

Sharing Faith in Lockdown

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 21 June 2020

Preacher: Derek Lamont

[0 : 0 0] Okay, we're going to do something slightly differently or in a different order this evening from maybe what we would normally do. I'm going to look at various passages and they'll be interspersed during what I'm going to say. So there's no reading of Scripture at this point, but there will be reading of Scripture throughout the message. So because I don't do what, I don't do this often, but I'm not going to preach or teach from one particular passage of the Bible in its particular context as part of a series. I'm not even going to preach from one verse as a one-off sermon or teaching session as John did so acceptably last week.

But what I'm going to do is I'm going to answer a question that was asked recently in one of our question sessions, but which we didn't answer, we didn't look at because we got a lot more questions in than we were able to answer. I'm going to answer one question in the light of Scripture and by referring to Scripture, I hope that's still teaching, right?

I hope that's still preaching from the Bible. It's just doing it in a slightly different way. And I'm going to answer the question that I'll tell you what it is very shortly. In the light of the fact that we're planning a seven-week evangelistic presentation in the summer, in the evening, so that's again going to be something different and I'll tell you about that at the end. But the question that we didn't look at in our question time recently was, how can I talk to people about Jesus during this crisis when I don't see anyone? A perfectly legitimate question. How can I talk to people about Jesus during this crisis, this COVID crisis lockdown, when I don't see anyone? I'm isolated or when I'm not able to get out of the house. And I think that's a really good question.

And I think it broadens our thinking and I hope it will broaden our thinking into wider questions about God's sovereign control over our lives and over the circumstances we find ourselves in.

So by way of introduction, I just want to say that I acknowledge and I experience that this crisis is indeed tough, you know? And it's difficult to think and act normally, as it were, as we would normally act. Maybe sometimes you've heard preaching and you think, well, you know, from me or Derek's talking about normal situations and things aren't normal and so it's difficult to apply the teaching. I hope that's not been the case. But it is a tough crisis that we're in and isolation is not a good thing. And for many of us, this has been very stressful, been stressful personally, there's been pain for people, loss, bereavement, fear. And we've seen, you know, snowballing effects in different ways and unconnected ways with the injustices and the hopelessness that seems to be prevalent in much of people's thinking. And maybe you'll say, well, I'm not sure how to survive this. I'm not sure how to respond as a Christian and how to disciple as a

[3 : 5 2] Christian and how to tell others about Christ during these times. Maybe now how can I survive? And maybe you're thinking, how can the church survive during this time? What is God doing?

And that's difficult. But just before looking at that, I've got a little sidebar here with a challenge. When you're thinking about these days and the crisis of these days, if you hate these days because of the challenges in your job or unemployment or the disruption of your social life or the fact that there's not going to be any holidays, and you find that really tough, but actually not having to interact with other Christians and be committed to coming along to church and being part of the gospel community with all its feelings, maybe you're actually loving that part.

And I wonder if there's a challenge there to our deep-seated thinking about what disrupts our peace and what is important to us and what is significant. What our understanding of the gospel and our calling as disciples is. And the wonder of God's grace if we're actually more perturbed by how this crisis has affected our general life rather than our Christian life. And actually, the two should be subsumed together. And the challenge therefore should come to us as whole people as Christians.

And there should be a toughness and a difficulty even about not meeting together and not fulfilling that great calling to love God and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

