

Dear all

Last night I had a dream. In fact, I had 3 or 4. I can't remember much about them, except that they were vaguely dystopian. They weren't nightmares as such, but I can remember the general unease. And I know at least one of them involved masks!

Humanity has been fascinated by dreams from earliest times. They have been considered liminal experiences, where the barriers between the physical/material and the spiritual are at their thinnest. Sometimes the seeking out of these dream experiences or visions (What is the difference between dreams and visions? Discuss...) has involved meditation, physical activities, physical deprivation, or the taking of psychoactive substances such as drugs, mushrooms etc..

Dreams play an important part in the bible – think of Joseph and Pharaoh, or the other Joseph, and his wife Mary. We can think also of Martin Luther King's speech "I have a dream..." How much less of an impact he would have had if he had said "Hey guys, I've just had a really great idea"!

Even in our own very scientific age, dreams hold a fascination for us, and we are still unsure of what they do. Some suggest it is our rampant imagination freed from the shackles of our consciousness and sense of what ought to be. Perhaps our deepest subconscious fears and desires. There is a theory that our brain is like a computer, and that, when we dream, the brain is not so much re-booting, more like defragging (sorting itself out, and gathering together things that belong together etc.) Still very mysterious.

Whenever I hear the word 'dreams' I recall the words of the prophet Joel, repeated by Peter on the Day of Pentecost, that when the Spirit is poured out on all people *and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams*. In this context, I think there is little significant difference between 'visions' and 'dreams', or indeed prophecy. They are all God's word to His people, and open to everyone, not just one group, elite, gender or profession.

The word 'vision' brings to mind Proverbs 29:18. In the Authorised Version we read *where there is no vision, the people perish*. The New Revised Standard Version (the one we use at church), however, reads *Where there is no prophecy, the people cast off restraint*. The Hebrew word *chazon* means a sight (mentally) i.e. a dream, revelation, oracle, or vision. As such, it is prophecy – God's word to His people. The word *para* has a root in 'loosen', and implies to expose, or dismiss – figuratively to make naked, or to perish.

The upshot is, without that vision, that dream, the people are in trouble!

I wonder if that fits our circumstances in the present. Perhaps our 'vision' (different focus of the word) is confused, muddled, unfocussed... blinkered even. Perhaps we feel we are fumbling around in the dark, to an end we are at least uncertain of.

Our archbishops are encouraging us to pray for the nation. (I must confess, I have somehow missed out on this. I only discovered it when my latest, very delayed, copy of the Church Times arrived).

The Church Times report says:

*The month-long lockdown, which began on Thursday, should become a month of prayer for the nation, senior church leaders said this week.*

*The Archbishops of Canterbury and York, together with the House of Bishops and the leaders of other denominations, are urging all Christians to pray each day for a specific group of people. And they have*

*asked for a collective moment of prayer at 6 p.m. each day, to be accompanied by the tolling of a church or cathedral bell.*

*The idea was first mooted in a letter to all clergy, written by the two Archbishops and the Bishop of London last Sunday. This has now been fleshed out, and support has come from the Presidents of Churches Together in England, among them the RC Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Vincent Nichols; the Pentecostal Pastor Agu Irukwu; the Coptic Orthodox Archbishop Angaelos of London; and the founder of 24-7 Prayer International, Pete Greig.*

*Intentions for each day of the week have been suggested:*

*Sunday: family, friends, and loved ones;*

*Monday: schools and colleges, children, and young people;*

*Tuesday: the elderly, those who are isolated and vulnerable;*

*Wednesday: businesses, the workplace, and economic wellbeing;*

*Thursday: the NHS and other key workers;*

*Friday: national and local governments;*

*Saturday: all who are grieving, those suffering with physical and mental health.*

You will be aware that I have used, and posted, prayers from my old pal, Nick Fawcett, and I know many have been blessed by him. You will also be aware that he has been ill recently. He has learned that the chemotherapy that he has been on for a good few years now is no longer working (hence his feeling so ill recently). He has now opted for a new regime. Please pray for him and his ministry.

Here is one of his latest posts – this week from his book ‘The Teacher’, which are reflections based on the writings found in the book of Ecclesiastes. This one on despair...

I talked to one in the grip of despair, not just low but utterly hopeless, such that they could find no peace, no joy, no reason to keep on living – each day seeming as pointless as the next.

And though I tried to comfort them, to show how much I cared, it appeared that nothing I could do or say could lift the clouds and restore their spirits.

So I said to the Teacher, ‘Help me to understand what they are feeling. Give me some insight.’

And the Teacher answered, ‘Everything is utterly futile, pointless, a waste of time. What do people gain from all the work at which they toil under the sun? A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains for ever. It is all tedious, more than words can begin to say. The eye finds no fulfilment in what it sees, nor the ear in what it hears. History goes on repeating itself: whatever we do is ultimately the same as what’s been done before; there is nothing original under the sun. This business of life God has given us to be getting on with is not a happy one. Everything we do in this world is an empty illusion, a vain pursuit of the wind.’

And I glimpsed for a moment the pain of despair, the hopelessness of those caught in its maelstrom, sucked ever deeper into its crushing depths until nothing and no one seems to matter and life feels without purpose. I grasped something of the misery of each day seeming to be sapped of a little more joy, a little more hope.

‘Is there nothing I can do?’ I asked the Teacher. ‘Nothing I can say?’

And the Teacher answered, ‘Even the sweetest of songs is as vinegar poured on a wound to one who is heavy in heart; it is like stripping off their clothes on an icy day.’

I saw then that attempts to help can, rather, hinder; to lift up, instead beat down; to ease pain, increase it further – that what we intend as kindness can be cruellest of all, adding only to the burden of pain, guilt and sorrow.

For there are no easy answers, no magic words to spirit despair away. The sun still shines, but holds no warmth. The flowers blossom, but have no beauty. The birds sing, but their tune is bland. Though life is rich, yet it feels poor.

And I understood that what the despairing need is not advice but understanding, not to listen but to speak; to open up and be heard without judgement or condemnation, impatience or expectation, so that, however isolated they may feel, they will know they are not alone.

The lesson I have learnt is this: where lives lie broken and despair hangs heavy, never seek to give answers; give rather of yourself – your time, your love, your care – for where life has lost its spark, we can only gently fan the smouldering embers until the flame ignites once more. And should you be the one despairing, do not lose heart . . . for though you may not see it now, and may not think it possible, night will finally give way to morning, tears to laughter, and winter again to spring.



Stay safe

Blessings and love

Mark