

# Scottish Episcopal Institute Journal



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in the Anglican Communion and beyond*



# Scottish Episcopal Institute Journal

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## [Church, Ministry and Coronavirus: An Editorial](#)

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This issue was conceived as the country entered 'lockdown', and the Church with it. It is coming to fruition just as the Scottish Government has announced its ['route map through and out of the crisis'](#). This does not mean that the virus will be eradicated, still less that the physical, social, economic, psychological, and spiritual effects on stricken families, and on society as a whole, will have been addressed, still less remedied, when in due course church doors open again for public worship.

The impact on our worshipping life has been immediate, even if anticipated in the precautionary measures introduced progressively over the preceding weeks. The pastoral care of our members, and of others who seek it, including those struck down with Covid-19 and approaching death, has been restricted in ways that conflict with the ethos of self-sacrificial ministry modelled on the example of Christ, which many clergy have embraced since before their ordination. People are living, and dying, in isolation, which is requiring that traditional patterns of ministry be reconceived quite radically. Baptisms, except in emergency, have had to be deferred, weddings postponed, and funerals conducted under constraints which offend our cultural and religious sensibilities. The financial cost to the Church of the loss of revenue from venue hire, and of plate offerings, not to mention the inevitable economic recession ahead of us, has yet to be calculated, but questions will surely be asked about the viability of many struggling congregations, especially if any lose a significant proportion of their members, if pension funds collapse, or unemployment soars among working members.

This time of crisis raises significant theological issues, many of which the Church will need to explore as it reflects in the coming months and years on the lessons to be learned, the insights to be gained, from an experience likely to bring bereavement to many of our families and congregations. There is an immediate need to respond to the challenges in

ways that are theologically informed, and this collection of essays is an initial contribution to that process.

The issues raised by the coronavirus pandemic do not concern merely the life of the Church, its worship, and ways in which pastoral care is extended to those in need. There are profound questions about society, and the nature of the human community, to which the Church needs to respond in a theologically informed, but not a self-interested, manner. The response of governments around the world, including and perhaps especially the United Kingdom, has raised serious questions about the nature of society and the value of human life. The evidence is overwhelming that economic considerations, by which is meant not the common good in the classical sense of *oikonomia*, but the financial interests of the powerful, have been paramount. This is a profoundly political issue, one which transcends party and class, and one which requires an unequivocally theological response. When lack of investment in the National Health Service over many years has meant not only that basic life-saving respiratory equipment is scarce, but that personnel are expected to deliver frontline care without essential protective equipment, putting themselves and others at constant risk, while patients with potentially life-threatening conditions are having their treatments postponed or cancelled, the question is not merely who is benefitting and who is losing financially, but who is living and who is dying.

Governments around the world have, in many cases belatedly, taken measures to curb the spread of the virus, mostly by selectively curtailing freedom of movement, social interaction, and economic activity. In many places these are accepted as reasonable and necessary, if inconvenient in the short term and generating deep fears in many people for their longer-term economic security. Our Church, along with other Christian denominations and most faith groups in the United Kingdom, has acquiesced in these measures, and the College of Bishops has issued guidelines with which most clergy and lay members have been willing to comply. Concerns have been expressed, not so much by religious leaders as by professionals in secular caring professions, at increasing levels of mental illness, child abuse, and domestic violence in our communities, exacerbated by the confinement of vulnerable people to homes where they are unsafe, and their isolation from human interactions which might provide relief, if not protection. Where emergency powers have been invoked, even when granted to governments by elected parliaments, there are well-founded concerns that the pandemic is being exploited to corrode civil liberties and to subvert democratic institutions permanently. When politically connected individuals enjoy exemption, for purely private purposes, from restrictions enforced – in some cases quite ruthlessly – on

others, and in particular on ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities, this raises serious questions about creeping authoritarianism and the rule of law in this country. The resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement has been a powerful reminder that the evidently greater susceptibility of people of certain ethnic backgrounds to the coronavirus is not the only racial issue of concern in our deeply fractured and polarised society. The apparent suppression of a [report by Public Health England](#) into this issue, together with the appointment of a commission into racial inequality to be headed by a prime ministerial aide with a record for denying the reality thereof, illustrate not only just how endemic racism is in British society, but a political determination not to address the root causes of social and economic injustice, widening polarization and alienation, and increasing destitution, homelessness, and morbidity. The Prime Minister has been unabashedly racist, and is surrounded by ministers and officials likeminded or worse, including a Home Secretary who, despite her origins, has been consistently and profoundly malevolent in her attitude to migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, not to mention the expatriate healthcare professionals upon whom the National Health Service depends.

