

### **378 Shaking the Trees**

“Stop - Look - Listen” says the notice by a footpath that is about to cross a railway line, and in the midst of the current mass shutdowns caused by Covid-19, those words serve as timely instruction on a wider front. Life for us all is suddenly very different from usual: nations, governments, businesses, churches, schools, families, individuals – all have been forced to “stop” in various ways, and all now have the challenge and the opportunity to “look” and then, above all, to “listen”.

Biblically, as we are confronted with what is going on, we instinctively “take it to the Lord in prayer” as the old hymn urges. In His allowing this virus to run so free, what is the Lord God saying? - to the world at large, to the nations, to Israel, to the Church, and to individuals, each one of whom is still made in the image of God Himself (Genesis 1.26-28).

Is He not surely “shaking the trees”? In times past for instance He has promised such shakings would occur for His original covenant people due to their sinfulness (egs., Isaiah 17.6-8 / Chapter 24). Some such promised shakings have indeed happened for them already, while some are still to come: the seizing-away of the true Church (I Thessalonians 1.13-18 / I Corinthians 15.51-52) is to be followed by the seven years of tribulation and judgment for the Jews and the Gentile nations, at the end of which the Messiah will return in power and glory (egs., Daniel 9.27 / Revelation Chapters 4-19 / Matthew 24).

We know that God’s “very good” creation of Genesis 1.31 was quickly spoiled by Adam and Eve: sin entered creation, leading to spiritual and physical death, and creation itself was subjected to the curse from which it still suffers (Genesis 3). Here then is the familiar old backdrop to all that has been going on in the world ever since – a world cut off from God through sin, incapable of solving its problems by its own efforts, and spurning the gift of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, the one and only Lamb of God who “takes away the sin of the world” (John 1.29, 36 / Romans 5.12 / I Corinthians 15.22 / John 14.6 / I Timothy 2.5-6).

Such spurning is plain stupid! – yet even now, as Covid-19 gathers pace, the rallying cries of the politicians brush God aside - “we will crack this together!”. Please God, and by His grace, Covid-19 will indeed be “cracked”, but how much better would that cracking be if linked to a healthy dose of “Stop - Look - Listen” in terms of national prayers of repentance and a crying-out for God’s mercy.

For the Lord God is still utterly holy and is still not to be trifled with, as the numerous meticulous instructions given within “the Law” (as in Exodus – Deuteronomy) repeatedly stress. The emphasis upon the New Testament in many local Christian churches today, with a consequent neglect of the Old Testament, tends to downplay God’s continuing holiness in the face of His extraordinary love subsequently shown to us all in Jesus Christ. Rather of course God’s holiness and God’s love are “both / and” rather than “either / or”.

So it is timely for God’s Christ-redeemed people to assume He is shaking also the trees of our own lives – a calling for each of us to stop, look and listen. What of my use of the time, gifts, energy and money which the Lord has entrusted to me? What of my relationships, habits and hobbies, of my thoughts and speech, and of my track-record with the internet, television, films, music, books and magazines?

How easy it is for little sins, rather like an unnoticed virus in themselves, to “hang about in the system”, as if they don’t really matter. Yet these little sins can act like a tangle of barbed wire around our legs which we may not recognise is there, snaring, cutting, hurting, impeding. We are to “get rid!” – by acknowledging, confessing and repenting before the Lord, then claiming His forgiveness and receiving this afresh by faith in Christ. Then we cut away and throw away any tangling barbed wire in whatever forms it may take, for we are now forgiven and free again by the blood of Christ (John 8.36). Alleluia indeed! If amidst everything else this Covid-19 pandemic serves to shake our own life-trees and prompts us to stop, look and listen concerning our personal Christian discipleship, then it will have been a fine example of Romans 8.28.

In the midst of current and any future turmoils, we can join our prayers with that grand prayer of Psalm 83.18 – “That [men] may know that thou, whose name alone [is] JEHOVAH, [art] most high over all the earth” (KJV).

For surely it is because that “knowing” needs to take place, through Jesus Christ and around this world, that the Lord God Almighty is using this pandemic to “shake every tree that there is”, for our ultimate good, and for His ultimate glory.