

Are We Heading Towards New Norms?

A Reflection in a Season of Pandemic

Reflections Prayer, Repentance and the Spiritual Life 24 June 2020

1 Peter 1:7 (quoted)

Isaiah 48:10 (quoted)

Matthew 12:28 (quoted)

Luke 17:21 (quoted)

Let me begin by making a disclaimer: I have no answers for the questions I am raising today. All I am doing is speaking my mind. All of us should think through these questions prayerfully, and seek answers from Jesus.

The primary, but most critical, question before us today is this: after Jesus endured such inhuman torture, was nailed to the Cross, died for our redemption, and rose again on the third day, why are we not in Heaven yet?

The Old Testament tells us that from the time man fell from the grace of God, He gave humanity countless chances to turn around, but we did not heed them. He chose the Israelites as His special task force, and walked with them towards the promised land. He gave them the Law through Moses, so that they might have a clearer vision of His will. They became entangled in the Law, cleverly engineered by the high priest and the rabbis, and put God on the back burner. And when the time came, He was incarnate in the Person of Jesus Christ, and we know well the events narrated in the New Testament.

Returning to the question I raised: I suspect that Jesus has given us a long rope, but merciful as He is, He also gave us His resident Spirit to seek guidance from. Tragically, though, what Jesus taught us in three years, we have not learned and practised in two thousand and twenty years. Is it then any small wonder that the whole world is now in a quandary? Jesus seems to be saying, "Enough is enough."

The deeper tragedy is that we continue to go back to what we understand as normal. The second question for us, then, is whether what we consider normal is truly the norm any longer. If it were, God would not have put us through this test. Speaking of testing, or of refinement in fire like gold, there are several verses in the Bible one could quote. Let me read out two that I find fitting: "That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:7, King James Version). Our trials, struggles, and persecutions refine our faith, recreating us as new creatures, useful to God. Instead of sitting back

and asking, "Why me, Lord," we should respond to suffering with a new set of responses, firmly believing that Jesus is in the process of revealing Himself to us. Isaiah prophesied this in the eighth century before Christ, thus: "Behold, I have refined thee, but not with silver; I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction" (Isaiah 48:10, King James Version).

I am no end-time evangelist, but something Jesus spoke two thousand and twenty years ago rings a bell. Matthew reports Him as saying, "then the kingdom of God is come unto you" (Matthew 12:28, King James Version); Luke reports Jesus saying, "for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21, King James Version). Connecting our present afflictions to the fact that, after two thousand and twenty years, we remain where we were, together with all the beautiful teachings of Jesus, one wonders what we should be doing about it.

The debate rages as to whether we should quickly return to corporate worship, congregating once more in churches, temples, mosques, and synagogues. Some say yes — but not those under ten years of age, and not those over sixty. That is no new norm; it merely cuts off the root and the fruit. I am not demeaning those in between. We rushed to the aid of technology, and the result was a technologically superior virtual worship, but in doing so we clung to the old order of worship. Jesus, as He did two thousand and twenty years ago in the Temple at Jerusalem, has driven us out of the churches, not so that we might replicate, adamantly, what we used to do in the past. He has disbanded the seminaries in the West, and they have gone online within a span of fifteen to twenty days, giving more room for the ministers of the future to think for themselves. Statistics show that our staying power in worship, once an hour to an hour and a half when we met in churches, has now been reduced to ten or fifteen minutes online.

We need diligently to seek the new norm that Jesus wants us to adopt. It is there in the Bible, which is like a vast field with hidden treasures. Let us drop our self-help philosophies like hot potatoes, and return to the drawing board — the Bible. Let our sermons become a true form of teaching, and a collective deliberation, by making them interactive. I am sure our young, enterprising, technologically able generation can work that out, if we stop breathing down their necks. May God bless us all.

Amen.

