

The Coronavirus – Theologically & Pastorally

Introduction

I want to deal with this topic by asking a few questions and then seeking to give an answer to each one of them. These may not be definitive answers but may just help to stimulate some thought as to how we may approach some of these things.

How do we retain our spiritual life at a time like this?

We have entered a time like Lent when we are giving up all kinds of things. Most of all, we have given up our liberty for the greater good and we have given up that most important of dynamics, human contact. This is like a Lenten fast, but there is no 'Easter' to come at the moment. All sorts of things we take for granted are on ice.

Engaging with spiritual nourishment when socially isolated can be a challenge. We are social animals as humans and are not used to being like this. It is important, therefore, to maintain your spiritual disciplines or, if they have not been part of your routine, start them. Perhaps build in a morning, midday and evening prayer in a kind of monastic rhythm – there are many resources online to help with this. Include regular Bible reading and times of quiet as well as prayer. Find a spot in your house where you can encounter God each day.

Also, look outwards to our Christian brothers and sisters who are suffering in places like Iran and China and India, and pray for them in the new found space that you have.

What has the church done in the past at such times?

Frequently, in the ancient world, plagues would strike a city, a region, or even the world. We have forgotten that plagues, like famines, are just part and parcel of the way the world is. We live in a post-enlightenment world that is generally cossetted from such things – we have health and wellbeing available to us in many forms. However, underneath this western veneer is the reality of our fragility and mortality as humans.

Most of history has not been like it is now. Unlike the past, we live in a fairly ordered and predictable world where we are not daily under the threat of war, famine or plague. If we had lived in the 1300's we would have endured the Great Famine of 1315-17 where the sun barely came out for 3 years. This was soon followed by the Black Death of 1347-51 which killed 1/3 of the world's population. Such events were accompanied by wars with France and then civil war. Thank God we live when we do.

These things are not a sign of the end times or that God is not in control. These are frequent things that have happened throughout history and we are privileged to live when we live, mostly without such things impinging upon our comfortable lives.

In the 3rd or 4th century onwards, when a plague hit, Christians would take it as a sign that this was their opportunity to serve in the name of Jesus. This often caused many, in the aftermath of such a time, coming to faith. Some of these Christians would die, but it was an extraordinary witness to the communities in which they lived. Often, they were the only ones who actually stayed to care for the sick.

Of course, we are not all called to rush out and find some infected persons and lay hands on them, but we do need to care for our families and neighbours and to pray for our communities. Our example is in Acts: when the Church heard that a famine was on the way, they raised funds to

alleviate the suffering of the brothers and sisters in Jerusalem, and we can do the same, not just here, but also for our overseas brothers and sisters.

Where is God in such times of suffering?

We begin here with Jesus tears at the tomb of his friend, Lazarus. When Jesus went to Bethany he did so to share in the grief of Mary and Martha, even though he knew what he was going to do. In his humanity, he reached out to those he loved.

We may think we know how God ought to act at times like this – that he ought to stop the pandemic, or should not have let it start in the first place - but that is seeing things upside down. It is only when we look at Jesus that we see who God actually is. God knows the sorrow and pain of the world and has come with his own grief to share in it.

In Genesis, we are told that God saw the wickedness of the world and it brought him to grief, and in the same way, in Jesus, God shares the grief and suffering of the world. In Romans 8 we are told that the Spirit groans within us as we groan over the pain of the world. God is not insusceptible to the suffering of the world. The triune God comes and gets his hands dirty and in fact had them nailed to the cross to alleviate the pain and suffering of the world.

At the cross, Jesus entered into the deepest, darkest suffering that we could possibly imagine. In his humanity he bore the full suffering of what it is to be human and in doing so, rescued us from that darkness. For further reading on this, I recommend Jurgen Moltmann's 'The Crucified God'.

It is in our darkness that the God of all compassion comes to be with us in the midst of that darkness. We are in the world that God has made and we know the face of God in Jesus and the breath of God in his Holy Spirit.

God has already triumphed over evil and death through Jesus' cross, resurrection and ascension. Every aspect of death – disease, suffering and death itself – are a sneer in the face of God. It is a way of the enemy saying, 'Your creation doesn't work'. However, God will not be mocked forever. The resurrection power of new life that is already at work in the world and has already given life to our mortal bodies, will ultimately triumph. A day is coming when death itself will be destroyed and we will be with Jesus in our resurrected, perfected bodies, having triumphed with him over death's last sneer. When He returns, he will put the world to rights in every way. This is actually the gospel – the promise of God to put everything right and this comes into focus in our own lives and in our redemption.

We live still in the fallen world with all that that means including death and disease, but we have the hope of resurrection already at work within us and the promise of the restoration of God's good creation. That is the triumph of God!

Pastoral Care in the midst of this crisis?

One of the key issues pastorally that is going to confront us in the months to come is that people may not be able to be with their loved ones at the times of departure, or even be at the funeral. This is similar to what people encounter in war when they have to come to terms with the death of friends all around them without any hope of consolation or a funeral or anything.

We need to lament the fact that we cannot lament the passing of our friends. In six months, or when all this is over, we will see a wave of deferred and displaced grief and lament. This will come out in different ways and in multiple waves.

As leaders, we need to prepare ourselves for this coming wave and the pastoral issues that will come with it. In the meantime, where possible, we need to ensure that we retain pastoral links through phone calls, social media, Zoom, etc.

In the middle ages, people struck by the plague or other diseases observed the liturgy of churches through peep holes in the wall. These were especially made holes enabling people suffering deadly diseases to come and watch the mass from outside the walls of the church. Effectively, we are doing the same through our on-line services, etc. Seeing things, even if we can't touch, is better than nothing at all, and so we need to draw on that ancient wisdom.

This is also a fantastic opportunity to give pastoral care to the wider world through social media.

Can God do anything through this crisis?

We know that God can take the worst things and transform them into something wonderful and creative – the great example is the cross of Jesus. At the cross, God took the greatest suffering and indignity that could be imposed on a human and made it the most restorative and transformative act of history.

We cannot solve this current problem but we can take the grief and suffering of the world to the communion table. At that place, God takes the brokenness of the world and enwraps it in the atonement of his son. Encourage communion at home, on-line and as often as we can.

As we do so, who knows what God can do through our prayers and intercessions. I know people are questioning what is really of value in their lives right now. This time is an opportunity when God, by his Spirit can bring people face to face with the reality of his love. And, at the very least, we can all pray for our communities at this time.