

“THEN THE LORD SHUT THEM IN”

READINGS: *Genesis 7 verses 1 – 16; Psalm 23 verses 1 - 6*

INTRODUCTION

Here we are, once again, about to enter another week of lockdown. But there seems to be a bit of hope on the horizon. For some, it cannot come quick enough. For others, there is still a sense of apprehension about relaxing things too quickly, too soon. Facebook is full of optimistic speculation and I suppose it is good for morale, to keep our spirits up. Here is one such message which some may have spotted:

“Lockdown began on March 25th, and now extended till 3rd May. It's exactly 40 days from 25th March to 3rd May.

QUARANTINE - The Latin root of the word "quarantine" is "forty". So what does the Bible say about 40? The flood lasted 40 days. 40 years Moses fled Egypt. 40 days Moses stayed on Mount Sinai to receive the Commandments. Exodus lasted 40 years. Jesus fasted for 40 days. Lent is 40 days.

Also: A pregnancy lasts for 40 weeks. 40 days for a woman to rest after giving birth.

A group of theologians thinks the number 40 represents "change". It is the time of preparing a person, or people, to make a difference.

Did you know that during this "quarantine" rivers are cleaning up, vegetation is growing, the air is becoming cleaner because of less pollution. The Earth is at rest for the first time in many years and hearts are truly transforming.

Remember we are in the year 2020, and $20 + 20 = 40$.”

This is all very interesting reading. However, a couple of points. Tomorrow is the 3rd of May and we are still in lockdown. The flood in Genesis lasted for 150 days, albeit the rains did stop after 40 days, and Noah and his family were on board for a total of 370 days. Sorry to “rain” on this parade! However, it did get me thinking, and I realised that this was the very first and original lockdown recorded. I did try out an additional piece of research by watching the film “Noah” starring Russell Crowe. Something of a loose interpretation of the story. I watched as everyone and everything got on board, next thing I knew, they were about to come off again. So much for research.

MAIN BODY

In **Genesis chapter 6 verse 6** we read **“The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain.”** All of this a far cry from the days of creation when after everything God created, we read **“and the Lord saw that it was good” (Genesis chapter 1 verses 6, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31)**. So what happened? Sin entered the perfection of creation when Eve was tempted (**Genesis chapter 3**) and Adam soon fell to the same temptation and that perfect scenario became tainted with sin. Jealousy and murder were to follow in **chapter 4** and by **chapter 6 verse 6** we read those words of God’s pain.

As I have stated on other occasions, I am not joining the “doom and gloom” group by saying that our current circumstances are as a result of all that is wrong in our world, but just maybe, as the article from Facebook indicates, this is a time of getting ready, of preparation, maybe even of learning, for us all. Already we have seen a lot of good surfacing in these difficult times. Already we have seen the best in humanity and also some of the worst. So what lessons are we learning through these days? Are we going to be more appreciative, better people, once this is all over?

For Noah and his family there was much to learn and much to endure during the period of their “lockdown”. Noah was in something of a privileged position because despite all the pain God felt about His creation, we read in **Genesis chapter 6 verse 8** **“But Noah found favour in the eyes of the Lord”**. Whilst God could have completely obliterated everything and started with a completely clean slate, Noah found favour in God’s eyes.

We go on to learn that God spoke to Noah, told Him his plans, and Noah responded, enduring abuse and ridicule from those around as he set about building a huge boat on dry land. When the boat was ready, the animals on board, and Noah’s family safely installed, God shut the door. The first lockdown had commenced. The word used to describe Noah’s boat – “ark” – is not used anywhere else in the Bible to describe a sailing vessel but rather is used to describe a square box, basically, a coffin. There was no steering equipment. There were no sails. Once on board, the inhabitants were seemingly at the mercy of the waters, but more so, in the hands of God. For Noah and all on board, this floating “coffin” would carry them from an old way of life to a new beginning. This is one of the very early pictures of God’s grace in action, of God’s salvation in the midst of destruction.

In **1 Peter chapter 3** we read of how God was patient whilst Noah completed the divine building instructions, and in the story of the flood we read of Noah’s patience and trust in God during the time of the rains, then the period of waiting until the door was finally opened. For Noah and his family it would be a time of reflection, of preparation, of wondering what lay ahead. For us today none less so – a time to reflect, a time to prepare for whatever lies beyond lockdown.

The Psalmist has written some wonderful Psalms – none more famous than, what we have as **Psalms 23**, where we are reminded that the Lord is our Shepherd – our provider – our guide – our restorer – our comfort – our protector – our priest – our preserver – our deliverer. Perhaps it would be helpful to re-read those words and realise again what they mean – not just a quick run through, but over a cup of tea or coffee, a sit in the sunshine, or on your daily exercise walk and go through it phrase by phrase.

Noah and his family had a lengthy time of preparation before they came out to face a changed world once again, bearing in mind that their lockdown lasted 370 days in total. I really hope that ours will be much shorter. No matter how long, will our society be different? Will we have been changed? Perhaps the use of the rainbow now is a poignant reminder of God’s grace and mercy, of his comfort and care, particularly for those who have suffered loss in these days, the comfort of the one who journeys with us in and through the “valley of the shadow of death...”

An additional thought. The story of Noah presents the picture of a harsh and cruel God who obliterated all life save those of Noah, his family and the animals on the ark. Read **1 Peter chapter 3 verse 18 – 20**. Here we read that when Christ died at Calvary and was buried, he descended into the place of the dead and preached to those spirits who were imprisoned, who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. A further reminder of the grace and mercy of God which goes beyond our understanding.

We need to remind ourselves that the God who closed the door on Noah and his passengers, was the same God who opened that door once again to a whole new world. The politicians have continually used the phrase “the new normal” for when after this is behind us. May we find ourselves re-entering a new world after these days of preparation to anything but a new normal. Rather a renewed and refreshed way of life. When God does something, it may be new, but it is certainly anything but “normal”.

As God promised His people of old, so He promises us today – **“Forget the former things, do not dwell on the past. See I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up. Do you not perceive it?....”** **Isaiah chapter 43 verses 18 and 19.**

“I’M IN HIS HANDS”

I SHALL NOT FEAR THOUGH DARKENED CLOUDS MAY GATHER ROUND ME;

The God I serve is one who cares and understands;
Although the storms I face would threaten to confound me,
Of this I am assured: I’m in His hands.

*I’m in His hands, I’m in His hands;
Whate’er the future holds, I’m in His hands;
The days I cannot see have all been planned for me;
His way is best, you see; I’m in His hands.*

What though I cannot know the way that lies before me,
I still can trust and freely follow His commands;
My faith is firm since He it is who watches o’er me;
Of this I’m confident: I’m in His hands.

In days gone by my Lord has always proved sufficient,
When I have yielded to the law of love’s demands;
Why should I doubt that He would evermore be present
To make His will my own? I’m in His hands!

Stanley Ditmer
Salvation Army Commissioner – USA
Promoted to Glory 2003

A Scripture selection related to these reassuring words is *Isaiah 41 verses 10-13*:

**“SO DO NOT FEAR, FOR I AM WITH YOU; DO NOT BE
DISMAYED, FOR I AM YOUR GOD. I WILL STRENGTHEN YOU
AND HELP YOU; I WILL UPHOLD YOU WITH MY RIGHTEOUS
RIGHT HAND.”**