

# Hard Times

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Lawrence Peak

Charles Dickens was a master storyteller whose stories have entertained people over the ages since they were written around 1830 – 1840. We think of a tale of two cities, Oliver Twist, Great Expectations and a Christmas Carol – wonderful classics. All of these have been made into movies - some more than once

One of his shortest novels is “Hard Times” which highlights the problems of the Industrial Revolution. It is the story of a very stern schoolmaster, Thomas Gradgrind, who believes only in facts and figures – cold hard facts and nothing else - with no imagination whatsoever and no appreciation at all for beauty, culture, love and the higher sensitivities. As a result he virtually ruins the upbringing of his children and as a consequence essentially ruins their later lives which end up disastrous and deeply unhappy.

It is a fairly grim tale set in the hard times of the industrial revolution and the soul numbing environment of the mills in Northern England.

We are currently experiencing our own “hard times” because of this Covid 19 pandemic which has almost stopped normal operations around the whole world.

With something like 208 million contracting the disease and 4.3 million deaths to date, and with the virus evolving into the highly contagious and far more virulent Delta strain, there is no clear end to this world-wide scourge. Hard times indeed!

And these hard times are right on our doorstep with people we know suffering and dying and having to be effectively isolated from each other. We cannot greet each other in person and hug each other and reach out and care for each other’s needs.

We have also the strain of constant isolation taking its toll on us all mentally; particularly our young people who depend so much upon social contact. At the moment we cannot make any firm plans, and we cannot travel overseas or even safely interstate in our own country.

There are signs of anger in the streets, when people feel frustrated and lash out at the nearest authority even though they do not have any real answer themselves to this constantly changing and evolving problem.

In times of war people traditionally turn to God to give them a sense of hope and stability; this is a real war, there are no tanks or bombs or invading armies, but it is a war nonetheless which has brought the world to its knees. So maybe we should indeed turn to our Father God for strength, endurance perspective and above all hope! His Holy Spirit remains close to us no matter how dire the circumstances, and we need to lean on Him when things are grim.

The Covid situation is bad, but if this were not bad enough we have the world in a real mess! There are wars and rumours of wars, refugees in their millions, and the ongoing tragedy of Afghanistan. We have Israel and Palestine unable to live peacefully together, and the unfettered burning of fossil fuels driving climate change, extreme weather events causing small island nations to fear for their very existence due to rising sea levels.

All this reminds me of the quote of four star general Omar Bradley who served with distinction in North Africa fighting Rommel and his Afrika Corps. This quote came after the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

*“We have men of science but too few men of God. We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the sermon on the mount. The world has achieved brilliance without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than we know about peace - more about killing than we know about living”*

How do we as Christians face the future when there is so much chaos, uncertainty, tragedy, despair and lack of hope? Dianne has always called me Pollyanna because I like to see the glass half full in spite of the negativity around.

Sure it is easy to get depressed when faced with all this, but my message today is also to look at the other side of the coin. Not to put our heads in the sand pretending it doesn't exist of course, but there is definitely another side of the coin.

The first thing to say is that it is not all bad. There is so much for which to be thankful: the wonderful world of nature around us shown in all its splendour by people such as David Attenborough.

Just recently a whole army of volunteers, police, SES and fire crews as well as concerned neighbours searching relentlessly for four days in the Hunter region to find a little lost autistic boy and bring him home safe and well.

And there are so many stories like this we could tell!

Everywhere, there is a veritable army of quiet saints loving, caring, sacrificing and risking. People such as those in the front line of Covid testing and treatment. People such as those in the service industries, aid giving societies, hospitals and charities - true modern day saints. And there are ways in which we too can join this army in reaching out, caring and supporting.

Jesus bids us shine with a clear pure light  
Like a little candle burning in the night.  
In this world of darkness, we too must shine,  
You in your small corner and I in mine.

We are also truly blessed with modern day technology which allows us to see and hear each other and communicate via zoom sessions or Facetime, as well as by emails, phone and good old-fashioned post which is still operating.

And of course, now we have all these vaccines now available to give us a light at the end of this dark tunnel we have been going through – light and hope!

The second thing to realise is that God is with us at all times, no matter how distressing the times might be.

- If tomorrow is to be joyful and full of radiant sunshine, God will be our God and we will rejoice with Him in our happy times.
- If tomorrow is to be difficult and hurtful, God will be our God and He will strengthen us and sustain us.
- If tomorrow is to be flushed with success, God will be our God and He will keep us humble, helping us to realise that our success is due to His blessings.
- If tomorrow is to be perplexing and uncertain, God will be our God and He will give us wisdom and guidance.
- If tomorrow is to be full of despair, God will be our God and He will give us hope and confidence.
- If tomorrow is to be lonely, God will be our God forever beside us. And as we walk with Him we will know that we need never be alone.

- If tomorrow seems to be so much out of control, God will give us the wisdom to see things we can do and where we can make a difference. They may be small things, but when we join in with many others, the results can indeed be significant.

It is because God is a God for all circumstances that Jesus told us not to be overly anxious for the morrow, for whatever is going to happen, God will be with us.

It doesn't mean that He is going to make life easy for us – often far from it – But it does mean that He will be close regardless. And as we face our Brave New World we need to remember this!

The third and final thing is to realise that God is in ultimate control, even though it might not seem so. The Bible makes that abundantly clear all the way through its pages.

I end with two quotes; one from Isaiah Chapter 65 and a similar sentiment from Revelation.

*See I will create a new heaven and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, but be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard no more. Before they call, I will answer; while they are still speaking, I will hear. The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, and dust will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain.*

And from Revelation Chapter 21

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying "Look! God's dwelling is now among the people. And God himself will be with them and be their God, He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away".*

Yes God has a plan which he is lovingly and patiently putting in place!!

It is a little like viewing a tapestry. If we view the wrong side we see a tangled mess of threads not making any sense whatsoever. It is tangled, messy and chaotic, and if this is all there is we would rightly despair. However if we turn over to the other side and change our viewpoint all makes sense and we discover the beautiful pattern that the artist has been creating all along – and then it does make sense!

Yes, there are many hard times for the world and also for us in our lives. However, let us not forget the promises that ring out in the Bible loud and clear. These are promises to live by; these are promises to give us strength to make the world a better place.

And let us never forget the words of Jesus as recorded by St John

*“In this world ye shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer for I have overcome the world”.*

Amen