



A VIRTUAL MULTI-FAITH PRAYER

5pm, Monday, 6th April 2020

Welcome: Imam Monawar Hussain, MBE DL
Founder, The Oxford Foundation

Bismillah Al-Rahman Al-Rahim

In the name of God, the Infinitely Good, the Most Merciful.

Welcome to Oxfordshire's Second Multi-Faith Virtual Prayer and thank you for joining us.

We are joined by:

Mr Tim Stevenson OBE, Her Majesty's Lord-Lieutenant for Oxfordshire

Cllr Craig Simmons, Lord Mayor of Oxford

The Rt Revd Bishop Colin Fletcher, Bishop of Dorchester

Penny Faust from the Jewish Community

Jawaid Malik from the Muslim Community

Gian Gopal from the Hindu Community

Davinder Singh from the Sikh Community

Satyadasa Waterston from the Buddhist Community

Esmyr Koomen from the Baha'i Community

Lord-Lieutenant, Lord Mayor, Faith Leaders and Representatives, Attendees and those viewing this live stream.

Peace be upon you all.

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought to the fore our human vulnerability and powerlessness, in the face of an invisible pathogen. Both are illustrated through the numbers infected globally; as of this afternoon 1.27 million had been infected and the lives lost exceeding 70,000; 190 countries having been affected. We in the United Kingdom, have lost thus far 4,934 fellow citizens, including frontline medical staff, the elderly and children, the youngest being 5 years of age. Families are not only having to come to terms with the grief of loss but also the absence of not being present at the bedside, in the final moments of their loved ones lives. This will weigh heavily on many souls. Expert projections of the spread of the virus, are grim reading, suggesting that we will hit a 'peak' over the next couple of weeks. That's why we have taken 'hope' as our theme for today's prayer.

Shaykh Sa'adi of Shiraz, captures the deep sense of what it means to be human in the following lines:

Human beings are members of a whole,
In creation of one essence and soul.
If one member is afflicted with pain,
Other members uneasy will remain.
If you have no sympathy for human pain,
The name of human you cannot retain.

We are as it were hardwired to be touched by the pain and suffering, of all the human family. It is what defines our human-ness. Hafiz, likewise, articulates the hope implicit in all prayer:

I should not make any promises right now, But I know if you Pray
Somewhere in this world – Something good will happen.

I want to hold especially in my prayers and thoughts, families who have been bereaved or have a loved one ill, and all in position of leadership, in our health and public services – thank you for all that you are doing to save lives and to bring this terrible pandemic to an end.

Address by: Mr Tim Stevenson OBE
Her Majesty's Lord-Lieutenant for Oxfordshire

As we enter a dangerous and difficult phase of the COVID 19 crisis we must prepare ourselves for a period of distressing news. For some, the news will involve the death of a member of their family. For our desperately pressed medical friends it will mean exhaustion, disappointment and extraordinary psychological stress.

At this time it may seem hard to maintain hope; it may be hard to celebrate the remarkable surge in concern for others, of solidarity, of the sense that we are all in this together. But that surge and the way so many are working tirelessly for the benefit of others is the strongest sign of hope that we could wish for, the hope that we can emerge from this crisis stronger, more resilient. My colleagues will be reading from the sacred texts of their different traditions. I am going to read a poem by the 17th century scholar and divine, John Donne:

“No man is an island

Entire of itself;
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main;
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less,
As well as if a promontory were,
As well as if a manor of thy friend's
Or of thine own were;
Any man's death diminishes me,
Because I am involved in mankind;
And therefore never send to know
For whom the bell tolls;
It tolls for thee."

This plague is a global challenge for mankind. Working together we will defeat it. And having defeated it we must continue to work together.

Lord, give us the grace to accept our challenge and to maintain hope; the generosity to celebrate those who are working tirelessly to support us all, and the wisdom to reap the learning that this is happening to us all, wherever and wherever in the world we are; to replenish our supplies of empathy and human fellow-feeling.

Address by: Lord Mayor of Oxford, Councillor Craig Simmons

May I start by thanking those frontline workers putting themselves at risk to keep essential services going. And thank you to all the volunteers who have stepped up to help, many thousands in Oxford alone. Such acts of kindness give us hope; the theme of this series of talks. Something, as the Lord Lieutenant says, we need to grasp with both hands.

