

Coach House Church **BEACONS**

6TH APRIL 2020

ENFORCED IMPRISONMENT

Hi everyone – how are you doing? Good to be with you. As I was preparing this, I realised I need to stop and remember everyone has their own individual experience of the current situation. Some of you are working flat out, to get essential work done – I am so grateful for what you are doing, caring for the vulnerable, keeping the NHS and shops and banks and deliveries going – the tasks we so often take for granted. But we are so glad you are there now.

Others are struggling to work from home with fractious children in the background – it's not easy to keep the whole household happy when some are working, others are attempting home schooling, the kids are bored, the house is a mess and you know it could go on for quite a long time!

For others, though, myself included, the day to day reality couldn't be more different – normal routine has gone out the window and they are stuck at home with nothing much to do. Social isolation.

normal routine has gone out the window and we are stuck at home

I must admit the novelty is wearing off now. I don't exactly live a wild life at the best of times – but I'm usually busy, and this is a bit quiet even for me. Enforced imprisonment, surely this can't be good?

Well, it's interesting isn't it? Things that FEEL bad can often ultimately be good. It got me thinking. Enforced – and unjust – imprisonment occurs frequently in the bible. Good people held against their will through no fault of their own. The list includes the Apostle Paul, various prophets – even Jesus was taken by force and held in army barracks, mistreated and ultimately killed – although even the governing authority could find no fault with him.

So when we're imprisoned or just socially isolating - we it might feel like it's some enemy holding us fast, against our will. But what if its God – holding us like a loving father holds a squabbling child, the child is angry and frustrated - but its being held for its own ultimate good

Let me explain what I mean. The most detailed account of false imprisonment comes in the first book of the bible – the book of Genesis. (incidentally, Genesis is a great saga recording the adventures, misfortunes and mistakes of an ever-growing family, the people of God. Worth a read if you've got time on your hands).

In chapter 37 we meet this huge family of 12 boys – 12 sons of Jacob. Same dad, four different mums. You can imagine the tensions and rivalry, the jealousy and favouritism. One of the youngest lads, Joseph, was extremely gifted, clearly his father's favourite, and destined for great things. Joseph seems to have been aware early on that he was a cut above his brothers – and was pretty proud of the fact. Naturally enough, this wound up his siblings no end – to such a great extent that they decided to get rid of him. After debating whether to kill him, they finally decided to just sell him into slavery in Egypt. Enforced imprisonment, phase 1.

However, Joseph, being a born leader, and an all round exceptional young man, quickly found his feet in Egypt and having started out as a servant was soon running the household of the king. Wonderful! Until the queen spotted his good looks and decided she fancied a little dalliance with him to liven up her quiet afternoons at home. When he quite rightly rebuffed her, and ran away, she was so angry she accused him of sexual assault and told her husband the King. And so, Joseph found himself in prison, without trial, on a trumped-up charge. (I told you the bible was a good read!). Enforced imprisonment, phase 2

So Joseph languishes in prison, for several years – for something he hadn't done. There is no record of how he felt, or what he went through. But he was only human. We can only assume he went through periods of disbelief at what had happened, anger and bitterness, depression, loneliness. There in the darkness, he no doubt at first thought God would quickly rescue him – he was such a favourite, after all. But no relief came. The weeks and months and years went by. What thoughts tormented his mind? How could he ever forgive those who had brought him to this?

He grew in authority and influence.

He was there a long, long time. He grew in authority and influence. He helped other prisoners. When they were released, he assumed they would help him. No – they forgot about him. Poor Joseph. How unfair. What on earth could God be thinking? Why would God let this happen to such a gifted individual? What a waste of his youth and talent.

But no. God was doing a deep work in Joseph. Much as he was imprisoned in the 4 walls of a palace dungeon – he was also imprisoned by his own self, his character flaws and weaknesses. Somehow, during the lonely days, God worked on his character. Worked through all the layers of pride. Helped him see that his gifts were there – not to elevate him above other people – but to help them, to serve them. Little by little his anger and bitterness had to go. He learned to be patient. However much he tried, he wasn't going to get out until God had finished working on him.

Finally, one day, circumstances change. Joseph interprets a dream and was able to show the king that the nation was about to face a terrible famine. Joseph is very suddenly released from prison, and put in charge of preparations for famine for all Egypt!

What a turn around! Even the brothers who had tried to kill him now had to come to him for food. You might think - at last – Joseph had the chance for revenge. But guess what? God had so worked on this character, that there was no bitterness and anger left. Some sorrow, and grief for the years that had gone by. But the terrible pride had gone, and been replaced by a clarity he never had before. He saw the purpose of all his suffering. He saw that, not only was he now able to save his whole family – but the whole nation as well. A totally different perspective.

And Josephs final summary of the situation was – “you meant it to me for harm - God meant it for good’.

What a great story. But what does that mean for us?

Firstly, don't be too quick to interpret your circumstances – what might seem like harm, God may mean for good. Ask God to give you a long view, to give His perspective – its probably very different from yours

In the Apostle Pauls letter to the Romans in the New Testament it says “In all things God works for the good of those who love him”.....or it can be translated “all things work together for good to those who love God”. Even your most difficult circumstances can be turned to good, in God's hands

And secondly, in our relatively short time of isolation –what might God be doing? Like Joseph, maybe my prison isn't just the 4 walls of my house. I might be chained by my own impatience, buried anger and resentment, bitterness, or pride? Maybe I'm imprisoned by my own inability to forgive someone, or even maybe to forgive myself. In the quietness, God can show me.

Jesus said he came to bind up the broken hearted and set the captives free. He said, those the Son sets free are free indeed. I want that kind of freedom – and only God can give it. In the quietness.

One thing is for sure. I don't want to get out of prison – well, social isolation - the same person I went in!



ANNE RODGER



Coach House Church

leadership@coachhousechurch.org // 0161 432 5604

the coach house church, 222 wellington road north, stockport sk4 2qn