So I think, you know, there's maybe a little sidebar there about where our priorities lie. But with regard to the crisis and the toughness of life that we're going through and witnessing through that and how we do it, we're also called to live with great hope and to always be learning and always to be growing. And if you remember the great picture that has been the foundation of our movement towards deeper and ongoing discipleship in the congregation from Jeremiah 17, that picture of the tree that always bears fruit even in drought can bear fruit because of where its roots are. When the heat comes, it can still bear fruit. And we needn't be afraid because its roots are still receiving life and energy from the living water. And as we are rooted and living for Christ, even in a drought, a time of drought, and this very much feels like a time of drought, then we begin to realise if our faith is for real and where our roots are and whether we can still bear fruit at such a time like this. So there needs to be that great acknowledgement that crisis is that we're going through is tough. But can I say, and we move on to look at some examples in the Bible, our crisis can be God's canvas. So the crisis that we are going through can be something that God uses and something that God does use and something that God has always used in the past. So we're reminded that this crisis for us is not for God. It's not a crisis for Him and He is sovereign over all that's happening. Now that, I've heard a lot about it from many different people in these days about God's sovereignty through this crisis. It's not a cheap cover all doctrine. It's not a theological sop. We don't just let it trip off our tongue and say, yeah, yeah, yeah, God's in control. It's fine. It's almost like something that's quite careless and quite blasé. I don't think for us, while it's rooted and it clearly is revealed in

[8 : 13] Scripture, it is a truth that for us is wrestled out of the fires of suffering and the recognition of God's redemptive work in our experience, in our experience as part of broken humanity.

And so it's not a cheap truth for us to just trip off our tongue, but it nonetheless is an important one. And it's that deeply paradoxical reality that we face as Christians in this life, which is a battlefield with the cross as our template where the innocent one suffered and died and was exposed to great injustice and yet that greatest of all injustices was the means by which God wrote salvation and redemption for humanity. So we see in that that the foolishness of God is wiser than our wisdom. And so we can see and know and understand that God will use the crisis that we go through as a canvas on which to work. And he, in his permissive will, he will use and even evil, he will use evil against itself to bring its final demise. So the cross is that revelation of God's victory over evil. And we wait for its final destruction. It was defeated, it will be destroyed, and he will bring in its final demise. So our understanding of the divine good in all of difficult times is one which recognizes mystery and depth and unseen and unspoken explanation sometimes. But we believe and we trust that God is at work. And in many ways, again to use a kind of very non-biblical phrase, he works against all the odds. And in the difficulty, in our crisis, we see it becomes God's canvas. And we are to believe in that and to recognize that.

So I want to say a couple of things, a couple of things on each point. Firstly, that his truth will motivate us, I think, to action through a time like this and enable us to share our faith and to live as Christians in difficult times. And there's two elements to his truth, to truth that I want to mention. First, his power and then his perspective. And we're going to read about his power in Matthew 16 verses 17 to 19, a short passage, and Mary Murchison, who is going to be working as an apprentice with us. I'm an apprentice in training with us from September.

We'll be reading some of the passages and William McSween, who we hope will also be working with us for a year from September as an apprentice, will read also one of the passages, but they'll be interspersed. So the first reading, Mary will read from Matthew chapter 16.

Matthew 16 verses 17 to 19. In Jesus answered him, Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father, who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. So we have here Jesus just making a great declaration on the basis of Peter, what Peter said to him, that you know, when Jesus asked all the disciples, who do you say that I am, Peter says, you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Redeemer. And Jesus goes on to say that that great declaration and that great reality, and that great truth is the rock on which the church will be built, of whom Peter will be one of the founding apostles, and goes on to speak about this great truth being what will build the church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. And it's this great declaration of power and glory from both the message and the work of Jesus Christ. And it may seem that the opposition is great. The gates of hell is an awesome picture, and it's a frightening and scary picture of evil and darkness. And yet Jesus is saying, as the kingdom progresses, evil and darkness will not be able to withstand the growth and the movement of the kingdom and the coming in of Christians and the ushering in of God's new creation. And things then, and now often seem very bleak, we feel that the gates of hell seem to be shut tight against Jesus Christ and his claims. We feel sometimes the gospel is weak and the darkness that sometimes is in our hearts, but sometimes in people's souls is impenetrable. They will not believe. And there is that sometimes a sense of malevolence and opposition, a widespread rejection, there's so few people being saved, there's little evidence of God at work. And yet we are to be reminded in times of crisis, in times like this also, that Jesus has already stormed the gates of hell on the cross. And his death and his resurrection is the ceiling of his defeat of darkness and sin and the grave. His kingdom is coming and we are to be his soldiers. And he asks us to hide in him. He asks us to act for him.

[15:10] He asks us to share our life and our faith and our testimony in his name and to stumble out our faith story with prayer and with belief to other people, because he is the Messiah and we follow in his footsteps. And we believe that he wants to use us to further his kingdom and to share our faith even in a time of crisis, even when it seems unproductive or unfruitful. To mix metaphors, we need to constantly be deepening our roots into the rock, into the foundation that is Jesus Christ and the gates of hell do not prevail against him. He is the Christ. And as we live for and as we trust in Jesus Christ, we recognize his great power, power that hell could not overcome and will not overcome. And we need, as we think about sharing our faith, as we think about how we can share Jesus when we're in this crisis, we need to look at the transforming power that Jesus Christ has wrought and we look to see being wrought in our own hearts. And as we see his power, then it enables us to think differently about the crisis we're in. So his power is one thing.

Then we go on to the second part of his truth, which I hope motivates action for us, which is his perspective. And here, Mary will read from Matthew 19 from verses 23 to 32.

Matthew 19 verses 23 to 30. In Jesus said to his disciples, truly I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Again, I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.

When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, who then can be saved? But Jesus looked at them and said, with man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible. Then Peter said in reply, see, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have? Jesus said to them, truly I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first. Okay, so in this passage very briefly, again we see impossible odds. You know, in the first passage it seemed like the gates of hell were against Christ and we're talking about the crisis and the difficulties we face today. Well, in this passage we have a rich man and Jesus speaking to the disciples and exposing how difficult it is for those with material wealth and material pleasures and material plenty, how difficult it is for them to see their need for salvation so much so it's easier for an eye to go through, a camel to go through the eye of a needle, a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. And it's an interesting picture that Jesus paints there of how deceitful and how appealing are the attractions of this world of materialism and we see that and wealth and maybe even secularism we see as tremendously, making it tremendously difficult for people to believe in Jesus. Maybe you look at your friends at people around and say they're never going to believe in Jesus. It's like the rich man in the story. He's never going to believe because it's so difficult because he's so surrounded by all of this world's good things and it's tough. It's very tough and but the great thing is Jesus knows that. He knows it's really tough for people to come to faith in him, to overcome these ills, not just for the rich man but for all of us. That's why he uses that illustration. He says, yeah, as we look at it, as human beings we look at the prospects of our friends or anyone else coming to faith, we think it's impossible, be easier for a camel to go through an eye of a needle and that's a great and crazy illustration, isn't it? He gets it. It seems terribly difficult but we need to see things from his perspective because he thinks, you know, you look at that and you say, is it possible then for anyone to be saved? And he says, with man that is impossible but with God all things are possible and we need to see that perspective and recognize that he is the one who does the impossible and we are not to fret unnaturally or in an uneasy way about these things and believe that we are to go out and trust in him, to live our lives and to make good use of what might be impossible times. Just tell it out and leave the results to him. He's the one who raises the dead.

We're simply asked to make the introductions at the grave side. All we're asked to do is introduce people to Jesus by our life, by the natural reflection with others of what Jesus means to us and having introduced him, we're to leave him to raise the dead and to bring to life their sense of need for a redeemer. So his truth motivates action but also secondly his ways inspire hope. Now again, so we're looking at unfavorable circumstances and crises and difficulties that make it difficult to live as a Christian maybe and even harder to share our faith as Christians and how do we do that? Maybe you're looking to say, I can't live the way I want to live even as a Christian. I can't mix my friendship groups with so that my Christian friends are mixing and mingling with my unbelieving friends. I can't go out for a meal or for a coffee to share my faith with someone or I can't invite someone to my church community on a Sunday and I still go even doing one-to-one stuff with people and everyone anyway is so distracted. They've all, everyone's got so much on their plates, it's overwhelming.

[22:17] How can, I can't even think about sharing my faith and can I just encourage you and then I encourage myself not to be overwhelmed but to know he knows and to rest in him. I'm just going to, I want us just to look at two, briefly two, biblical accounts to encourage you briefly.

The first is how God works in a desert and then in a prison. So in the passage about the desert, it's from Acts 8, 26 to 39 and William is going to read this.

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. This is a desert place and he rose and went and there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candens, Queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure.

He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning, seated in his chariot and he was reading the prophet Isaiah and the Spirit said to Philip, go over and join this chariot. So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, do you understand what you are reading?

And he said, how can I unless someone guides me? And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this, like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shears is silent so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation for his life is taken away from the earth? And the eunuch said to Philip, about whom I ask you does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else? Then Philip opened his mouth and beginning with the scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. And as they were going along the road they came to some water and the eunuch said, see here is water, what prevents me from being baptised? And he commanded the chariot to stop and they both went down into the water Philip and the eunuch and he baptised him.

[24 : 38] And when they came up out of the water the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away and the eunuch saw him no more and went on his way rejoicing. Okay it's a slightly longer passage because it's a really great and encouraging passage to read. And I chose this passage because it's great to reflect on the way God works so often that is counter-intuitive for us. So here's Philip and later on in I think in Acts 21 he's called Philip the Evangelist. So he obviously had the gift of an evangelist. The gift of an evangelist, what a great thing. Someone who could tell the gospel, who knew the message well and who obviously was able to share it with people and people, you know.

So what would God say to him? Go to Jerusalem Philip or go to Rome or go to somewhere where there's lots and lots of people and be an evangelist and he says, no go into the desert, go into the desert. I say, what? There's nobody there. There's no people there. What kind of strategy is that? Why are you taking me to the desert? The desert is brilliant. There's nothing in the desert but snakes and sand. But God doesn't see a desert. God sees a person.

God isn't looking at the circumstances that Philip will have to endure. He is seeing a person that Philip needs to meet. A member of the Ethiopian royal household who has been in Jerusalem, is traveling back home. So it's really, it's not the circumstances that are significant. It's the connections that God wants us to make. One person at a time. We're often overwhelmed by the need but it's one person at a time for us that God is often using us to do. So when we think of the story of Philip and the Ethiopian, we can pray that God will lead us to people in whom his spirit is maybe already working in order to be part of their story, in order to be part of the way God is leading them to himself. And it might be the circumstances seem entirely unproductive. We may feel that we're very isolated and that it's going to be impossible for us to effectively share our faith or witness in a crisis like this. But these circumstances are not a crisis to God.

And he used Philip doing a most counterintuitive way going into the desert to bring this Ethiopian to faith and probably through him a church in North Africa was born. Our task, I think in life as Christians is to be sensitive to his leading and obedient to his will and willing and able to share the good news when it comes. So the desert wasn't an ideal circumstance or an ideal strategy or an ideal situation to be in, but God was sovereign over that and God is sovereign over these days in which we live. And the last reading is from Philippians chapter 1 and verses 3 to 11 and Mary is going to read this again. Philippians 1 verses 3 to 11, I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

It is right for me to feel this way about you all because I hold you in my heart for you are all partakers with me of grace both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.

[28 : 51] For God is my witness how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more with knowledge and all discernment so that you may approve what is excellent and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God.

So we've seen the circumstances sometimes that God uses a desert and here we have Paul writing a letter to his Philippian church but he's writing it in chains, he's writing it because he's in prison and he speaks about that in the passage that we read. And again, a very unfruitful place to be left you would think. And I know a lot of people, teachers and preachers have made reference to Paul's imprisonment during this time of isolation.

But can I just for a moment ask you to think about what it would have looked like do you think for Paul and even for the early church that was very much reliant on the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul, who loved his missionary journeys, who planted churches, who appointed leaders, who went back to teach them again and who wept on the side of the sea on the beach with elders that he'd made because he was going to be moving away from them. Great people, person in many ways and hugely significant leader writing from a prison cell in Rome rotting in effect on death row.

