

SERMON: 22 March 2020 – Rev Alistair Cowper

" Times of crisis reveal our true colours "

(1 Samuel 16:1-13)

In this time of trial and global suffering, there is, understandably, much fear. There's a sense that things are running out of control. People are panic buying, fearful that we might run out of toilet roll. Heaven forbid!

Supermarket shelves are being raided in an attempt to keep some sort of control over a situation that is largely out with our control.

Of course we need to be careful about spreading the virus and we must follow the latest health advice about cleanliness and social distancing.

But do we really need to stockpile more than we need?

Isn't there enough to go round if everyone takes what they need?

If we take more than we need, what effect will that have on those less fortunate than ourselves?

It's in times of trial and crisis that we see humanity's true colours surface, when our true character is revealed.

It seems to be human nature that we look for someone to blame in difficult times.

In John's gospel chapter 9, there is a reading for today of a man born blind and the Pharisees see him and they say to Jesus who's fault it is that this man was born blind?

Jesus doesn't give in to the blame game. He simply says that the man's blindness means that the power of God could be seen in him (John 9:3).

The power of God. In a poor blind man. Time and time again, it's the poor and needy whom God lifts up.

And you may know the end of that story and how Jesus used it to teach us that he came to give sight to the blind and to show those who think they can see that they are in fact blind (9:39).

Christ brought a new light to humanity. It's that light that is seeking to spread in these days.

Nearly thousand years ago, the early church soon realised that Christ was the light by which we see all things.

Even still, some today are wondering, why have we got this virus? Who's fault is it?

Rather than trust in the good that might be seen from the crisis, it can be too easy to be paralysed by a mood of fear and scarcity, or seek to point the finger of blame away from ourselves onto someone or something else.

In the book of Samuel, Saul was the first king of Israel. In so many ways he ruled from a place of fear. He was jealous of others. He tried to rule with an iron fist. His son Jonathan lived with a different spirit. He once said that the Lord can win a battle whether he has many warriors or only a few (14:6). Jonathan saved Israel on at least one occasion.

Saul didn't like that and even wanted to have his own son killed only to be saved by the people who could see the good that Jonathan had done.

In the time of crisis in Israel's history, Both Saul and Jonathan showed their true character. Saul was found wanting whereas his son chose to listen to God and find the courage to do the right thing, the kind thing, the loving thing.

Love always means going beyond yourself to otherness. It takes two. There has to be the lover and the beloved. (RR)

As the Bible puts it, it's love that overcomes fear (1 Corinthians 13:13).

I wonder, in this time of crisis, what our true colours will be revealed as.

We can see good happening all around us in the drive of so many people to help other human beings in this time of global suffering.

People are going out of their way to sign up to help neighbours, deliver shopping, chat on the phone; health care workers putting themselves on the line, working extra shifts; pharmacists, researchers, delivery drivers and the like; all giving from the pull love in their hearts.

Suffering pulls people together. And love makes it bearable.

God tells Samuel the prophet that the Lord looks at the heart.

Jesus modelled the perfect human life with a heart full of love; love that

endured all the suffering one can imagine; love that endured even unto death.

It's how we love that matters. It's love that is answering the fear that is rampant today.

[Paul tells the Ephesians that even though their hearts were once full of darkness, now they are full of light from the Lord, and their behaviour should show that - because the light within produces only what is good and right and true (5:8) - true colours.

He urges them to try to find out what pleases the Lord.

And how else can we do that but to listen.]

When we take time to listen to the voice of love within us, we can find a stillness, a calmness, a rest, a peace, that we might not find anywhere else.

It's why the prophet Samuel reminds the newly crowned King Saul, who bashed on with his own ideas of trying to fix things and control things, that "listening to (God) is much better than offering the (sacrifice of animals)" (1 Samuel 15:22).

In the early life of David, the shepherd boy, we see he had spent time listening to God. As he cared for the sheep and protected them from lions and bears, he knew who his true Shepherd was.

His true character was formed and shaped in the times of solitude and the times of caring as well as the times of crisis. And his heart learned to listen to the voice of love within.

The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want...even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.

There's an old Gospel hymn that puts it like this -

The God of the good times is still God in the bad times, the God of the day is still God in the night, and the God of the light is still God in the darkness.

David knew that. He had lived it. In looking after the sheep, in the ordinary caring acts of everyday, he learned how to love and his character grew.

So when it came for the new king of Israel to be anointed, David was the one who's true colours matched up to what the Lord was looking for.

He was the one that went on to have the courage to stand up to the giant who towered above all Israel, like a contagious disease, striking fear in the heart.

But David knew the battle belonged to God.

As a man after God's heart, the young David shows us that God is Love and his way is love.

Love that is sacrificial in nature, willing to give itself to the other and for the other.

That's what this global challenge is preparing us for.

We're being prepared for such a love as this,

love that is the essence of our true nature, our true colour;

Love, who comes to us right now and whispers to us, I am with you even in the darkest valley.

Listen to your heart.

Listen to the Voice of Love within.

And let that love cast out all fear.

Let your true colours be seen, in the light of Christ,

Who is your life.