

“One night the Lord appeared to Solomon and told him, “I have heard your prayer and have chosen this Temple as the place where I want you to sacrifice to me. If I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or if I command the locust swarms to eat up all of your crops, or if I send an epidemic among you, then if my people will humble themselves and pray, and search for me, and turn from their wicked ways, I will hear them from heaven and forgive their sins and heal their land. I will listen, wide awake, to every prayer made in this place.” 2 Chronicles 7: 13-15.

About a week into this lockdown, the thought occurred to me that this is a rather brutally enforced STOP on all the normal routines of our daily lives. Everything that isn't deemed essential is now shut and 5 weeks in, a visit to a café, a pub or even a friend's home seems like a rather distant memory belonging to a different life that existed before Covid 19 turned our lives upside down. I have been made to stop, as a church we've been made to stop (or at least do things very differently as our church building continues to lie empty), our community has been made to stop (as I write this I can hear no cars at a time when normally Glebe Road would be busy with people driving to work), our nation has been made to stop (our PM has been in ITU and our economy is crippled) the world has been made to stop (no planes in our skies either and the environment rejoices)! Do you see what I am getting at here – on every possible level we are living through a time of enforced stop! I then immediately remembered that as a church, several years before we ever set foot in Christ Church, you were given a prophetic word that said 'stop'. A few Christmas's ago when we had all the snow and many of us couldn't get to church or get our cars out of the drive for a week or more, I remember thinking about that word and how being made to stop creates frustration but it also creates an opportunity.

I wonder if that is true now as we reflect on these verses? I intended to begin with the familiar 'if my people....' But as I read what came before and after those verses, I couldn't help but be struck by them. Whatever we may feel about God's purposes in this crisis, He has allowed this to happen and He is the God who brings hope out of despair and gives us beauty for ashes. He is the God who can make even the most bitter things sweet if we will allow Him to do that. He is a God of compassion and His heart breaks for the suffering of the world He loves so much, but His love doesn't leave us in a place of despair, floundering and alone – no, it draws us to Him. You see this **stop** starts with us, His people. What we have in this crisis, a word which now know in Chinese means both danger and opportunity, is a unique opportunity to go deeper with God. That means humbling ourselves, it means repentance, it means refinement, it means surrender, in short it means being prepared to put ourselves in what Henri Nouwen describes as '*the furnace of transformation*.' He says that solitude is both the place of struggle (the struggle perhaps to let go of those things we usually fill our lives with, the struggle to confront those things about ourselves that we would want to hide from) and the place of encounter.

In this 'stop' I long to encounter God, (indeed, by His grace, I believe that I am already encountering Him in a new way), I want to be changed by Him, I don't want to come out of lockdown the same person that went into it. I want to spend time with the God who promises to hear us when we cry out to Him about this virus ('I will listen wide awake to every prayer made in this place') and who promises to heal our land. Yes, we want God to heal our land from this virus but don't we also long for Him to heal it spiritually? When the 'stop' begins to ease and restrictions begin lifting, the world is not going to go back to how it was. Suffering changes people, it softens hearts and produces a questioning of priorities and a realignment of perspective.

I believe the opportunity for the church is greater than it ever has been in my lifetime, perhaps you feel that too? Our communities, our nation and our world are desperate for a Saviour who brings certainty, hope, healing and transformation. This crisis has shown that so clearly and we are those God has commissioned to lovingly and graciously share that Good News! It starts with me, it starts with you, these verses so clearly say so, and so let's be ready, let's be humbled and let's earnestly seek God's face during this time of 'stop'.