

## Reflection for Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> June 2021

Old Testament - Genesis 7 1-5

Old Testament - Jonah 1 1-5

New Testament - Matthew 14 34-36

I want to add a fourth reading to the three bible verses that we encountered this morning. This is from a book which is as long as the Bible called The Lord Of The Rings, Book 1, Chapter 2. The hobbit Frodo Baggins has just found out that he is responsible for looking after the all powerful One Ring, a magical ring of great power and malevolence which he must now quest to destroy.

*"I wish it need not have happened in my time" Said Frodo. "So do I said Gandalf, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."*

What Tolkien does, in this one short paragraph, is show that we don't always have a say over the hand fate deals to us. Tolkien would have felt this greatly. Like many of his generation he served in WW1, in the Battle of The Somme in fact. He also lived through WW2. Neither he, nor those of his generation wished those wars would happen in their lifetimes, but they did and they had no choice but to use their time on this earth to take a part in great events. Frodo Baggins would like nothing more than to sit in the pub and eat six meals a day, but fate has other plans for him.

In our first two readings from the old testament this morning we can also see this in action. Fate is replaced by God - he has big plans for Noah, and later he has big plans for Jonah. And we see two different responses to this. Noah is an old man with grown up married sons, he ought to at his age - whatever age that is (we don't know) - be taking things easy. Instead, he follows God's call to build an ark to avoid the cataclysmic rainstorm that is sent to sweep the world clean. Jonah - arguably - doesn't have to do anything so physically demanding as build a giant ark but is asked to give of himself to serve God. Famously he runs away. You know these stories inside out. They wish these things didn't happen in their lifetimes, but they were called to serve, as Frodo is also destined to serve a mission. Like the generations who lived through two world wars.

*"I wish a pandemic need not have happened in my time" Said Stuart. "So do I said Gandalf, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."*

Jesus didn't, it would seem, live through a pandemic, but living 2,000 years ago he did see a lot of illness and he did meet and heal a lot of sick people, even some who had died from whatever sickness had made them ill in the first place. Our new testament reading is one example of that - but, again, you know these stories inside out - I could have picked any number of examples.

Jesus is a bit like Noah - he has an inbuilt sense of mission and purpose. There is little or no room for doubt - unlike Jonah or even Frodo. Jesus often reconciles a lot of the old testament teachings - and what I mean by this is, his mission, his quest, is based on love, the love of God, the love of humanity - whereas the old testament books can be very problematic. A lot of life is destroyed in the Noah story, Jonah is swallowed by the big fish - you know - all that sort of thing. Jesus brings humility, self-sacrifice, and love. He puts others first. He does all these things in times of great upheaval, in times of occupation by a foreign army, and in times of in-

fighting by the spiritual and secular leaders of his day. He has no doubt about what he will do with the time that he is given and gives of himself freely - even though ultimately it will cost him his life.

*"I wish all this upheaval need not have happened in my time" Said Stuart. "So do I said Gandalf, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."*

Speaking of upheaval, this Tuesday just saw the commemoration of Windrush day. People arriving in Britain between 1948 and 1971 from Caribbean countries have been labelled the Windrush generation. It refers to the ship MV Empire Windrush, which docked in Tilbury on 22 June 1948, bringing workers from Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago and other islands, to help fill post-war UK labour shortages.

In the same year, the NHS was formed. However, it became clear very quickly that in the aftermath of World War 2, there was a shortage of qualified health care staff to fulfil the ever-increasing demand. Nurses, midwives and other care staff from the Caribbean were actively invited by the British government to come to Britain and help staff this new service.

The arrival of the many nurses and new trainee nurses who arrived from the Caribbean in those years was crucial to the success of the NHS. Without their input, it is likely that it would not have survived, failing before it really had time to be established.

Unfortunately, despite being invited by the British Government, no preparation had been made to receive them and the British people themselves were unprepared for the influx of large numbers of migrants. As a result, far from the welcome they expected, these, nurses, midwives and other workers were introduced into a largely hostile social and work environment.

There are many stories of the challenges faced by black people of the 'Windrush generation' – experiences of racism, isolation and rejection as they tried to fulfil the duties they were assigned. Many found that their qualifications from the Caribbean were not validated in Great Britain and had to work twice as hard to 'regain' the recognition and professional levels they arrived with. Sadly, many never did.

Currently, the NHS is the biggest employer of people from a BAME (Black,Asian, Minority Ethnic) background in Europe – 20.7% of the NHS workforce which represent over 200 nationalities. Many are doctors, nurses, allied health professionals, domestic, catering and porters.

On Windrush Day, we give our thanks and gratitude to all of them, for being - like Noah, Jonah, and Jesus - the right people in the right place, and at the right time. Some with a strong sense of purpose, some perhaps more reluctant but nevertheless here when we needed them.

I'll tell you of my pandemic experiences at the hospital another time, but for now here's just one story. During the first lockdown in 2020 I was talking to one of our specialist doctors, she wanted me to find some journal papers for her. She, like many of the NHS staff at the Great Western Hospital, came from overseas - a young African woman. After she had gone I took up her list of references. On the list she had made various handwritten notes - nothing unusual about that - but one caught my eye. At the bottom of one page she had simply written "God is Great!" exclamation mark.

God is great. Even in the midst of a pandemic, even in the middle of what must have been a very busy shift, even in the middle of a hospital library. God is Great. Events often take us by surprise. Noah lived through a flood, Jonah lived through being eaten by a fish, Frodo lived through the battles of Middle Earth, Tolkien lived through two world wars, We lived through a global pandemic, Jesus lived through his time and is living with us still.

God is Great. Sometimes that's the only message we need, no matter if the message itself was in a place most unexpected, but it was for me in the right place and the right time. I have no more control over my fate than any of you - at least we have no control of the time in which we live or international events that stir up our small world. Rather like Frodo Baggins, our comfortable little world has been hugely changed forever. But like Jesus, Jonah, and Noah - whatever our misgivings, God is Great, and calls us to respond. As Christians it's what we do - with love and compassion or judgement, whatever our circumstances - and long may we continue to do so. Amen.