sister was considering the growing list of countries even she won't go to.

Of course, our minds have been focused on terrorism this week because Europeans and mainly British are involved - but thousands of innocent people have lost their lives in recent years in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Egypt, Nigeria, Libya, persecution involving Kurdish people and religious minorities, there is a form of civil war going on amongst Muslim groups.

Christians are targets around the world as never before. Beheadings, bombs and gunmen in churches,

Two of my sons have tattoos, all with Christian symbols and texts. Fergus has a cross from elbow to wrist and an eagle on his upper arm with the Isaiah text "They shall rise on wings like eagles." Calum has a Celtic cross and the fish symbol. Someone observed this week that they might be targets particularly on a beach

abroad - that certainly didn't occur to me a few years ago when they had these tattoos done.

I was doing a Kenny Borthwick yesterday! Kenny is the minister at Holy Trinity Wester Hailes. Kenny plans his sermons in coffee shops, Costa usually! He finds the buzz of people around him helpful. I always thought I could never do that, I needed peace and quiet, but yesterday morning I found myself in Dobbies with my iPad and a couple of hours to spare. And the sermon began to take shape. It was interesting thinking about the state of the world, the horrific events of the past week....and watching a packed restaurant at 10am with folk having coffees and their seven piece fry up! Life going on.

The text came to me from Matthew 24: 26 - **We do not know the day and the hour when the Son of Man will come, some will be working in the field or at the mill or lying in bed or having coffee in Dobbies.**

I wondered how many people around me give any thought to God? Not many I would guess.

Where is God in all the troubles of the world? At one level, he is out on the edge where post-modern, post-Christian society has firmly put him.

We have cast God out of education, no more prayers and hymn singing at assembly, no more whole school church services, chaplains restricted in what they can say to children if they are allowed into school at all. Easter is the spring holiday and Christmas is the winter holiday. Christmas cards say "Season's Greetings."

Many students no longer find a Gideon Bible in their room at college or university and the same with many hotels - I stay in hotels regularly for work and check the drawers just to see if there is a Bible.

Sunday is a day for shopping and work and sport and leisure.

We are no longer a Christian nation. It is popular belief that incoming Muslims and those of other faiths have brought about this demise of the church but that is not so. Many devout Muslims in this country respect those of the Christian faith and are not at all offended by Christmas trees and cards, Christian symbolism and so on. They are, in fact, often dismayed that the Christian church seems so wishy washy, so willing to compromise in order to be acceptable to an increasingly hostile and dismissive society.

It is secularism that is the main threat to faith, the main opponent. People of no faith other than faith in themselves, and often anti-God and anti-Christ, are hell bent on shutting out God, assigning him to history. God satisfied a need when we were more primitive and ignorant but modern sophisticated man and woman has no need for God. Man glorifies man.

Rick Segal wrote yesterday, 4th July, about the United States on Independence Day. He said "Christianity is no longer the pre-eminent social influence in American life...We will live and work henceforth, as do most other Christians around the world, amidst a public hostile to our beliefs.

An article in the Scotsman yesterday examined the Tunisian massacre and the London bombings almost ten years ago. The writer concludes that we are sustained through these hard times by **the spirit of humanity**. He says that no-one has much clue what to do about terrorism or to have much stomach for analysing it. Ours, it feels, is **The Policy of Crossed Fingers**. Not a mention in hundreds of words of God and his Holy Spirit. The best we can do is cross our fingers or touch wood or do whatever other useless superstition comes to mind. The final sentence concludes **The human spirit is indeed an amazing gift and it can sustain us in these terrible times**.

No it can't! Only the holy spirit of God can sustain us!

But God will not be shut out and God is not on the edge, he is right in the midst of all that is going on in the world. He is the creator and sustainer of all life. He is the God of the past and the present and the future. He is all-knowing and he sees everything. God is still in control of his world and for that reason we should stand fast and not be fearful about what we see going on around us. God is working out his purposes.

Jesus warned that people would rise up against his followers, men would hate them and even have them put to death but he encouraged them to stand firm. He said "**Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs on your head are numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.**" (Matthew 10: 28 – 31)

God has been working out his purposes since he created the world and he will not abandon his people now. God chose David to be king over Israel and to begin the line that would lead directly to the birth of Jesus of the house of David. And he chose David's son Solomon to succeed him as king. He gave Solomon great wisdom

and blessed his life. Solomon built a temple that was acceptable to God. But God knew that even Solomon would turn away from the right path and his people would be disobedient. God put up with many kings after Solomon, some good but many bad until he finally allowed the temple to be destroyed and the people scattered in exile in a foreign land. He would only restore his people when they turned from their wicked ways.....**If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.**

This was God's invitation to his chosen people thousands of years ago. We are his chosen people today and the invitation is the same. The answer to the problem of world terrorism is not to drop more bombs on Syria or Iraq or wherever. The answer is not to sit around talking about the problems. The answer is not to put our heads in the sand and hope it will go away or at least not affect us.

God wants us to get down on our knees and pray. He calls us to pray as a nation, as a church, as individuals. We are to be humble, to pray, to seek his face and turn away from sin. Did Jesus not call us to do these very things?

How do we seek his face? By reading our Bibles. Scotland used to be the country of the book. Scotland was a land where faith was strong and prayers were said daily in the home.

Faith and prayer should be inseparable. A friend sent me a few words about faith and prayer yesterday –

The possibilities of prayer are the possibilities of faith. Prayer and faith are Siamese twins. One heart animates them both. Faith is always praying. Prayer is always believing. Faith must have a tongue by which it can speak. Prayer is the tongue of faith. Faith must receive. Prayer is the hand of faith stretched out to receive. Prayer must rise and soar. Faith must give prayer the wings to fly and soar. Prayer must have an audience with God. Faith opens the door and access and audience are given. Prayer asks. Faith lays its hand on the thing asked for.

It can be hard to start a meaningful prayer life or to deepen your prayer times. What to say, how to listen, how to be still, how to avoid distraction. It can be hard to read our bibles constructively, where to begin, how to read, what does it mean, what is God saying to me today through his word?

I can recommend a new book by John Paul Jackson called *The Art of Praying the Scriptures – a Fresh Look at Lectio Divina*. John Paul wrote the *Art of Hearing God* course, he had a world-wide ministry in helping people to develop their spiritual

gifts and walk more closely with Jesus. He died a few weeks ago. Lectio divina is an ancient Christian practice of reading bible verses and meditating on them, praying through them and asking God to reveal meaning and message. John Paul says –

Lectio Divina is a way to practice giving God your full, undivided attention. The more you practice this method of reading the scriptures, the easier it becomes to focus on God without the distractions of the day trying to take over your consciousness. Still, it does often require us to turn off the sound on our mobile phones, notebooks, laptops and computers to ensure that what we want to focus on remains our focus. Lectio divina is slowly and deliberately praying the scriptures thereby allowing God to speak to you through them..... God breathes the light of the word into our spirits. That which was dormant becomes alive. That which was languishing becomes vibrant once again.

Psalm 27 says **Hear my voice when I call O Lord; be merciful to me and answer me. My heart says of you “Seek his face!” Your face, Lord, I will seek.”**

Let us hear God’s call to humbly pray and repent and seek his face. Much is at stake in our fallen world. If Christians who have faith do not pray to the one true God, the God of Israel, then who will? We have nothing to lose and everything to gain. After all, God promises to hear us from heaven and forgive our sins and heal our land.

AMEN

Brenda Robson