

Dr Jocelyn Bryan &

Revd Canon Dr Alan Bartlett

Fear in the Time  
of Covid-19-  
Theological and  
Spiritual  
Reflections



# Session Outline

- Brief Recap on Fear and Covid
- Theological and spiritual reflection
- Fear and Faith
- The Psalms
- Prayer
- Virtues and Fruits of the Spirit
  
- Pastoral Response





# Fear is an emotion

- ‘Emotions reveal the world to the creature, the creature’s deepest goals to itself, and all of this to the astute observer.’

M. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought* p. 108

# Fear in relation to Covid-19

- Characteristics of our current situation:
  - Heightened anxiety and sense of vulnerability throughout the population
  - Anxious political and scientific/medical leadership
  - Constant stream of information about the threat and its impact
  - Daily death rates – fear of death and death itself constant presence
  - Slogans and warnings with the goal of protecting us may also increase anxiety
  - Global response has increased personal collective sense of vulnerability and helplessness
  - **Flight or fight are not realistic options**

# Four Key Foci of Fear

1. Our Bodies
2. Social Fears
3. Uncertainty
4. What to do and what not to do



Schimmenti, A., Billieux, J. & Starcevic, V. The Four Horsemen of Fear: An Integrated Model of Understanding Fear Experiences During The Covid-19 Pandemic, *Clinical Neuropsychiatry* (2020) 17,2,41-45

# Your theological reflection?

- What has challenged you theologically in this pandemic?
- What has your theological reflection focused on?



# Theological Reflection: Holding Our Fears Before God

- Faith in God does not make anxiety and fear either sinful or inappropriate
- Anxiety is a natural expression of fear which leads to action. It is a warning.
- Our anxiety is a reflection of our perception that something that matters to us is being threatened.
- Reflecting on what matters to us and our priorities is hard but necessary spiritual work as part of our discipleship.
- Anxiety is something to be prayed through and should not be denied – we pray in faith that God will sustain and protect us.
- Jesus in Gethsemane – he was troubled and prayed about what might be possible to relieve him of the threat to his life he faced but he acted in faithful obedience.
- Reflecting on when God has sustained us and been faithful to us in the past, places our fears in a context where they can be managed as part of our reliance on God and can deepen our relationship with Him.

# Fear and Faith in God

- In break out groups discuss how you understand the relationship between fear and faith?
- How much is this a theological issue for you personally and for your congregations?
- What theological resources might help us in exploring this further?





# Noting our Responses

We noted:

- How fear seems to be generating anger and some of this is focused at church leaders, which is hard to bear ! What is the relationship between fear and anger ?
- We noted a disparity between some very un-Christian behaviour and rhetoric in the public domain – and this contributed to a sense of us feeling marginal to society - as opposed to some deeply compassionate action being delivered at a local community level. This reminded us that “we do not have to do everything” but we can look for and co-operate with other people/institutions of good will for the common good. This reduces our sense of stress and guilt.
- We wondered what we as church are “for”? It is right that we are involved in practical help but is our USP “prayer” – spirituality, God. Some ministers experiencing many more requests for prayer than pre-COVID. What does this imply?

# Noting Our Responses 2

- The challenge of being attentive to the prophetic task of the church being a source of hope and at the same time leading the people in lamentation
- Seeing/being aware of those in whom God is working
- Fear of change as a result of COVID in our congregations
- The need for the gift of patience

# Theological Reflection: The Psalms, Orientation, Disorientation and Lament

- 'Life is [...]savagely marked by disequilibrium, incoherence and unrelieved asymmetry.....It is a curious fact that the church has, by and large, continued to sing songs of orientation in a world increasingly experienced as disorientated.....These psalms of order and reliability are flung in the face of disorder....they insist that nothing can separate us from the love of God.'
- It is my judgement that this action of the church is less an evangelical defiance guided by faith, and much more a frightened, numb denial and deception that does not want to acknowledge or experience the disorientation of life'.
- *Brueggemann, W. (1984), The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary, Augsburg Publishing House. p51*

# Psalm of Disorientation

- ‘The use of psalms of darkness may be judged by the world to be acts of *unfaith and failure*, but for the trusting community, their use is an act of bold faith, albeit a transformed faith.....because it insists that the world must be experienced as it really is and not in some pretended way....it is bold because it insists that all such experiences of disorder are a proper subject for discourse with God. To withhold parts of life from that conversation [of the heart] is in fact to withhold part of life from the sovereignty of God.’
- ‘God who is present in the darkness, weakness and displacement of life’
- God of sorrows and acquainted with grief
- The presumption and affirmation of these psalms is that in such deathly places new life is given by God.
- *Brueggemann, W. (1984), The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary, Augsburg Publishing House. p52*

# Disorientation

- Acknowledging how life really is.
- Expressing that which tries to match experience but does not fit with religious sensitivity.
- Speech and experience at their limit
- They never escape addressing Yahweh – who is Lord of all and partners us in all human experience.
- They assure us that even in the chaos of the moment there is a Yahweh directed order
- These psalms have the presumption that in these dark and deathly places new life is given by God.