Our compliance with the emergency measures must be accompanied by theologically informed vigilance, and a willingness to speak truth to power; not that the Church may prescribe the political dispensation in this country, but that the value we believe God invests in each human being created in the divine image, and in the flourishing of human communities, may be upheld. Where democratic structures are eroded and civil liberties curtailed, even if we believe the government is right in principle and measures are enforced with moderation and restraint, the prophetic voice of the Church is urgently needed.

This collection draws together contributions from a variety of disciplines. Our aim is not to define prematurely the theological significance of the pandemic for the Church, but rather to offer resources which will assist the Church, corporately, to explore the issues and to discern the theological truths which we will need to digest and apply to our life and mission in the coming years. It seems appropriate that we begin by learning something of the science concerning viruses.

It is essential that we understand the conditions in which viruses come into existence, and mutate so that, from time to time, they may pose a threat to public health, and even to human life. **Delyth Reid** explains how viruses are an organic phenomenon, integral to the natural order which Christians understand as God's creation, and therefore not the result of laboratory experiments fantasised by certain politicians. Their generation and transmission is a function of ecology, and responsible human stewardship of the earth and its resources — and not oral or intravenous

use of bactericidal chemicals — is the key to human flourishing in an environment to which viruses are integral.

The pandemic is, by definition, a global phenomenon, and it has historical antecedents. The experience and insights of the Church in other parts of the world, and in the face of other significant public health crises, are therefore relevant and instructive. **Michael Mbona**, currently Anglican Chaplain in Kuwait and formerly an educator, priest, and cathedral dean in central Africa, examines the response of the Church to the present crisis in the light of experience of and research into the role of the Church in confronting the HIV-Aids pandemic.

The suspension of corporate worship, and enforced solitude in which many of our members are living, poses challenges for a spirituality that is rooted in being part of the community of the faithful. **David Jasper**, whose numerous writings include *The Sacred Desert*, reflects on the spiritual challenges and possibilities of solitude, and what the resources of the Christian eremitic tradition may contribute to our spiritual lives at this time.

The significance for our self-understanding and identity as a Church of the suspension of public worship, is considered in depth by **John Reuben Davies**. He discusses in particular our liturgical customs which have been temporarily discontinued, and the profound theological questions raised by the measures taken to meet the spiritual needs of our congregations by means of on-line worship. Celebrations of the Eucharist, with “remote” or “virtual” participation *via* the internet, require careful reflection on the nature of the Church itself. We are reminded that Word and Sacrament are inextricably linked, and that reading and reflection on Scripture and prayer remain available and necessary when gathering as a community is not possible. A crisis is a time of judgement, when we are exposed to God’s truth, and have the opportunity to persevere in faith, to learn and to grow.

**Merete Thomassen** explores the phenomenon of on-line worship, reflecting recent experience in her native Norway as well as globally. She follows predecessors in the field in distinguishing between churches which offer worship via the internet as a substitute for gathering physically for that purpose, and those which function essentially as virtual communities, but suggests also that the distinction may be more fluid than commonly supposed, and that virtual experiences of worship may have more traditional antecedents than may be appreciated.

Much of the worship offered on-line, not least that led by the Bishops, has been eucharistic. Very often the ministry of the Word has been curtailed, on account of time constraints or for whatever other reasons. **David Jasper** and **Nicholas Taylor** offer some considerations of this, and present an example of ways in which the Word might be shared when the

community of the faithful is dispersed, especially during as liturgically rich a period in the Church year as Holy Week and Easter.

Intercessory prayer is another aspect of our worship which requires careful reflection in times of crisis. **Léon van Ommen** draws upon the tradition of lament in the Old Testament, and in particular the Psalms, exploring the complexities of the relationship between God and Israel reflected in these prayers. He calls for greater awareness of the needs of those less fortunate and more vulnerable, and of the biblical imperative to strive for justice and peace in the world, when laying before God our own needs and fears.

A crisis which has challenged the Church in so many ways requires quite radical re-thinking of our fundamental principles. **David Jasper** calls, not for the creation of a new theology, but a re-examination of the theology upon which our life as a Church is founded. It is in rediscovering the riches of our Christian heritage that we will be able to reflect more deeply on who we are as a Church, and to examine critically the manifestations of ecclesial life which we have hitherto taken for granted, and the ways in which we have sought to sustain our common life under lockdown. It is only on the basis of a renewed theology that we will be able to address coherently the ethical questions which confront us in the present and future.

A theological approach to the crisis of our day requires that the Church interrogates the premises upon which government ministers and officials have framed policy, or perhaps responded erratically in an absence of clearly thought out principles or strategies. **Katrin Bosse** examines the definitions of health and sickness, and of death, as presupposed in political discourse, and finds them incompatible with Christian anthropology. The human body is not simply a machine, to be kept going by repairing and replacing defunct parts, until it is no longer able to function, i.e. it dies. The human being is a person in relation, and life and health are to be understood accordingly. Death is not the end, but transition to another and more ultimate form of life, to which the Church is called to bear testimony.

If the Church is to offer hope in the midst of turmoil and death, we need to understand how human beings cope with stress, and the techniques which evolve in cultures or are consciously developed to enable individuals and communities to do so. **Paul Watson** draws upon insights from cultural anthropology, and in particular the work of Ernest Becker, to argue that the Christian narrative of the sacrifice of Christ, and of new life in him, provides opportunities to engage anew with society, and to offer hope in the face of death.

**Alison Jasper** uses philosophical categories to interpret, and to develop strategies by which to manage, the breakdown in routine and violation of custom which have impinged in various ways on the lives of

individuals and families. She suggests that new ways of analysing changes in circumstances we cannot control make possible responses which are more constructive and less damaging.

The pandemic has imposed very considerable strain on the National Health Service, and on local authorities and other providers of care for the vulnerable. The pandemic disproportionately people who already face discrimination and disadvantage, causing increased suffering and death. **Margaret Adam** argues that medical treatment and social protection should be disproportionately provided for those facing the greatest risk. Christians are challenged to recognise, acknowledge, and overcome institutional injustices which favour the most privileged and neglect the most vulnerable. She champions preferential treatment of those most vulnerable, in pre-pandemic planning and in subsequent responses.

The social ills exacerbated, not so much by the pandemic as by the authoritarian measures taken to curb human freedom in order to curb its spread, are illuminated by **Avigail Abarbanel**. Her analysis of neoliberal economics and its destructive effects on human wellbeing is accompanied by a call to the Church, and to her own profession, to strive for human flourishing rather than providing coping mechanisms: "The Church Jesus established was supposed to be the vehicle for changing the world, not another flawed and human institution or structure that can get easily lost in its own need to survive."

The restrictions imposed on our customary ways of meeting and communicating, not least for worship, have a particular impact on people who live with conditions affecting their perceptions, responses, and capacity to relate to and communicate with others. **Léon van Ommen** and **Denise Maud** explore the implications for people with autism, reflecting the work of the [Centre for the Study of Autism and Christianity](#) in Aberdeen, from which the Church will surely benefit immensely in the coming years.

The challenges posed to clergy in the exercise of pastoral care, who have been required by canonical authority to withdraw from the patterns of interaction to which they have been accustomed with their communities, and with individuals and families in distress, have been considerable. For many, conscience has battled obedience, and the repertoire of words and gestures by which their ministry has been communicated has no longer been adequate. It is undoubtedly right that the Church should hear the theological reflections of priests and deacons who have thought and prayed to discern how they are to address the challenges of vocation in times like this. **David Cameron** offers reflections on the ministry of priests to their congregations.

A public health crisis which not merely confronts us in abstract terms with our mortality, but which leaves individuals and families, and medical



practitioners, helpless in the face of irreversible organ damage if not imminent death and bereavement, poses challenges for the healing ministry of the Church. **Leslie Ireland**, Healing Adviser for the Diocese of Glasgow and Galloway, explores these issues.

The reality of death is perennial to life, however much we may usually choose to ignore it. The pandemic has raised awareness of the fragility of life, and also raised particular challenges for those caring for the sick and dying. **Norma Higgott** reflects on Christian ministry with people in the final stages of their earthly lives, and with those who care for them.

A word of appreciation is due to contributors who have, at short notice, risen to the challenge of offering the fruit of their scholarship, experience, and insight to the Church. They have undertaken this task while continuing their normal tasks in straitened circumstances, and often under increased pressure, and without access to libraries and other resources normally considered essential to academic pursuits.

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## AUTISM AND LITURGY

### A special request regarding a research project on autism and liturgy

[Dr Léon van Ommen](#) needs your help for a research project on autism and liturgy.

Léon is a lecturer at the University of Aberdeen, a member of [St Ninian's Church](#) (Aberdeen) and a member of the [Liturgy Committee of the Faith and Order Board](#).

Léon is conducting a research project on autism and liturgy. He is looking for participants. If you (self-)identify as autistic/on the autism spectrum and are willing to share your experience of worship and liturgy, please get in touch with him at [leon.vanommen@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:leon.vanommen@abdn.ac.uk). People anywhere on the autism spectrum, including non-verbal, and of all ages, are welcome to join.

The project is based at the Centre for the Study of Autism and Christian Community, at the University of Aberdeen. Ethical permission has been obtained from the University. Please email Léon for more information, he would love to hear from you.

## PROFESSOR DONALD M. MACKINNON

### A special request regarding the late Professor Donald M. MacKinnon

Dr André Muller, who is working on an intellectual biography of Professor Donald M. MacKinnon (1913–94), would be very interested to hear from anyone who knew the Scottish philosophical theologian, or heard him lecture or preach, or corresponded with him, or has any information about him.

André may be contacted via email ([mulan398@gmail.co.nz](mailto:mulan398@gmail.co.nz)) or post (14a Arnot Ave, Clouston Park, Upper Hutt, 5018, New Zealand).



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## Suffering during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Reflections by Scientists with Faith

DEYLTH M. REID

Institute of Medical Sciences, University of Aberdeen (retired)

Is there a spiritual person among us who has not asked, or been asked, how can there be a loving Creator when there is so much suffering in the world? In 1710, the German philosopher and mathematician, Gottfried Leibniz, coined the term 'theodicy', to justify the existence of God in an apparently imperfect world. A classic example is the book of Job. Here, I have explored this timeless question as a Christian who has followed a career in science. I have had discussions with colleagues of different faiths and have included some of their thoughts. To me, it is wonderful that wisdom and love can reach human beings through multiple routes.

As a Christian, I believe that human beings have a responsibility of stewardship for the Earth, as entrusted to us by God, and that many of the evils threatening human life today are the consequence of unscrupulous exploitation of resources. I also believe that the Church has a responsibility to speak out a great deal more on these matters. Below, I will discuss viruses and a few other disease-causing agents, thinking about their place in the world and trying to see how they came about through natural evolutionary processes and also, how some diseases arise through our lack of stewardship. I focus mainly on animal/human disease, but it is worth remembering that plants are also subject to microbial infections, something which farmers have to plan for and manage. Plant specific viruses can wreak havoc in the farming industry and sometimes whole crops and even herds of cattle have to be destroyed as part of the control measures. These infections are often exacerbated by human activity, including growing a single crop over a wide area (monoculture) which favours the spread of disease. Trade and travel also spread plant viruses and their insect vectors (for example greenfly) to places where they may have fewer natural predators.

I think we can, therefore, acknowledge that at least some suffering results from the selfish behaviour that puts national, corporate and even personal short-term profit ahead of the welfare of ourselves and of the planet. Of course, poverty drives some damage to the planet, but the wealthier nations do little to alleviate this. The urge to continue on our current course is a strong one and change will inevitably affect the lifestyles that we have come to expect and cherish. Huxley, an early

eminent evolutionist, concluded that the social behaviour of animals was so awful that we have a real fight on our hands against the selfish nature that our evolution has produced in us.<sup>1</sup>

There are many different ways of looking at suffering and you do not need to be a person of faith to see that good can sometimes arise from dark times. During this coronavirus pandemic, there has been an outpouring of kindness, support and appreciation of others and life that otherwise may never have emerged.

### *A material world*

We live in a fantastically landscaped world, all of which was created by the physical processes obeying the laws of the universe. These processes include volcanic eruptions and earthquakes. I have never thought of these occurrences as evil or resulting from sin, yet I have come across this view. Of course, to those living in affected regions, the processes can be experienced as destructive and deadly. Indeed, it was the great Lisbon earthquake of 1755, with its subsequent fires, tsunami and a death toll in the tens of thousands, that sparked enormous discussion among the European Enlightenment philosophers and gave rise to the development of theodicy.

My personal struggle with creation, however, began when I thought on the purposes of parasites and germs — the viruses, bacteria, protozoa and fungi, that infect us, causing illness and even death. Why did God create such apparently bad and useless organisms? If we could eliminate all of these, wouldn't life be better for people, animals and plants? These questions challenged me especially when I was majoring in parasitology at university. I wanted to see creation as perfect. Thus, I chose to see that the processes of life were given freedom from the start, to evolve in the Earth's environment. Freewill is very much part of most religious beliefs. I certainly did not believe that evil played any role in the evolution of disease-causing organisms nor had the power to influence these processes.

We need to ask ourselves a question: what are we doing to the Earth, a habitat that we share with all other life? Are we not sucking it dry of oil, polluting the pure air and oceans, eating up the fish, cutting down the forests and driving other species to extinction? This does make us look like a poorly adapted parasite that will cause the eventual death of its host and extinction of itself. An MSc student of sustainable energy suggested to me

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<sup>1</sup> T. H. Huxley, 'Evolution and Ethics in Sociobiological Perspective', *Zygon*, 23 (1893), 383–438. Published in many other formats as an essay or lecture.

that it is as if the Earth is trying to fight off this infectious destructive rash, that is us, by throwing up this new pandemic.

*Disease causing animals: Parasites*

Parasitic worms, like all life, evolved without any thought or plan on their part. They co-evolved with their hosts towards their best outcome, which was maximum life support to the parasite with minimal disruption to their permanent home, the host. The intestinal round worms of dogs did not plan to involve a secondary host (for example, a rabbit) in which its eggs would hatch, and the larvae burrow through this animal's (or human's) flesh, brain and eyes, until at last it was eaten by a dog and the larvae could mature into adult egg producing worms and continue the cycle. We cook meat to 60 °C so as to kill any kind of parasite containing cysts. We humans have our own tape worm species: from cattle and pigs. Upon ingesting undercooked infected meat, the larvae mature in our intestines into reproducing adults. In a well-fed human these are often of only minor inconvenience and some Victorian ladies would deliberately take on worms for weight control. Although there can be health complications, this is an example of a well-adapted host-parasite interaction where the species evolved together. In fact, recent studies have suggested that some parasitic worms can benefit the host by skewing the immune system, thereby reducing conditions such as allergy, eczema and even preventing more severe roundworm infections of the lungs and improving fertility.<sup>2</sup> The mechanisms by which the worms are able to do this are not yet fully understood and until we can reproduce this effect without the worm, some controlled infection trials are underway. Sadly, developing countries see many terribly debilitating parasitic diseases caused by species that seem to have no other purpose than their own existence and reproduction. I cannot believe that God planned to include such creatures among our ecosystems. But God did allow it to happen.

*Of microbes and men*

Humans, and indeed all members of the animal kingdom, are vastly out populated by an inconceivably large number of microbes. Their evolutionary success in terms of increasing copies of themselves is evident. They have been blindly competing, reproducing and spreading and to inhabit even the most inhospitable environments. They are not capable of

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<sup>2</sup> K. Filby et al., 'Intestinal helminth infection promotes IL-5- and CD4+ T cell-dependent immunity in the lung against migrating parasites', *Mucosal Immunology* 12 (2019), 352–62.

choosing to be decomposers, symbiotic gut flora or flesh-eating MRSA (multi drug-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*). MRSA evolved in an environment rich in antibiotics. We are responsible for this. The same natural processes that resulted in the emergence of human beings, resulted in the development of antibiotic-resistant bacteria. The staphylococci were just doing their thing. There is no evil intent.

Likewise, the early microbes had no goal to become multicellular organisms, no wish to become intelligent life. We know that their emergence was a prerequisite to all life on earth and therefore our own existence. We now understand the necessity of microbes in the breaking down and recycling of molecules and minerals from dead plants and animals, without which life could not progress or be maintained. Of course, the benefit of gut microflora is promoted by the manufacturers of food products containing a limited repertoire of 'good' bacteria to 'top up' our own natural flora. This is suggested to be important because our modern diets are very different to those of our ancestors, although our guts have likely remained unchanged. The benefits of certain gut bacteria to our health is a growing subject of research. Gut flora pass easily between people and animals in close proximity to us. Babies acquire them from their families. *Escherichia coli*, or E. coli, inhabit the mammalian gut, whereas Salmonella species inhabit most other vertebrate guts. Occasionally, a harmful strain of Salmonella contaminates poultry and we can become sick. But we have learned to reduce this risk by taking relatively simple measures. Care when handling animals and meat products is ultimately beneficial to the economy, therefore the methods are well established. We cannot say the same for our response to our flu virus pandemic experiences to date.

While we are pondering upon why a good Creator would include in his plan, parasites and microbes that can wreak such suffering upon not only all the sentient animals, but also the creatures whom, according to the Bible, God made in his own image, we should remember that we are observing the world and the universe from a single point of view, our own. We believe ourselves superior to pathogens and our goal is their elimination. Is this cruelty, this widespread decimation of parasites and pathogenic microbes that have taken refuge in our bodies, which are their worlds?

#### *Viruses: Where did they come from?*

Perhaps we can think about viruses a little differently since it is still up for debate as to whether or not they are living organisms. During the very first lecture that I attended as a biology undergraduate, the professor described the characteristics that define life, for example eating, excreting,

responding to stimuli and reproducing, and asked whether viruses could be counted as living organisms. They do not meet these planet-wide (and likely universal) criteria. Their origin and purpose remain elusive and are the subject of great debate among virologists.<sup>3</sup> There are three main hypotheses.

1. *Regression*: This states that viruses emerged by a process of reverse evolution or simplification of previously unicellular organisms. These would have lost key genes for replication while taking on a parasitic lifestyle. This hypothesis covers obligate intra-cellular bacteria and even mitochondria\*. Note that a glossary at the end explains terms with an asterisk (\*).

2. *Progression*: This states that viruses began as pieces of genetic material that could move around the host genome and later acquired the ability to move from cell to cell. They were also capable of acquiring useful genes.

3. *Co-evolution*: Here it is suggested that viruses existed before unicellular organisms and at that time were able to self-replicate. Indeed, the first replicating molecule was RNA, not DNA, and RNA structures can catalyze biochemical reactions. They may have increased in complexity to form the first replicating membrane bound cells. These may have become the first microbes, or they may have predated upon these as their early hosts, evolving with them over the millennia, perhaps succeeding as harmless parasites of primitive bacteria. They then would have subsequently further evolved with the emerging plants and animals. Viruses can be broadly grouped according to whether they use RNA or DNA for gene coding.

Some of our immune systems' earliest experiences with viral infections may have emerged when we began to live in settlement in close proximity to our captive animals and members of our growing communities. Viruses that had long been inhabiting horses and chickens, for example, were now able to jump host species. Viruses that cause the common cold originally came from horses whereas flu originated in bird populations. Zoonoses is the name given to diseases that have been transmitted from animal populations to humans. The most recent example is the coronavirus now named SARS-CoV-2 and the disease it causes has been named COVID-19 (coronavirus infectious disease — due to its first appearance at the end of 2019).

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<sup>3</sup> As reviewed by D. R. Wessner, 'The Origins of Viruses', *Nature Education*, 3 (2010), 37.

*Viruses: What are they?*

Viruses can be thought of as CDs within their envelopes. Like CDs, they contain coded information and can do nothing on their own. They only express themselves once removed from their protective covers and inserted into a player through a specific portal. Viruses consist of protective protein envelopes or capsules containing just enough genes to code for more capsular proteins and their assembly into new virus particles. The viral genetic material makes its way to the host cell nucleus and inserts itself into the host's genome. The cell is reprogrammed to become a virus making factory, just like a brewery can be re-instructed to make hand sanitizer. Viruses are too small and simple to house any of the essential genes and biochemical machinery for independent life. True life forms, like our own cells make functional proteins for structure, movement, digestion, carrying oxygen, microbial attack, vision, metabolism and neurotransmission. Plants are also made of advanced cells, sharing many gene similarities with animals and are capable of making very complex proteins like chlorophyll for photosynthesis, and anti-microbial molecules (that have been utilized by humans since the Stone Age).

Microbes and viruses gain access to our bodies chiefly through the respiratory and digestive systems and through damage to our skin. Respiratory viruses infect the epithelial cells that line the nasal passages, throat and, in the case of flu and the more dangerous coronaviruses, the lower airways also. Our immune defences occupy positions below the epithelia of the respiratory and intestinal tracts and skin and are on constant alert. Without this protection we would quickly succumb to an overgrowth of fungi and bacteria. Fungi often infect by brute force, their hyphae barging their way through cells and along paths of least resistance, like the tubules in kidneys. Bacteria, if not eliminated by the immune system quickly, reproduce rapidly causing necrosis of host tissues, abscesses and septicaemia. Viruses, however, infect through a very precise mechanism — described below for SARS-CoV-2.

*The coronavirus family*

The earliest few cases of the COVID-19 pandemic were linked to the Huanan market in Wuhan, suggesting a market animal source. SARS-CoV-2 is the latest of seven coronaviruses known to have infected humans. These viruses belong to the family Coronaviridae and are further sub-classified based on their genomes, coded in single stranded RNA. Some only infect mammals, others, birds and some can infect both. In mammals, coronaviruses usually cause gastroenteritis. In humans, coronaviruses can cause relatively mild cold symptoms. Others can cause severe respiratory illness, especially in those with underlying health conditions. These include

SARS-CoV-2, causing COVID-19; SARS-CoV, causing severe acute respiratory syndrome and MERS-CoV, causing Middle East respiratory syndrome.<sup>4</sup> Some coronaviruses transitioned from bats or rats through other mammals like pigs before reaching humans. MERS-CoV is thought to have transitioned from bats to dromedary camels about thirty years ago where it remains prevalent. This virus is thought to have been through many unsuccessful attempts to infect and then transmit from humans before sufficient rounds of mutation and natural selection produced success.<sup>5</sup> Initial genomic analysis of SARS-CoV-2 confirmed its natural origin rather than accidental laboratory escape or the unthinkable purposely genetically modified pathogen.<sup>6</sup> Subsequent data suggest that it may have resulted from the recombination of two bat coronaviruses, similar to the creation of the SARS-CoV. SARS-CoV can transition through civets and some evidence suggests that SARS-CoV-2 underwent a transition through a pangolin population.

#### *SARS-CoV-2 structure and function*

Viruses are so minute, that they can only be seen using the resolution and magnification of electron microscopes. The coronavirus measures at 100nm in diameter, 1000 times smaller than the width of a human hair. During the COVID-19 pandemic we have been shown scanning electron micrographs of the spherical virus covered in spike (S) proteins, giving it the appearance of having a corona. For enhancement, the micrographs are often artificially coloured. The S proteins are twisted into trimers (triplets) and contain a region (analogous to the prongs on a key) specific to binding to the ACE2 receptor on epithelial cells of the lung, gut and other organs. Children are reported to express fewer ACE2 receptors and this may be why they are less susceptible to COVID-19. The ACE2 protein is analogous to the keyhole. The coronavirus genome encodes three other structural proteins, essential for the assembly of the viral package: envelope (E); nucleocapsid protein (N); membrane protein (M). Coronaviruses are economical with their coding and most proteins have more than one job to do. Not only does S bind to the host ACE2 receptor, it facilitates the fusion of the host and viral membranes and can even enable the fusion of adjacent

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<sup>4</sup> As reviewed by J. Cui, L. Fang and Z. Shi, 'Origin and Evolution of Pathogenic Coronaviruses', *Nature Reviews Microbiology*, 17 (2019), 181–92.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> K. G. Anderson and others, 'The Proximal Origin of SARS-cV-2', *Nature Medicine*, 26 (2020), 450–52.

host cells to allow it to spread directly from cell to cell, without encountering the immune response. M is the boss protein, interacting with the other structural proteins and driving virus assembly, in addition to itself being the major structural protein of the viral envelope, giving the virus its round shape. E is the smallest structural protein and is essential for efficient virus assembly within the endoplasmic reticulum\* and Golgi\* of the host cell and only some of it needs to be incorporated into the envelope. Coronaviruses are unusual in that they exit via the host cell secretory system, although the cells do eventually rupture, causing inflammation, pain and irritation of the nerve endings and coughing for the host. Importantly for the virus, it is launched into the environment nicely protected from dehydration, within droplets propelled during coughing and sneezing.

Essential to effective vaccine development is a good knowledge of the virus structure and function. Since the E protein is essential to the coronavirus life cycle, mutated virus lacking this protein and unable to cause infection, could provide a promising vaccine candidate.<sup>7</sup> Many studies are underway.

### *HIV and AIDS*

The human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) was discovered in the 1980s as being the causative agent for acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS). This virus docks onto a molecule known as CD4 on human (and chimpanzee) immune cells (mostly CD4 positive T cells and dendritic cells). Through its hijacking and subsequent reproduction within and killing of these essential immune cells, the hosts have greatly reduced defences and become more susceptible to infections that they would have previously been able to tackle. They acquired this immune deficiency, they were not born with it. Genomic evidence suggests that HIV arose from SIV (Simian immunodeficiency virus) during the 1920s in the Democratic Republic of Congo,<sup>8</sup> transitioning from hunted chimpanzees through butchering and consumption. Thus, our behaviour has facilitated the emergence of this disease and its spread throughout the world as a human sexually transmitted disease, also affecting innocent children through placental transfer of the virus. HIV has caused enormous suffering especially during the 1980s and 90s, but the effects can be greatly reduced through the use of

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<sup>7</sup> D. Schoeman and B. C. Fielding, '[Coronavirus Envelope Protein: Current knowledge](#)', *Virology Journal* 16 (2019);. Review in open access 27 May 2019.

