

A Few Thoughts for the Hunkered-Down

Tuesday, August 25, 2020

The Benefits of a Little History

What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done: and there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new"? It has been already, in the ages before us. There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to happen among those who come after. —Ecclesiastes 1:9-11

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us. —Hebrews 12:1

We are being reminded repeatedly that the COVID virus is a *novel* virus, meaning that it is a new germ to which our immune systems are not accustomed. *Novel* seems to be a suitable word for this whole crisis, for it seems to be presenting us with all kinds of new problems. Those of us who have been around for a while have seen many troubles come and go, but it is generally agreed that this is a new one. But is this battle with the virus really so new? A remark from C.S. Lewis was recently brought to my attention which I had not seen for many years. In 1948, with the advent of the atomic bomb and the fear which surrounded it, he offered some helpful perspective on this "new" threat:

In one way we think a great deal too much of the atomic bomb. "How are we to live in an atomic age?" I am tempted to reply: "Why, as you would have lived in the sixteenth century when the plague visited London almost every year, or as you would have lived in a Viking age when raiders from Scandinavia might land and cut your throat any night; or indeed, as you are already living in an age of cancer, an age of syphilis, an age of paralysis, an age of air raids, an age of railway accidents, an age of motor accidents."

*In other words, do not let us begin by exaggerating the novelty of our situation. Believe me, dear sir or madam, you and all whom you love were already sentenced to death before the atomic bomb was invented: and quite a high percentage of us were going to die in unpleasant ways. We had, indeed, one very great advantage over our ancestors—*anesthetics*; but we have that still. It is perfectly ridiculous to go about whimpering and drawing long faces because the scientists have added one more chance of painful and premature death to a world which already bristled with such chances and in which death itself was not a chance at all, but a certainty.*

This is the first point to be made: and the first action to be taken is to pull ourselves together. If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb when it comes find us doing sensible and human things—praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts—not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about bombs. They may break our bodies (a microbe can do that) but they need not dominate our minds. —“On Living in an Atomic Age” (1948)

Lewis adds much needed perspective to our present situation and his major thrust is that nothing is as new as we believe it to be. Solomon affirmed this thousands of years earlier with his opening reflection in Ecclesiastes. A little study of history is amazingly helpful in reminding us that our troubles are very much like the troubles of countless other generations.

Do bear in mind that Lewis is *not* attempting to minimize the pain and sorrows caused by naturally or humanly inflicted disasters. One may correctly demonstrate that proportionately several other modern pandemics have been more harmful than COVID-19, but it is all the more true that the pain and grief of loss felt by those touched by this virus is just as intense and miserable as that experienced in any other plague. We may first think of C.S. Lewis as a grandfatherly academic who led a safe life of secluded reflection, but in actuality he spoke from an experience of significant suffering. The words quoted were penned while much of London and southern England were still in ruins from the Second World War, and Lewis’s early life was shaped by the trauma of years in the trenches of the First—an experience of which he rarely spoke. He was no stranger to suffering and never meant to speak flippantly of genuine human anguish.

Lewis’s ultimate point is bold and refreshing. Life is frail and difficult. It always has been, and we are in this struggle together. So, let us live it as God would have us to live, rejoicing in the gift of life and not being dragged down into the premature death of worry and fear. He echoes the sentiments of the Book of Hebrews which reminds us that we are a part of a great host of believers, many now with the Lord, who have all faced trial and difficulty. Knowing that we are not alone, and cheered on by this great multitude, let us run this race with courage and joy.

Blessings,

Pastor Jim

Make us, O blessed Master, strong in heart, full of courage, fearless of danger, holding pain and danger cheap when they lie in the path of duty. May we be strengthened with all might by thy Spirit in our hearts.

—F. B. Meyer, 1847-1929