# Psalms to consider....

- Psalm 13
- Psalm 30
- Psalm 49
- Psalm 86
- Psalm 77
- Psalm 79



# In breakout groups discuss:

- What is your response Brueggemann's assessment of the use of the psalms of disorientation and their theological significance?
- How might this inform our spirituality and the way we support others?



# Noting our responses

- Lamentation and expressing hope seems hard to do at the same time. But paradoxically, it is in the lamentation that hope is needed. And it is in the times of “death” that hope is often rediscovered.  
“Nonetheless...”
- The realism of the emotion of the psalms we found helpful; though we also struggled with some of the language. The psalms needed to be “used with care” ...
- We reflected on the life of the Early Church and how despite its challenges it remained outward looking, “how radical love and service was the air they breathed”. Can we live like this?
- The sense of community on the psalms – we are in this together



# Theological Reflection: The Psalms, Disorientation and Lament

- The psalms as sources of emotional expression to the reality of life
- Expressions of anguish and distress
  - – who are the/our enemies in this pandemic?
  - - what are the sources of our distress?
- Holding on in the hope of expectation that God is faithful and good.
- Seeking out helpful metaphors in the psalms

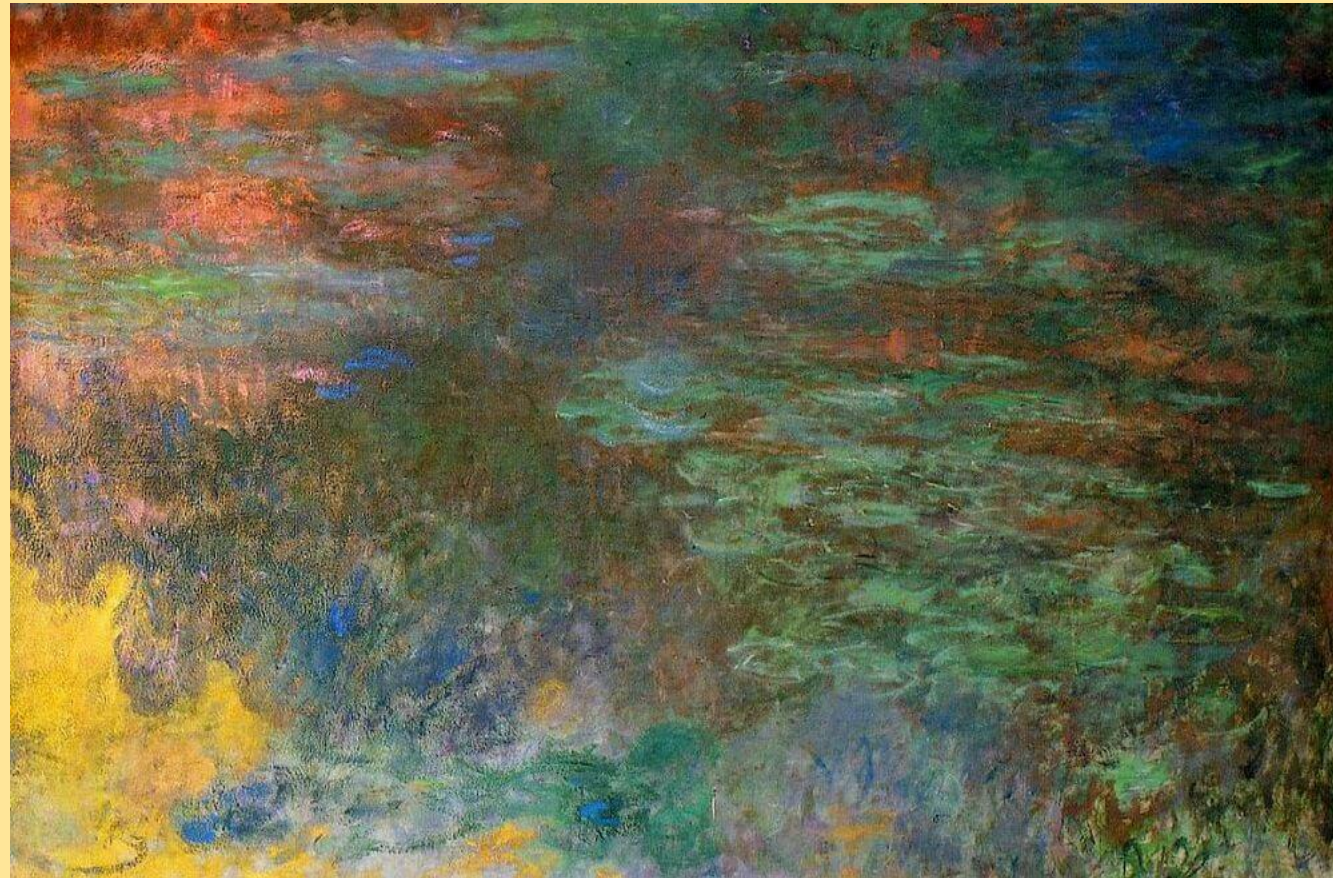


6 minute  
break

# What is our theology of prayer?

- How has Covid challenged our theology of prayer?
- What do we pray for?
- What do we thank God for?
- What are we expecting from God and why?

More theological and spiritual themes to reflect on and develop



Christian Virtues &  
Fruits of the Spirit –  
which do we need to  
be focusing on  
spiritually at this time?



# Other themes to consider....

- Meaning making...what narrative are we telling to make sense of this?
- Tensions in the inter-relationship between hope, faith and fear
- The sickness of the world and creation
- Being Christ-like...Jesus's healing touch, the challenger of the law
- Freedom in Christ in a time of helplessness and constraint
- What risks do we take, who do we risk....the gospel is risky
- What are our congregations expectations of us?

# In break out groups

- Which of these themes resonate most with you and your ministry at present?



# To Note Concluding Thoughts

- Have we been formed, and help form our churches in, “forgotten” Christian (and human) virtues such as endurance, patience, steadfastness. Why have we forgotten these virtues ? Note these virtues celebrated by the wartime generation and embodied in traditional hymnody. Have we been enculturated into our society’s assumptions about quick fixes? Is “our God” a God who solves problems quickly? Is there rather a need for a different, longer, slower timescale?