When someone uses the phrase “hope springs eternal”, they are typically referring to a person or community who – despite being in a bad situation – haven’t lost their sense of hope. They are still motivated, optimistic, even flourishing. Faced with the fear and tragedy around us, I think we can all relate to the need for this in our current circumstances.

“Hope springs eternal” was coined by Alexander Pope – second only to Shakespeare amongst 16th and 17th century British poets – the phrase is an extract from ‘Essay on Man’ – a substantive philosophical work, written in the form of rhyming couplets, intended to form part of a system of ethics. Despite the title, it applied to all humanity – not just men.

So, writing in 1732, what did Pope’s great philosophical work have to say about ‘hope’ that might inform our current predicament.

The full context of the phrase is strangely prescient:

Hope springs eternal in the human breast:

Man never is, but always to be blest:

The soul, uneasy and confin’d from home,

Rests and expatiates in a life to come.

The meaning of expatiate in this context is to ‘wander freely’.

Now I am no literary scholar – so I encourage you to read your own meaning into this extract.

The comfort I take from Pope's ethical framework is that 'hope' is hard-wired into our humanity. It is a bottomless well of positivity that exists within all of us. At times like this we need to draw on this reserve to see beyond the current crisis.

We are all souls; uneasy and in confinement. We are resting now but, in a life to come, as Pope says. we will be again be able to wander freely.

In the meantime, please look after one another and try to find some joy in the gloom.

Thank you.

Multi-Faith Prayers

The Rt Revd Bishop Colin Fletcher OBE, Bishop of Dorchester

One of the places in our Scriptures that I often go to in times of stress are the Psalms. In them you can find the whole spectrum of human emotions – from elation to desolation and from despair to hope.

It is no accident, therefore, that many have been finding great solace in saying Psalm 23 day by day throughout this crisis – combining as it does the realism of 'walking through the valley of the shadow of death' with the hope and assurance that God's 'goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever'.

Let me read the whole Psalm first and then say a prayer.

- 1 The LORD *is* my shepherd; I shall not want.
- 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures: he leads me beside still waters.
- 3 He restores my soul: he leads me in right paths for his name's sake.
- 4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil: for you are with me; your rod and your staff - they comfort me.
- 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies: you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
- 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

And then a prayer:

‘Lord God, thank you that you travel with us in every moment of our lives. You are there with us both in the glories of Easter and in the desolations of Good Friday. Bless, we pray, at this time, everyone in this County, in our Country and across the world. Be with those who are fearful, those fighting this disease, those caring for people affected by it, and those who mourn. Bring them your hope in the midst of the darkness.

For this we pray in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, Our Lord
Amen’

Penny Faust from the Jewish Community

The Psalms, which originally appeared in the Jewish Scriptures, are used as a source of inspiration for all circumstances. In Jewish thought, Psalm 91, conveys the themes of God's protection and rescue from danger.

Those who live in the shelter of the Most High, live in the shadow of the Almighty.

Therefore I say that the Eternal One is my fortress, my God in whom I trust.
For the Eternal Guardian rescues you from the hunter's trap, from a death that is final destruction.

The Eternal Guardian keeps you covered with strength and you can find shelter beneath God's wings.

God's truth surrounds and shields you.

Do not fear the terror of the night
nor the sharp blows that fly by day,
the disease that walks in darkness
the sickness that destroys at noon.

Though a thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand,
it will not come near you.

Because you say 'God is my refuge' and make the Most High your dwelling,
No evil shall come upon you
No disease will come near your house.

Because God's messengers are commanded to watch over you
and guard you in everything you do.

They bear you in their hands lest you stumble over a stone.
You will find your way through terror and you will defeat new fears and evil.

The Eternal One says

When people love me, I will set them free

I protect them because they acknowledge my Name.

When they call Me I will answer them and will be with them in trouble.

I will rescue them and bring them honour.

I will give them a long life and show them deliverance.

Jawaid Malik from the Muslim Community

In the Name of Allah, The Most Kind, The Most Merciful

We are surrounded with bad news all around us. Life is full of highs and lows.

Every person, without exception, has a challenge or difficulty in their life.

These difficulties can sometimes feel overwhelming to the point where one sees no way out and despairs.

