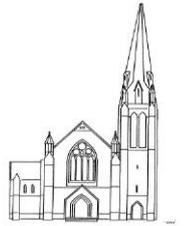




**THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND
NORTH PARISH CHURCH, GIRVAN Ayrshire.**



A Reflection from the Interim-moderator -

“It’s been sent to try us” – this comment was overheard in a queue outside the butcher’s shop. We might wonder which part of this statement, if any, is true.

“It” of course refers to the Covid-19 pandemic that has caused the nations to go into lockdown. A coronavirus is one of the many living organisms with which we share the earth. Some viruses live in a host for years on end without any ill effects. But occasionally a mutation occurs that gives the virus the ability to live in an additional host species, and to be virulent in that new species. In this pandemic it is thought that the mutated coronavirus came from animals in the wild meat markets of Wuhan, China, and spread worldwide. The development of the pandemic is entirely consistent with known biological principles.

“Sent” – the question is – ‘by whom?’ The implied answer and the answer most people jump to is ‘by God’. The lady in the queue did not mention God but there is a general feeling, a suspicion that he is behind this pandemic, if not actually responsible for it.

God does not behave like that. To send a viral disease with such a high mortality rate especially in elderly people, would be the action of a cruel despot; an act of vindictiveness, as if God took a perverse pleasure in seeing people suffer. We find it hard to imagine that God would want to visit his children with any infectious disease that took so many lives and cause so much pain and sorrow.

We know from what Jesus has told us of him that God is a God of love who would never deliberately cause one of his children to endure the hardship of disease. He is a Good Shepherd and Loving Father, whose care of his children is his first concern. He looks after each as if there was only one to look after. We do not believe that he would deliberately inflict us with a viral disease, or send an infection with so many devastating consequences.

We need to learn that this is God’s world and we share it with a great number of forms of life apart from ourselves. Viruses are one of the earliest and simplest forms of life, and need animal, bacterial or plant cells in which to multiply. Many viruses are harmless. But there are human, veterinary and agricultural viruses that can cause disease of very considerable destruction.

We share this world with a large number of micro-organisms that are potentially virulent. Of course we do our best to prevent disease and when it occurs our medical care is of the highest standard. But it is a fact of life that disease and death occur. This is the kind of world in which we have been placed.

This might tempt someone to ask – ‘Could not God have made a world in which there were no viruses?’ The answer must be ‘Yes’, but it would not be this world. He could have created a world free of everything that causes pain and suffering, disease and death, but it would not be a world like ours. Science tells us that the conditions that sustain life are unique to this planet. Another set of condition, which eliminated all pain and suffering, would look very different from this world. Appreciating how the world is, is one of the great discoveries of life.

Does it try us? It certainly does! Many lives have been turned upside down by this pandemic – income has been lost, businesses have been brought to the brink of survival, pensions have been affected, the economic consequences have been felt immediately, and may be far lasting. In addition the social consequences are considerable – families with insufficient food and locked down at home with nowhere to exercise or play. Older people are experiencing an isolation and boredom and loneliness that they never knew before.

These are a few of the consequences of the lockdown that has been imposed in order to minimise infections and allow the NHS to prepare to handle hospital admissions – and we are tried or tested by our response to the restrictions.

We do not believe that God does or ever would ‘send’ a virulent virus to any of his children. But we live in a world in which pathogenic organisms occur; we share life in this world with other forms of life that can be fatal for us. Of course we must take all steps to ensure that viral diseases are brought under control (as eg the viral diseases of smallpox and polio), but from time to time new diseases will emerge – this is inevitable when we share God’s planet, which is ever changing, with a large number of other different living forms.

We are tried by the way in which we react to the disease and the measures taken to contain it. Some people will allow it to get them down, to drain their mental and spiritual reserves so that they really suffer. It may be that many people will conclude that the situation must be endured; they persevere and face the lockdown with stoicism. Everyone has the opportunity to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses and the success with which they face the forced shutdown. The way that we deal with the virus and its privations is the way in which we are tried. Everyone has the opportunity to discover something good and positive about themselves in the enforced lockdown.

And where is God? He is not the sender of coronavirus, but he is not absent. He is present with us in our challenges and difficulties. He identifies with our plight and would strengthen us individually. He wants us to know that life is not a fixed event but an ever changing series of joys and sorrows, gifts and sacrifices, pleasures and pains from which we may emerge stronger and maturer in character. He wants us to appreciate the spirituality of life and know those qualities of spirit that allow us to overcome our present difficulties. He wants to show us the endlessness of his plans, especially when we can see no way forward. And he would have us speak to him in prayer, by which we may know that his existence is a presence, and his sympathy is a personal care, and his truths hold everlasting power.

God of hope, fill us with joy and peace in believing, that we may ever abound in hope and courage by the power of your Holy Spirit, and show forth our thankfulness in trustful and serviceable lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour.