

**SERMON BY THE REVD JONATHAN AITKEN HONORARY CHAPLAIN
TO
CHRISTIANS IN GOVERNMENT
AT
THE WHITEHALL CAROL SERVICE
PREACHED LIVE FROM THE PULPIT AT WESTMINSTER ABBEY
ON
26 NOVEMBER 2020 (TRANSMITTED VIRTUALLY 16 DECEMBER 2020 TO ALL
CIVIL SERVICE IT NETWORKS)**

This Whitehall Carol Service comes towards the end of an extraordinarily challenging year for everyone, especially for those serving in Government.

So, the first words I want to say to all of you in the Civil Service is simply "Thank You".

The extra pressures you have had to carry during the pandemic have been enormous – not only in the NHS and the Department of Health, but across every Government Department.

So, as my Sermon tonight will be partly about gratitude. I begin by expressing it to you.

Thank you for all you have done in helping Britain to keep the show on the road and to get us through this pandemic.

The pandemic has sent fear stalking its unnerving way into every nook and cranny of 2020's Britain.

One journalistic cliché doing the rounds is that there is more fear in the country now than there was during the Second World War.

Steady on! As Private Eye might put it 'shurely shome mishtake'.

I am old enough to remember the last phase of World War II and one particularly alarming part of it, when London came under daily attack from V2 rocket bombs or Doodlebugs.

One afternoon in 1945, when I was playing in the garden of my Aunt's home in Putney, a Doodlebug screeched its way down from a clear blue sky, crashed and exploded on the house next door.

It was a terrifyingly memorable experience for this toddler who was knocked over by the blast.

Later I t became something of a family joke that, long before I could say Mama or Dada, I knew the word Doo-Bug!

Exaggerated WW2 memories aside, there is no doubt that fear of Corona Virus has spread far and wide across our country.

So what have been our fears?

Fear of death?

Yes, for some, for when Covid19 symptoms of high fever or breathing difficulties arrive in a human body, they bring to some minds, as they did to mine when I had the bug, the famous lines of T.S. Eliot in the love song of J. Alfred Prufrock:

"I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker.
I have seen the Eternal Footman hold my coat and snicker.
In short, I was afraid."

Then there are economic fears:

Unemployment

Business collapses

Loss of livelihoods.

And, finally, there is fear of the unknown.

Fear of uncertainty.

Fear of the future for oneself and one's family.

All these fears are a real and present danger to our well-being.

Now it is salutary to remember that fear played an important part in the unfolding story of the first Christmas.

"Do not be afraid" were the first words the Angels spoke to the terrified shepherds.

"Do not be afraid, Mary" was the earlier greeting of the Angel Gabriel at the moment of the Annunciation.

In an era when unmarried mothers in the hill villages of Judea were ostracised in disgrace, or even stoned to death for their disgrace, we can understand why Mary might have been frightened by the news of her holy pregnancy.

And then immediately after the birth of Jesus, every family in Bethlehem must have been rent asunder with fear when the Tyrant Herod ordered the slaughter of all male babies in his brutal, but unsuccessful, effort to kill the infant Jesus.

So, at the first Christmas in Bethlehem and at Christmas in Britain some 2000 years later, fear has been a malign force in many lives.

Now, there are important spiritual questions to be asked here.

How do we reduce our fears, or even conquer our fears?

Can God and our Faith in God help us?

There is a cynical answer to the last question provided by the Victorian poet, Arthur Hugh Clough, who wrote these lines:

*“And almost every one when fear,
Disease or sorrow strike him,
Inclines to think there is a God
Or something very like him”.*

But we can do better than such opportunistic cynicism.

A strange fact from the market research polling industry tells us that while less than 5 per cent of the British public ever enter a church, or a mosque or any other place of worship from one year’s end to another, including Christmas, Easter or Eid, nevertheless, 95 per cent of the population do admit to saying prayers at one time or another.

Why?

Is it for Arthur Hugh Clough’s reason, suggesting we are all inclined to pray when fear, disease or trouble strikes us?

Or is it because of what American Footballers call the option of “The Hail Mary Pass” – throwing the ball into the air when all seems totally lost?

Or could it be that somewhere inside each and every one of us there lies buried, however deeply, a spiritual hunger, a spiritual instinct urging us to pray?

Mary, an uneducated village girl, had that instinct. She prayed.

And she was safely delivered of a Son, destined to be the Saviour of the World.

She gave birth, not in the Bethlehem Maternity Hospital, but in a poor, probably unsanitary manger, with the Oxen, rather than the Gynaecologists, standing by.

And afterwards, Mary prayed perhaps what is the greatest ever prayer of gratitude, known to us as "*The Magnificat*".

It begins:

"My soul doth magnify the Lord
And my spirit doth rejoice in God my Saviour"

These words take me back to where I began tonight – with the subject of giving thanks. Most of us do not do this often enough in our prayers.

Let me tell you a short personal story about prayers of gratitude.

Some years ago, I was going through a self-inflicted career catastrophe. A fall from grace which saw me crashing from Cabinet Minister to Convict, serving a prison sentence in HMP Belmarsh, for perjury.

In the middle of this downward spiral disaster I was advised to take the spiritual advice of an eminent monk.

This venerable former Abbot listened carefully to my tale of woes as I described how I was going through the fires of:

Defeat, Disgrace, Divorce, Bankruptcy, and Jail

But, instead of offering me sympathy, the old monk lent forward in his chair and said in his quavery voice:

“Have you tried thanking God for them?”

I could almost have hit him!

But the monk went on to guide me to a couple of telling sentences in a book which in the 17th Century was regarded as a great Christian Classic “A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life”.

Its author, William Laud, wrote these two arresting sentences:

“If anyone would tell you the shortest, surest way to all happiness they would tell you to make it a rule to thank and praise God for everything that happens to you.

For it is certain that whatever seeming calamity befalls you, if you thank and praise God for it, you turn it into a blessing”.

Just for a moment, ponder on these words of spiritual wisdom.

Then apply them to any of your own personal worries and then to the pressures of the Pandemic.

In my own life, once I started to thank God for my personal disasters and chastenings, I learned from them, and now, with gratitude, I count my blessings for my happy and fulfilled life as a Priest and Prison Chaplain.

And looking at the Pandemic, I think we can all begin to see with gratitude what the Prophet Isaiah called "The Treasures of Darkness".

They include: The superbly dedicated work of the NHS.

The amazing scientific discoveries of the Scientists at Oxford University and elsewhere, who appear to have found new vaccines which will contain not only Corona Virus but all sorts of other viral strains which, unvaccinated, might cause pandemics in the future.

The many individual acts of kindness and good neighbourliness which keep on occurring in local communities.

And perhaps through the fog of our fears we can even begin to see the emerging contours of a gentler, kinder, softer and less sharply materialistic Britain, which might embody the spirit of Christmas all year round.

If these 'Treasures of Darkness' are real, as I believe they are, let's be thankful for them and encourage them, and pray for them.

I wish you all a grateful, unfearful, happy and blessed Christmas. **Amen**