God ultimately has a plan for each of us. We do not understand why things happen to us now, but down the line we may look back and recognize that those challenges were necessary to make us a better person.

There is a very beautiful verse in the Qur'ān that states that relief comes with difficulty. *“So, verily, with every difficulty, there is relief: Verily with every difficulty there is relief”* (Qur'ān 94:5-6).

“...After a difficulty, Allah will soon grant relief” *Quran* [65:7](#)

Holding onto hope can be one of the most daunting tasks when we are tested in ways that we may never have anticipated or expected. when it hits the hardest, holding onto hope that life will get better can feel like clinging onto a slippery rope that keeps swinging just outside our grasp. When you're out of ideas, that's when faith comes in as it is one's faith that gives hope. As long as there is hope, there remains the possibility of fighting for tomorrow and holding on. When hope is gone, our hearts are empty vessels—devoid of love, mercy, compassion

and all the good that comes from hope. As long as there is still hope, there is enough left to rekindle the heart. So let's reflect upon and remember the Lord's infinite mercy, blessings and bounties.

Let us all seek His Mercy and Blessing

Oh Lord of the universe, our Helper and Guardian, we are fallible, flawed and weak;

Lord, enlighten our hearts amidst the dark times;

Bless our NHS staff, the emergency services, the frontline workers and all those who are striving to provide a service to your creation;

Oh Lord, grant us what we hope for and protect us from what we fear;

Oh Merciful of the Merciful, hear our pleas; You are All Hearing, All Knowing.

Aameen.

Gian Gopal from the Hindu Community

1. Om Bhoor Bhuvah Svah | Tats-a-vitur Varenyam, Bhargo Devasaya Dhimahi.
Dhiyo Yo-Nah Pracho-Dayaat !

Oh Lord, the giver of Life, Remover of pain and sorrow, Bestower of happiness and Creator of the Universe, thou art luminous, pure and adorable. We meditate upon thee and seek your inspiration and guidance in this time of immense anxiety and uncertainty.

We believe that each of us have a soul/*Atma* which is part of and one with the Supreme Soul/*ParamAtma*. So having this element of divinity in us we need (now more than ever) to bring it to the forefront and use it to come out of the lockdown to happier times both as individuals and as a society.

In war time we stand shoulder-to-shoulder to overcome that which threatens us. But Covid-19 is a threat that makes it imperative that we do not do so; for the one we are standing close to may unknowingly have the infection. For this reason Coronavirus is so pernicious and after a few days it can be truly deadly. So we must follow the national medical advice: stay at home and if out keep a fair distance from the next person. But we do need to show kindness, respect and consideration to our fellow beings. In fact it is heartening to see that almost everyone has rallied together in the last two weeks.

I am reminded of what Lord Krishna says in the Bhagwad Gita – “..be sure that in Nature nothing is permanent..”. We should therefore take comfort from the fact that this period of anxiety and uncertainty will end – Human intelligence and creativity will defeat Covid-19.

In the meantime we must applaud the efforts of people in the front-line of this fight (not only the NHS staff, the engineers and the scientists but also those working to ensure that we are supplied with the necessities of life).

I end with:

2. Om Trayam-Bakam Yajaa-Mahe Sugandhim Pushti-Vardhanam | Urvaa-Rukmiva Bhandhnaan Mrtyor-Mukshiya Maamritaata |

O Sustainer of the world, Destroyer of illness and supporter of all, as a ripe fruit gets it release from its branch, so free us from this disease.

3. Om Saha Nau-Avatu | Saha Nau Bhunaktu | Saha Viiryam Karavaa-vahai |
Tejasvi Nau-Adhiitam-Astu Maa Vidvishaa-vahai |
*O Lord, Protect us all; Nourish us all; May we work conjointly with great
energy, May our efforts be vigorous and effective; May we not be mutually
contrary.*

4. Om, Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah *O Lord, May all beings be happy*
Sarve Santu Niramayah *May all be free from Misery and Ill-
health*
Sarve Bhadraani Pashyantu *May all be in harmony and Friendship
and*
Maakash-Chit Baagh-Bhavet *May all be free from Pain*

Om Shantih, Shantih, Shantih, Om !! *O Lord may there be Peace in the
World, Peace around me and Peace
within Me.*

Satyadasa from the Buddhist Community

What is the consoling message of Buddhism? Well, there is no easy consolation for this life. Life contains difficulties and suffering that we cannot easily sweep that away through either psychological or religious thinking. Nor should we sweep it away. Buddhism teaches that the consolation of this life is that, through awareness and with practice, we can transform the manifold, inevitable sufferings of this life into the energy of love and service.

