

Hello Everyone!

‘The days are coming,’ declares the Sovereign Lord, ‘when I will send a famine through the land – not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord’ (Amos 8:11).

One of the things that came as a shock to so many of us with the onset of the Coronavirus Pandemic was shortages in the shops – even now, some items are still rather difficult to get. It’s so easy to take the full shelves of our supermarkets and local shops for granted. We find it difficult to cope when particular items are not readily available. This, of course, is so different from the experience of people, even today, in very many parts of the world, where there is no guarantee that the shops will be full. Hunger, lack of clean water and even famine are part of the everyday lives of so many people.

Today, the world stands on the brink of unprecedented famines. About 30 million people are experiencing alarming hunger, severe levels of food insecurity and malnutrition in north-eastern Nigeria, South Sudan, Somalia, and Yemen. 10 million of them are facing emergency and famine conditions. Famine is already likely happening in parts of northern Nigeria, while Yemen and Somalia are on the brink. Thanks to aid efforts, it has been pushed back in South Sudan but the food crisis continues to spread across the country. These are just four of the many countries that are facing high levels of food insecurity this year. In Malawi, Sudan, Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo or Syria millions of people do not have enough food to feed their families. The situation in some of these countries could worsen if the international community do not address urgent needs and resolve the root causes <https://www.oxfam.org/en/hungry-world-plenty-millions-brink-famine> (accessed 13/05/20).

I am writing in the period that we normally mark as Christian Aid Week – nearly all the familiar things that we do for Christian Aid will not have happened this year. So perhaps I might ask you to give a special gift to Christian Aid, Oxfam (source of the quotation above), Save The Children or Tearfund – or a similar charity of your choice. If you need information as to how you might give (addresses and so on) please contact the circuit office (the temporary number is on the back page).

One of the things that this period of Coronavirus has given to people is additional time to think – yet reports on the media say that despite the increase both in illness and the death rate people are showing a great reluctance to talk about either. Despite its inevitability, death is one of the least discussed events in our lives. Although I have had some great visits to the USA I am not a great fan of Americanisms in English. One that I have become aware of recently is ‘passing’ – to mean ‘dying’. Of course, these expressions are often used with the best of intentions but ultimately they avoid the reality. I heard this morning that the father of one of my close friends has died. When I complete this letter, I will write to my friend. I will be sure to do three things (1) to say that I am sorry that his Dad has died; (2) to assure him that he and all his family are in our thoughts and prayers; (3) to offer some words of Christian consolation and hope.

It is the last of three things that I shall be writing to my friend where not only in wider British society but also even in church we seem to have lost our nerve. People in the wider world and in public life will express sympathy. Oddly, in my view, they always say that they are thinking of other people and though we might say that because we find it awkward to say that we are praying for them, while I suppose people might take comfort in not being forgotten, ‘thinking of people’ is effectively rather different from ‘praying for them’. As to third – words of Christian consolation and hope – I want to

share with you some words that I received from a friend by text. When I first read them they shocked me, yet what shocked me was not that they are different from what I believe, they are exactly what I believe, and yet they were written very plainly, with no attempt to avoid the reality.

God's grace has seen us this far and he will see us onwards until we meet him face-to-face. Who knows what the future will bring at any time? I reconciled myself to the idea that I might be infected some weeks ago, so it is only the outcome that is uncertain but that just about sums up our lives every day, though we are less conscious of the fact. I have been blessed throughout my life. If it is continue, the question has to be, how do I use it to serve God's purposes in this world? If it does not continue – we believe in resurrection!

The Bible verse at the beginning of this article is an important one in this day and age. For more than 400 years, the people of Great Britain have had relatively easy access to the Bible, to faithful Biblical preaching and to countless books of Biblical teaching that are worth reading. Yet, and I am somewhat sorry to say it, even within the church, we are not as conversant with Scriptural teaching as we should be (I readily acknowledge that this includes me).

In recent years, the Methodist Church of Great Britain has organised Bible month. This year, the book of the Bible that we were asked to look at for four weeks is Ruth. I was invited to contribute to a short book in the *Digging for Treasure* series (published by MET), sharing with a colleague of mine, Revd Dr Russell G. Herbert, who used to be in this Methodist District and is even now not so far away in Clevedon. Happily they editor took my title, *Three Funerals and a Wedding* (The Message of Ruth Today). These books are normally £6 but you can get one post free from the circuit office for £5 (cheques to 'Torbay Methodist Circuit').

Did you know that John Wesley had three dates of birth? Because of the change in dates from the Julian to the Gregorian Calendar, an 11-day adjustment was made in September 1752. John Wesley was born on 17 June 1703 (Old Style) but because of the adjustment this became 28 June on the new calendar (if you have ever wondered when the tax year ends on 5 April it is because it used to end on the old quarter day 25 March – three months after Christmas). He had a 'spiritual birthday' when he felt he trusted Christ alone for salvation on 24 May (1738). Someone else you know has a birthday this month and to conclude I quote from the *Wesley's Birthday Hymn* written by Charles Wesley (1707-1788).

My remnant of days
I spend in his praise,
Who died the whole world to redeem:
Be they many or few,
My days are his due,
And they all are devoted to him.

God bless



John Haley
Minister