

2021 Annual report (presented on Saturday, 1st May 2021)

We often say, rightly, that the church is not the building but the people. That being so, it has been no drawback under the Lord's supervision to meet via Zoom. Yet, "I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord. Our feet shall stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem" (Psalm 122). We look forward to being able to return and participate together in the Spirit as we have always done.

This past year, of course, has been dominated by Covid-19. Globally, and not just ourselves. Christians are not exempt but must often share the world's misfortunes, for they live in it. But it is incumbent upon those who believe in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ to explain to the world that this is God's doing, and that he has a purpose in it. He does not do all this for nothing that we may revert to our old ways as soon as possible. Neither does He desire that His people should, in exiting lockdown, be unreasonably divisive about the method of doing so. It is open to the freedom which the Lord gives us, to every believer's conscience, to obey the government's bidding, as we have done; or to return early to their church premises believing that it is the thin end of the wedge for subsequent repression if we don't and that it is a legitimate reason for obeying the Lord rather than men.

Ezekiel 14 is a good starting off point to understand what the Lord is doing. He lists the four sore judgments with which the Lord brings the nations to heel. They are the sword (warfare) thinking especially of invasion; famine; wild creatures and the pestilence. These things are major interruptions to the normality of life. So serious this may be at various times that "though these three men, Noah, Daniel and Job were in it (in this case Jerusalem) they should deliver but their own souls by their righteousness." In other words, their prayers would not avail for others not their very presence avert disaster.

These four judgments are mentioned from time to time in the scriptures. But the most notable is the observation of the Saviour (Matthew 24.7) concerning events before His return, that "nation shall rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom (that is warfare, invasion); and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes in diverse places". You notice that He substitutes "earthquakes" for "wild animals" as being the more destructive during this period.

The multiplication of sin and ungodly ways was the reason for the flood, and the destruction of all but eight of the probable millions who were alive. Covid-19 has not done this, not yet anyway, and so we must regard it as a solemn warning to the world. A warning not just to one culture but to all. There are many more millions in the world now, than there were in the days of the flood. When the Lord Jesus Christ returns it will be a similarly final destruction and only His people shall escape, as Noah and his family did in that earlier destruction.

Words of warning in Isaiah are repeated four times over within a short compass of six chapters. In other words they declare an urgent warning. If you read Isaiah 5 you will see the particular sins which are being dealt with. They are too many to deal within the short space of this report. The urgent warning is that "For all this, his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still." For different sins in Isaiah 9 the same warning is repeated three times over. And again in chapter ten. In each case either because different sins have not yet been repented of or because former sins continue.

Covid-19 is not over yet. The Lord's anger is not yet turned away. His hand is stretched out still. The "stretching out" indicates the Lord's personal supervision over the direction of this pestilence. We have not yet seen a major show of repentance. We have not yet seen repenting sinners returning to the Lord in their droves. Revival has not yet appeared, nor political recognition by governments that this is the hand of the Lord and therefore cannot be averted by scientific means alone (second cause of Almighty God though that is) but only by the Lord's intervention, the staying of His hand.

If we revert to our old ways maybe the pestilence will continue. Maybe, for example, the presence of warfare or locusts concurrently with the pandemic may exacerbate the suffering. Or if the Lord stays His hand, yet the world does not repent and turn to the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, than whom "there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4.12) there may be worse things to come. Revelation 9 speaks of the refusal of men to repent even under the most excruciating of torments. Chapter 16 speaks of people gnawing their tongues for pain,

blaspheming the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores yet not repenting of their deeds, as the world fast approaches the return of the Lord and its own final destruction.

So our present generation is being warned and severely reprimanded. Without repentance towards God and personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ on a large scale this pandemic is but a foretaste of what may be expected in the future.

Never was the preaching of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ more necessary than now. Just at this time, however, there are moves afoot even in our land, to criminalize the preaching of the gospel outside of church and church families; though even the latter may become a reportable offence. The dark ages will return; everyone will do that which is right in his own eyes, and nobody will know any better concerning things that are going on. How shall they hear without a preacher? How shall they be saved?

The church of God continues. Our fellowship continues; and we are most grateful to the Lord. But there have been differences. We felt it necessary to pass a motion concerning zoom church meetings, that they are to be considered valid during this emergency. For our rules indicate that we must have a quorum of those actually present; neither do we allow in normal circumstances, absent participation in voting. Those who are present we would normally regard as those whom the Lord wishes to vote on the matter in hand. And, of course, this could not be done.

We have a virtual member who, by the same token, is as fully a member as anyone else and one day the right hand of fellowship at a communion service will be given. Communion has been taken in our own homes during a zoom communion service. We have not yet succumbed to a virtual baptism!

Our sanctuary has been redecorated and is looking lovely, though we have not yet used it for communal worship. Some services have been zoomed from there. Except for its external hexagonal design, our sanctuary is a typical non-conformist meeting house for preaching and its very simplicity is stunning. Its very design always reminds us of the primacy of preaching and the pre-eminence of the Saviour in that preaching as in all else. We pray that such preaching, worship and prayer will continue until the Saviour returns; for, notwithstanding all that was said above, the word of the Lord is not bound.

Marcus has been unsparing with his time in preparing our orders of service and his know-how concerning things electronic has been our mainstay. Those of us who have the privilege of conducting worship or speaking to the children have had to learn new communication skills. Indeed, we all, and especially the children, have had to get used to another way of worshipping requiring greater concentration.

It must be said that this report is not a report proper, for which I apologise, though I trust it has been instructive and encouraging. It has been an attempt to assess Biblically where we are and where our generation is, that we may be unceasing in our lives of devotion and holiness to the Saviour, however difficult the days. At all times maintaining the unity of the little flock of the Lord's people here at Friston has been our prayerful endeavour. I conclude by quoting Psalm 133. "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity." Our dwelling together has been spiritual; and we are mindful of Jesus' words to the woman at the well (John 4.21-25) which include His observation, "the hour cometh when ye shall neither in this mountain or yet at Jerusalem worship me...God is a spirit and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth". This, I trust, we have done.