This being a multi-faith service I thought I would offer something on this theme from a faith not my own. Many Buddhists love the words of Rumi, the 13th century Sufi poet. In them we find a plain language, often without any explicit theology, that points simultaneously to the heart of the human condition and its transcendence. They ring true to life.

In his most famous poem, the Guest House, Rumi gives us a lesson on how to transform our life in the face of those sufferings that arise from within. The message is: turn towards whatever arises, whether it's pleasant or unpleasant with a kindness, as if welcoming a guest into your house. Studies of brain activity show that when we turn towards unpleasant states within ourselves and give them a kind, welcoming attention - saying hello to our worries, fears, angers and resentments - they lose their grip on us. Negative states of mind want to keep us on the run - in flight or fight or freeze.

In this coronavirus crisis we have less places to run. So perhaps it is a chance to look within, in the confidence that, in our deepest nature, we have the capacity to bear with more suffering than we think we do. And as Rumi points out, when we do this, we open up the possibility of joy and delight and connection. Once we open the door, all becomes possible.

The Guest House, by Rumi:

“This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all! Even if they're a crowd of sorrows, who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture, still, treat each guest honourably. He may be clearing you out for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice, meet them at the door laughing, and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.”

Esmyr Koomen from the Baha'i Community

Seldom has it been more evident that society's collective strength is dependent on the unity it can manifest in action, from the international stage to local communities.

Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Baha'i Faith set out in His Writings a vision of world unity. I'd like to share with you some of His Teachings that can give us hope.

He said:

So powerful is the light of unity that it can illumine the whole earth. Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch.

Just as a candle's purpose is to provide light, the human soul was created to give generously. We fulfil our highest purpose in a life of service in which we offer our time, energy, knowledge, and resources.

Therefore:

Strive with heart and soul until we have the reality of unity in our midst.

However difficult matters are at present, ... humanity will ultimately pass through this ordeal, and it will emerge on the other side with greater insight and with a deeper appreciation of its inherent oneness and interdependence

Oh God, Armed with the power of Thy name nothing can ever hurt me, and with Thy love in my heart all the world's afflictions can in no wise alarm me.

Therefore:

Strive with heart and soul until we have the reality of unity in our midst.

Be the well-wisher of all and strive to cultivate hope for the future of humanity, to foster purposeful effort, and to celebrate the endeavours of all those in the world who work to promote unity and alleviate human suffering.

So powerful is the light of unity that it can envelop the whole world.

Davinder Singh from the Sikh Community

Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa

Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh.

When you have lost hope, you have lost everything, and when we think all is dire there is always hope. Before I go to sleep at night, I pray to wake up in the morning to see another day in this beautiful world. Although we have so much going on with Corona virus and listening to the news, WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter a lot of the time it is negative news. I would believe to hope that all will be better soon. I hope and pray for the countries that are less fortunate than us living in the UK who have a great struggle in their life due to lockdown, those who cannot go to work and earn money and bring food to their family.

To give those people hope, members of the Sikh community are sending essential food to poorer countries to help provide the essential things for them.

We pray to God and hope that our prayers will be heard and answered. I strongly believe and hope that there are more good people in the world looking out for one another so ensure that essential needs can be taken care of, just like

the 750,000 volunteers who have given up their time to help those in need with medication and essential food and toiletries.

Our whole life is determined by hope. If we have no hope we could end up in a bad corner. The greater hope will put us in a better place. I hope, and hope, and hope that we will overcome this pandemic in the near future.

Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa

Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh.

Conclusion by Imam Monawar Hussain

Thank you for joining us for this virtual multi-faith prayer. Please keep safe and do please look out for those who are vulnerable, self-isolating, and lonely, in your communities. I close with the sentiment, found across the different faiths and cultures of the world, and expressed especially at difficult times: THIS TOO SHALL PASS!