

MISSING YOU - EASTER 2020 - GEOFFREY MARSHALL

'Where do we find God in this difficult time?'

Let me tell you first where I don't find God.

With church buildings locked and public worship banned, lots of clergy (and others) are live-streaming worship on the Internet. I'm sure many of you have appreciated their attempts. But I can't say I have. However good the music, however nice the priest's study, however excellent the sermon, however beautiful the photography, I've found such worship a poor substitute for the real thing. I've not been finding God on line.

I'm not one of those people who find God in the garden (my apologies if you do), or on the top of a mountain, or in a glorious sunset over the sea, or even in an empty church. I very rarely find God in silence; I might find peace, but not God. Yes, you know I believe in holy places and pilgrimages to them; but I always find my fellow pilgrims on the journey to be far more important than my arrival at the goal.

So where do I find God?

I find God in people – each one made in God's image. I'm missing people – be they children or grandchildren, be they friends or strangers, be they male or female, be they young or old, be they sick or healthy, be they mostly good or sometimes bad – because it is in other people's pleasures and needs, joys and sorrows, successes and failures, hopes and fears, that I find God.

That is why we normally meet in the flesh to worship. That is why solitary confinement is such a severe punishment.

So where is God in the pandemic lockdown?

The usual suspects tell us why they think God is sending this terrible plague on us – as a punishment or a warning or some other sign? But when I ask "why?" I get no answer. I can only lament (there's a biblical word if you want one) in my loneliness and frustration and impatience and fear. That gets even worse when I think what it must be like today in a crowded refugee camp in Greece or on the Gaza Strip.

It is at times like this that the Psalter comes into its own; what a shame so many churches have given up singing Psalms. "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me for ever?" (Psalm 13:1). "Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing; O Lord, heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror." (6:2). "Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (10:1). Again, all the more pertinent because I'm writing this on Good Friday, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (22:1), which Jesus quoted from the cross.

These ancient hymns usually find the light of hope by the end, with a new sense of God's presence, not to explain the trouble but to provide reassurance within it. I don't think it's my job as a priest to be able to explain why we are suffering the coronavirus. I do think it's my job as a Christian to share the lament. Out of our lament there seem to be emerging new ways of caring ('phone a friend' has taken on a new meaning), new ways of working, new means of safeguarding the environment, new hopes in science and medicine, new purpose for politicians; even Resurrection. Happy Easter!