

Coronavirus Assembly

I had planned a different assembly this morning, but the various pieces of news from around the world, not least the spread of the coronavirus, lead me to defer that assembly. It would be better to use this time together to reflect on the situation we find ourselves in, and how we might address it.

I would like to begin with a story that exists in a number of religious traditions. It concerns an exceptionally devout man. One day, he turned on the radio to hear a worrying news report. The announcer on the radio informed him that the weather was about to take a turn for the worse. Serious flooding was anticipated in exactly the spot where the man lived. He was advised to relocate immediately to higher ground. Our devout believer shook his head sadly. "Of course no harm will come to me," he said to himself. "God will look after me."

Sure enough, the rain fell and the floodwaters rose. The water level climbed to the first floor of the house. Along came a boat load of rescuers who said, "Quick, get in. We will save you."

Our devout believer shook his head sadly. "Of course no harm will come to me," he said. "God will look after me."

The floodwaters rose yet higher and only the roof was dry. Along came a helicopter which lowered a rope ladder. "Quick!" they said, "Get in. We will save you."

Our devout believer shook his head sadly. "Of course no harm will come to me," he said. "God will look after me."

And then the floodwaters rose yet higher and he drowned. Arriving in Heaven, the believer had the chance to address God directly. "What are you thinking?" he said. "I trusted in your care but instead of helping me, you let me drown."

"What were *you* thinking of?" replied God. "What do you mean I didn't help you? I sent you a radio announcement, I sent you a boat and I sent you a helicopter."

The moral of the story is that in times of trouble, instead of looking for extra-ordinary external sources of support, we should look to help each other and be willing to accept help from others, through whom God may well be working. So what should *we* do with all the bad news around us at the moment? Economic downturn, a brand-new virus which is reminding us what the phrase 'going viral' really means, a potential crisis in health and social care, another migrant crisis, extreme weather events and a host of other troubles are all on our radar.

Part of the problem is how we process significant challenges that we can have little or no personal impact upon. Another challenge is that we are overloaded with information, without having any sense of how to act upon it. Hence a natural tendency towards irrational behaviour.

So what should we do when we *don't know* what to do? There are three key actions. The first action is to understand the situation as best we can, using the most reliable sources of information. We need to gather information upon which any future decision can be founded. The second action is to check our resources. We need to know what assets, skills and possessions we have that can help us fix the problem in hand. The third and final action is to gather our friends and family around us to draw upon their strength and to serve their needs.

The good news is that I am confident that, no matter how large the challenges we face, we will - both individually and collectively - be able to use knowledge, resources and people to fix things. We will not achieve a happy outcome immediately - we face complex problems that will require complex and sophisticated solutions. Thus we should be very wary of politicians and pressure groups that tell us there is a simple solution, or that there are ideas that are unsayable. We will have to take things bit by bit. As the saying goes:

“How do you eat an elephant?”

“One mouthful at a time.”

It is when we are tested, that we discover our strength. I suspect that we will soon be reminded of our own strength, and the strength of our society. Do not make the mistake of thinking that the authoritarian approach that China has brought to bear on the coronavirus shows that they are strong. If they were not so institutionally and intellectually weak, we would not be facing the challenge in the first place. The wisdom, wealth and freedom that characterise the nations of the West are the surest path to a swift solution.

In terms of this school, we do not know what the future will bring. We are considering whether or not school trips can take place in the near future. Our decisions must be based upon prioritising the needs of pupils and staff. In the meantime, we must maintain good standards of hygiene to slow any spread. Please use the hand sanitisers we have placed around the school. It may be, if the coronavirus spreads more widely, that Health England will contact me and ask me to close the school temporarily. I will only close the school if directed to. At that point, we will use Firefly and other software to continue teaching by remote methods. Exam classes will have special arrangements made for them, which will be in common with all other young people in the same situation.

Until I am contacted by Health England, we will carry on as normal. We are, after all, British. This country invented the stiff upper lip. Self-isolation is the default setting for British social interaction. We have the world's largest natural resources of irony and understatement. We are perfectly placed to manage the situation, as we have yet one more opportunity to demonstrate our national character.

And to remind you of the story with which I began, whatever the future holds, listen for others offering help, and offer help yourself – it may be that you are the means through which God is seeking to improve matters for all.