

# **Prophetic action in the Pandemic**

***The 372nd Lion Sermon given at St Katharine Cree  
by The Rev'd Preb Richard Springer  
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After 371 occasions perhaps, as my mother would say, all the sermons have already been preached. Yet not all our hearts, including mine own, have received. So, we pray...

*...may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.*

Good afternoon. Thank you to the Gayer family and the clergy who on their behalf have invited me to offer this 372<sup>nd</sup> Lion sermon. It is my privilege to do it.

I have been asked to offer some reflections for a short while on these passages of scripture and the 'lions' faced by the people of my parish during the pandemic. I am here today, coming from the Anglican Parish of St George-in-the-East the borders of which run up from the Highway in the south, along which the church is situated to the Aldgate East area just down the road from here. Our church building has been there since 1729. It is a

parish with a rich winding history like many such places in the east end of London.

The total impact of the trauma of the pandemic on our community has not yet been fully realised. Too little time has passed since the height of the cases, hospitalisations, and deaths at the start of this year.

These past 18 months in the parish have been terrifying and sorrowful, especially for our Bangladeshi population. One congregant of St George's described his experience of working in a hospital as "like being in a war zone". No-one has lived in our community, country or perhaps anywhere and remained untouched by Covid-19. It has been in one way or another, inescapable.

This Lion sermon, as it says in your orders of service, was established in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, by the former Lord Mayor of London, Sir John Gayer "in gratitude for his divine and providential deliverance" from the mouth of a lion. The lion circled him yet miraculously passed him by leaving him unharmed.

The prophetic Old Testament book of Daniel contains the story we have heard today – 'Daniel in the lion's den'. In shutting the mouths of the lions, God performs a miracle. Belonging to the spiritual realm, miracles are enacted in

our physical world. An interjection from God into the ordinary order of our lives – including the inevitable pain and distress of this life - and turning those things upside down so that we glimpse something of the reality of the power of God.

In a real sense we have been cooped up as it were in the den which has been the pandemic. It has been all around us and we have literally been indoors hoping the terror would pass our homes by.

Down through history, Old Testament themes of being passed over by evil nemeses may truly resonate for some. Take for instance the dramatic realisation of the terror of the transatlantic slave trade in the novel, ‘The Underground Railroad’, where Colson Whitehead imagines an actual railroad beneath the violent plantations of the American south. Holes in the ground where innocent slaves would hide from the racist terrorists who were their legal owners... Or of the systematic genocide of the last century known as The Shoah, and for example, the tragic story of Anne Frank and innumerable others, hiding and seeking escape while evil lurked nearby.

These are almost unimaginable realities.

Biblically, these themes surface in the stories of the Israelites in captivity in Egypt. They too are people enslaved by earthly powers, trapped in circumstances they cannot control.

On one occasion, the Lord God instructs them in Exodus chapter 12, to ‘mark their doorposts with lamb’s blood’, as one night death will visit their dwelling places when the Lord strikes the land of Egypt. It is to be a strike to move their masters to let them go and thereby live free from enslavement and persecution. And the Lord says, “the mark on the doorposts shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you...”

The distinctiveness of these Israelites is that they are close to God despite their terrible circumstances. Their dialogue with God in the face of terror creates a new reality where they are saved from this angel of death. Daniel too with confidence in God enters the den of lions and faces the terror that lurks there. A lesson in these passages for us all is not necessarily the physical escapes of Daniel and the Israelites but that in the face of inevitable terror we can instinctively resolve to turn to God.

The airborne Coronavirus could be likened unto the breath of an angel of death. Blowing over and around us all.

Yet though the virus is no respecter of persons it seems it is a respecter of circumstances. It will not surprise you to know that the pandemic and its lockdowns has revealed unjust social disparities that have always existed between the peoples of this country. Unjust disparities that are not outside of the control of society but, I suggest, are outside of the collective will of society to eradicate.

The angels of death, the 'lions', faced during the pandemic by the poorer people of my parish and of many and diverse places have always been there: food and digital poverty, poor mental health exacerbated by difficult access to services for treating poor mental health all compounded by overcrowded housing.

Just the way a horror film works, the threat of these 'lions' is as stressful and terrifying as the reality of the attack itself. One must stave off the controlling *fear* of defeat in life, a sort of death by a thousand small defeats, let alone death itself, by being convinced of the possibility of a hope worth believing in and a future to live for.

So it is that, ingenious ways for making one digital device serve a household are conjured up; ways of coping with poor mental health in an overcrowded home and the necessity to make food go further.

Despite these daily familial miracles the lockdowns in this past 18 months have created a reality that bites hard.

*Survival on the breadline tipped into hunger, a cracked phone screen went from an annoyance to being the only access to any kind of education for children learning to read for the first time and their siblings doing GCSEs or A-levels.*

*The furlough scheme created a backlog of work for manual labourers that increased stress. And the disproportionate number of frontline workers who are poor and Black or Brown or Migrants meant the virus itself was an additional threat – brought home to children and parents each day.*

*Coping with poor mental health by getting out of a small flat disappeared overnight. A small flat in a poorly looked after block where the rubbish chute and the plumbing don't work properly creates tension and despair that is hard to cope with.*

These 'lions' have prowled long before March 2020 and have kept those confined to these dens well reminded of their vulnerability. A vulnerability amid their circumstances but also while those who might come to their side in

trying times look away – just like the powerful king; he of many decrees but of insufficient action.

The veneer of participation in society has been rubbed away to reveal a sopping wound that no-one really wants to see. No-one wants to look upon the precarious survival of the poorest. Why would the king tarry at the den less he witnesses the carnage?

However, to risk bearing witness to such pain in our society is to dare to act. It is an action to be present to and with suffering as well as to contend with our own suffering, for what we choose to actively bear witness to – whether poverty, or racism or mental distress – is to see the symptoms of a suffering society, one to which we all belong.

We might think that the ‘lions’ cannot harm us if we do not enter the den. Yet, see how it is the king who is undone and unable to cope with the very real and urgent situation. It is Daniel, facing the greatest threat and injustice in the story, who overcomes the injustice facing him and converts the king.

In the Christian categorisation of this Jewish text, Daniel is a major prophet. To go down into the den is the key prophetic action in his relationship with the king. He truly puts his faith to the test. Yes, he may have benefitted in the past

from his relationship with the king, but it is his brave embodiment of trust in God that transforms the nation and the king who had deserted him. Facing the 'lions' with faith is a prophetic action that can transform all of those willing to be changed by it.

We need this new action and new sight. Thankfully, the protagonists are in our midst, in many parts of my parish and in communities of marginalised people everywhere. For such action and insight is fuelled by faith forged in the hottest part of the fiery furnace and tested in the centre of the most dangerous dens. Of course, there must be gifts of knowledge and wisdom to be learnt from the parts of our communities who know these trying places better than anyone else.

Those who are able to face the 'lions' of this present age with faith are a gift to be treasured. Their lived experience can put the most overwhelming dangers into a perspective that creates flourishing in dry lands. Not to escape the inevitable pain of this life but to trust in and recognise the power of God in all situations. Where the interjection of a miracle working God into our lives is welcomed so that all can glimpse a new reality.

So that our souls may be taken up out of the dens of this life and no manner of hurt be found upon them because we have believed in God. The God who

carries our cares and in Christ Jesus establishes, strengthens, and settles us.

To face the 'lion's' dens of our world we are to be in communion with Him who has regarded us, shown us mercy, lifted up the lowly and filled the hungry with good things. To him be glory and might forever and ever.

Amen.