

Sermon 7 July 2020 – Genesis 1:1-10, 2 Corinthians 13:11-13, Trinity Sunday

The world is a mess.

In front of us, in the news, however we get it – COVID as seen by the wealthy countries. George Floyd.

Not in front of us, but still happening – COVID in poor countries. Famine. Endless war. The rich getting richer, the poor getting poorer. Climate change.

It's tempting to look at what we notice is happening right now and think we're at a singular moment in history. So many things are going wrong.

I was speaking with someone the other day who said their first reaction to all the deaths from COVID was – how can God let this happen – is God really there? And this is a common reaction – all this bad stuff is going on – where is God? ... is God?

Preparing for this sermon, I had a look at the University of Auckland's deprivation map. Wadestown, all the way North to Broadmeadows – this part of town is doing well. Wilton, Northland, Karori, a few pockets where things aren't as good but mostly ... doing well too. So our neighbourhood is pretty well off.

If you're middle class and mostly OK economically ... this "where is God?" seems to be a common response.

My generation hasn't been to war. My parents' generation hasn't been to war.

We get to read or watch the news, but it's about stuff that happens to other people.

We get to read history, but our inheritance is from the people who mostly won the battles, who won the trade wars, who ended up doing OK. The bad stuff in history happened to other people.

And the people who did the bad stuff, they're other people too. Not like us. We're racist like those cops in Minneapolis.

But now – the danger is near at hand. The news tells us of the horrific death toll of COVID overseas. And people in New Zealand have died of it. If you've got relatives overseas they may have been affected, and if not, they'll know others who have died.

Genesis – God there at the beginning

In 1968 the Apollo Eight astronauts were in a quandary.

They were preparing for their trip into outer space. They needed to make a little speech. But what?

There were thoughts of saying something about peace. The tricky thing was that the United States was embroiled in the Vietnam war. It's ... awkward to criticise government policy when they're your boss and the whole world is watching and listening.

They were already reaching for the bible – and ended up with Genesis one. Creation. Seems pretty fitting as your orbiting the planet to talk about God's hand in bringing it into existence. Although pushing that awkwardness to one side ... hmmm.

Now I know people here will have different views on exactly how the world came to be. My personal view is – God the Creator did it, God was there at the beginning, and I'm not too fussed over the details of exactly how it all happened.

The first chapter of Genesis, as it goes through elements of the created world, has the repeated refrain – that God saw it was Good.

We hit Genesis two, people show up, evil rears its ugly face, and things aren't quite right after that.

Opening up those history books again ... there's no time described where everything is OK. No time of complete peace. No time where everyone is fed.

The advent of modern communications means we are more aware of what's wrong with the world than we once were. Now we don't just hear about the problems around the block and in the next town, we hear about the problems on the other side of the world. As they happen. It's pretty easy to get downhearted, to sink into despair, to ask God – it was Good! Why isn't it now? Where are you?

There's been conflict between people since the early days. There's been sickness since the early days. There's been the haves and the have nots. And God was there, then, too.

That sounds like a pretty pat answer, pretty philosophical, oh well, there's always been evil about, we'd just better get on with life. God the creator created, and then ... (shrugs shoulders) yeah.

What do we do? And what does God do?

The despair, the giving up, can bring with it frustration with God.

We see the mess around us and wish God would fix it. Zap it away.

The Jewish people's hope that God would send a messiah who would rid them of those pesky Romans is one outworking of that hope God would sort things out. Zap

We hear the prophets – Isaiah, Ezekiel, Hosea – speak of a day when even the dangerous animals are at peace. Isaiah 65 talks about a day when when wolves and sheep will live together peacefully. Hosea 2 and Isaiah 2 talk about an end to war and peace among people. We are right to place this hope in our God.

When Christ, our redeemer, did show up, he didn't lead anyone into battle, he didn't wave a magic wand and make the problems go away. You look at the gospels -- there were signs and wonders, followers who found this man so compelling they left everything to join in -- and there was a heck of a lot of teaching. Some of the teaching was with words, and some with actions.

We've just come out of the end of the season of Easter. In the chronology of the church year, Christ has been resurrected and is now with God the father, God the creator. The Holy Spirit – the breath of God – the sustainer – showed up among the disciples with power and energy.

So what does our trinitarian, three in one God, do?

In the beginning, there was nothing, and the Spirit of God was there.

God the father, God the creator, created a good world.

God the son, Jesus Christ, Redeemer, showed up so that we might fully understand what God was like. You could look at him, watch what he did, and be left in no doubt. Christ's redemptive work, helping us to be good parts of that good creation. Freeing us from sin, the evil in the world, if we participated with God.

And God the Spirit ... the breath of God ... the Holy Spirit ... always there, always sustaining creation, sustaining us, calling out to us.

Creation, redemption are linked. But what is the Spirit sustaining us for?

How do we love the Lord our God?

How do we participate in God's redeeming work?

How do we work for peace and justice? How do we love our neighbour when the weight of the world falls more heavily on them than us? How do we keep our hope when despair is all around us? When it feels like the world is collapsing around us – so many things are going wrong – what do we do?

I'd say the big thing that as the people of God, the body of Christ, the Church, that we need is spiritual discernment. Prayer. Listening to God; listening to each other; listening to people outside these walls.

Some of this discernment is around "what do we do with what's happening around us right now" but some is "where, O God, should our energies be directed?"

It's easy to be swept up with the flavour of the month, what's in the news right now, what everybody is talking about. Yes, what's happening in the United States is awful, it's the fruit of a long history of awfulness, and it's in the news because things that happen in the USA are seen as important by our news editors.

When our family was living in Whanganui, the church we were part of decided we should have a local and a global mission focus. Our discernment process drew us to South Sudan, a country filled with conflict, hunger. It wasn't in the news. As a congregation we made time to learn about this place, learn about what was happening there, and we gave money to aid organisations working there.

When we see the news, of things going wrong on God's good earth, far away, that does pose the question – well, how are we doing? It's easy to condemn police in the United States for racism, and they do seem to be awfully good at killing people ... but we're not saints here in New Zealand. The police's pilot of carrying guns that's just finished was described by the New Zealand Maori Council as "frontline policy around SUV's with guns cocked driving around brown postcodes." The outcry around that is pretty muted. Yet our streets were filled with people protesting the actions of police on the other side of the world. Those events in the USA were the trigger for a bunch of news about armed police here ... would we have even heard about them otherwise?

Lord, have mercy. Creator, renew your creation. Redeemer, redeem this whole world. Spirit, empower us to do God's work, to be God's people.

This is why we pray for others, pray for our leaders, our Government. Those prayers are important. That's one way we cry out to God – "we can't fix this on our own."

It's also why we pray the Lord's prayer – let your will be done, your kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.

And when we get the chance to speak, when the world is listening, let our words not go to waste. That's the disquieting note in the story of those astronauts. They felt it would be politically awkward to talk about peace in the middle of war, so they talked about creation, of God's Good Earth. How things were, but not how things should be now. Sorry, the wolf will have to keep eating the sheep a bit longer, that's just the way of the world.

The funny thing is this muted message didn't keep everyone happy. A group of atheists took the government to court over their reading. If you're going to offend people in the name of our God, at least do it properly!

Amen.