Would he have felt frustrated? Would the church have wondered what God was doing? Did they ask why? Was he lonely? He certainly was isolated. Was he thinking, what on earth is God doing? Maybe as he initially started in prison, maybe thought, oh well, you know, remember being in prison in Philippi and the earthquake came and we got set free. I thought of Peter where the angel came and opened the prison doors and he was waiting and waiting and waiting for miracles for something to happen and nothing happened. Would that have been easy for Paul? I don't think so. I don't think it would have been easy at all. And yet, I think in Philippians 4 and verse 11, he says, I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. It was something he had learned to be content. It didn't come naturally. It was a process.

It may have taken quite a time to work through it, to reflect, to pray, to dig, to wrestle. I don't think for a moment Paul would have skipped into prison with the shackles on him and said, hey, God's sovereign over this. Yep, it's great. Everything's going fine. And yet, he learned and he patiently began to understand God's purposes so that he could say in verse 12, you know, I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.

[32 : 24] He wrote these great prison epistles, Ephesians and Philippians, Colossians and Philemon, which have been so crucial under the inspiration of God for the whole church over many, many centuries. And he could pray and he talks about praying. He could speak about the love of Christ. He knew Christ's fellowship with him. If technology had allowed it, he'd been on Zoom all the time, meeting up with people. I suppose it was Zoom snail mail by letter that he wrote.

He eventually received visitors as some restrictions would have been lifted. But he learned to give thanks. He meditated on what he had. He knew that God was, he came to know that God was sovereign over this situation and people were in his heart. So he was free at that level because he could, he could commit them to God and God was in their heart, God was in his heart.

And he knew the gospel would advance even with his imprisonment. As he focused on Christ, he was able to press on. I mean, if you have time, read the gospel, read the letter of the Philippians, it will not take you long and it will inspire you. And he was moved in prison, longing for the church of Christ. And he himself was moved in longing to see people come to faith and to recognize their great need of a Savior. So in that unfruitful circumstance, we find that Paul recognized God's sovereign hand and he was enabled to be used greatly. So now in our situation where everything is different and difficult, there are restrictions, can we learn by God's grace also to adapt, to recognize God's sovereign purpose in this that he knows it's not cheap for us, it will require us to learn what he's doing, to look at what we can do to take our difficulty like Paul did and make it an opportunity. And maybe through these days, you have more opportunities with your neighbors that you didn't have before, you have more time to pray, maybe you can contact people in different ways and meet up with people that you didn't meet up with as time goes on. We can invite people to our online services, it's maybe a less threatening invitation. And I hope that I'll speak about that in a minute. And as restrictions are lifted, you make a point of meeting up with people. So there's opportunities even in what seems to be a crisis. Keep learning. We need to keep learning about God's power, about our impossibilities becoming possible to Him, His perspective.

This is where God has you. This is where God has me. And this is where He wants us to serve Him right here and now. And I and you have the greatest good news, most amazing opportunity, while life is chaotic to grasp the nettle. Learning how to introduce others to Jesus, learning to share your own story of what He means to you, share how your Christian faith has impacted your response to lockdown, the injustices that we have become aware of in the world, and how Christ is the answer and the hope and the contentment that you have found.

We have the best news ever, and people are still enemies of Jesus Christ who have no hope and who are eternally lost. And so we long for people to come to know Jesus, and we don't know how long we have to have the opportunity to share faith. And may we help one another in that task. Will you join with us for our times of prayer and an engine room on a Friday at eight to plead with God for the gospel to flourish for many people in this city to come to faith, to encourage one another, to comfort one another as we struggle and battle with that, to remind ourselves that we are safe in Him, to learn and to love Him, to love our neighbor, to love one another, to love our enemies, and to know that with God all things are possible. Amen.