- Whilst rationally COVID should not be challenging our theology of prayer, its scale seems to be. What can/should we pray for? There was discussion about whether we simply hold things before God in the presence of God (who knows our needs) without expectation or that it is still right to bring our needs, our “lists”, to him as in a relationship ?
- Does Covid point us to things we should always have been praying for?



# To Note Concluding Thoughts

- We did not get round to discussing at depth the widespread feeling that “God has sent this”. Some people have a strong sense that there is “judgment” in this. Judgement for going wrong. Others see judgement operating in that we have treated the natural world with contempt. Others are very wary of seeing COVID as a divine judgement because it has caused such suffering and seemingly on a random basis. Indeed it is the vulnerable who have suffered most. Therefore this cannot be from God. We noted that seeing this as a judgement from God was one way of making sense of this – it is a specific example of “meaning-making”.

# To Note Concluding Thoughts

- How should we deliver pastoral care as Christian ministers? Many examples in the past – e.g. Fr Charles Lowder in the slums of the East End in the 1850s – of those who stayed and ministered (visited) during pandemics (cholera) and won much respect. Should we be visiting physically like this – visible in our communities? BUT we are aware of how COVID is transmitted (unlike some other diseases) and therefore we feel constrained in how we should/can minister. What is the right way? We noted a tension between those of us who are tempted to take risks in this work of pastoral care and those who regarded the rules as being for responsible Christian ministry. How (can?) we reconcile these different perceptions? How do we discern unwise faith (“God won’t let me catch it when I work for God”) or, conversely, a fear-driven faith-lacking rule-keeping?

# To Note Concluding Thoughts

- We noted that we too as ministers are subject to these complex and powerful feelings of anxiety during COVID. But we are also looked to as people who are imagined to be strong in faith and peaceful. How do we manage such expectations honestly? But also how do we find peace and strength so as to be able to support our churches and communities through this hard time ? It is part of the calling of the minister in such times...

# Some Suggestions For Further Reading

- *Brueggemann, W. (1984), The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary, Augsburg Publishing House.*
- *Brueggemann, W. (1995) The Psalms and The Life of Faith, Fortress Press*
- *Cook, C.C.H & Hamley, I. (Eds), (2020), The Bible and Mental Health, SCM Press*
- *Pembroke, N. (2010), Pastoral Care in Worship: Liturgy and Psychology in Dialogue, T&T Clark*
- *Brueggemann, W. (2020) Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Uncertainty, Paternoster Press*