<sup>8</sup> N. R. Faria and others, 'The Early Spread and Epidemic Ignition of HIV-1 in Human Populations, *Science*, 346 (2014), 56–61.



drugs being developed over years of intensive research, thanks partly to the celebrity interest and funding.

### *Are all viruses bad?*

Worldwide sampling of ecosystems, including the oceans, has revealed a staggering number of viruses. Interestingly, the world's seas and oceans are teeming with viruses, with millions suspended in a single teaspoon. In the last ten years, researchers have only managed to sample selected areas, but already hot spots of viral diversity have been identified, including the Arctic Ocean.<sup>9</sup> The latter is of interest since this habitat is particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Climate change affects the health and behaviour of all life and it remains to be seen how changes in ocean temperatures and salinity affect viruses and subsequently other life. Plankton trap atmospheric carbon through photosynthesis by incorporating it into their bodies. Viruses indirectly capture carbon by infecting oceanic bacteria and plankton and programming them to make more virus. Intriguingly, in this way it has been estimated that viruses are responsible for absorbing half of our CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and transport this carbon to the ocean depths and they can do this over the whole ocean surface.<sup>10</sup>

### *Therapeutic use of viruses*

Virus therapy is another area of intense research. Virologists have developed technologies to exploit the invasive properties of viruses to use as vectors for gene and cancer therapies. For gene therapy, non-replicating forms of virus are required, which will deliver the functional gene to the required cell type.<sup>11</sup> Here the viral genome is almost entirely redesigned in order to serve the therapeutic purpose and contains little viral genetic material. For example, bone marrow cells can be removed from a patient and transfected with the therapeutic virus *in vitro* before being transplanted back into the patient. Some conditions require just one treatment while others require many. A common problem is that patients can develop immune responses against the viral vector. Gene therapy using

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<sup>9</sup> A. C. Gregory and others, 'Marine DNA Viral Macro- and Microdiversity from Pole to Pole, *Cell*, 177 (2019), 1109–124. Summarized by *Nature News* 25 April 2019.

<sup>10</sup> M. Mietzsch, and M. Abandje-McKenna, 'The Good That Viruses Do', *Annual Review of Virology*, 4 (2017), iii-v.

<sup>11</sup> As reviewed by K. Elverum and M. Whitman, '[Delivering Cellular and Gene Therapies to Patients: Solutions for Realising the Potential of the Next Generation of Medicine](#)', *Gene Therapy*, (2019) [accessed 1 June 2020].

viral vectors is promising and there have been hundreds of clinical trials with varying success. At this stage in the technology cost is the major hinderance, with treatments costing hundreds of thousands of pounds per patient.

A wide range of viruses have been found to be oncolytic, that is they have the ability to selectively infect and reproduce in cancer cells, resulting in their lysis (bursting) and death, sparing the surrounding healthy cells. There are currently many clinical trials underway for several different cancers in humans, yet the practicalities of developing oncolytic viruses are very complex with many factors to consider, including the immune response and tumour type of the individual patient.<sup>12</sup>

### *Goodness arising during the COVID-19 pandemic*

We have all been uplifted by the heart-warming stories of SARS-CoV-2 survivors and their families, all of them filled with joy and thanksgiving. People were singing together on balconies in Italy, clapping for the NHS and all over the world groups have been set up to help the homeless, elderly and vulnerable. There is an increased connectivity between people by reaching out through social media to offer support. Kindness is prevailing throughout the world with extraordinary acts of generosity and fundraising. Helping others improves our own mental wellbeing. There are those who say that there is therefore no true altruism because the giver receives pleasure in return. But God loves a cheerful giver (II Corinthians 9. 7) and there is nothing wrong with taking joy in doing good.

The lockdown has increased our appreciation of the outdoors, fresh air and wildlife. There is hope that businesses and institutions will consider increasing home working, since it has often been proved possible. The benefits to the environment and safety for cyclists will be significant. Importantly we are recognizing where we have under-appreciated others, including families. No doubt those who have lost or nearly lost someone close have had reason to re-evaluate their lives. This is more so for those who have had a brush with death.

### *Author's personal reflections on suffering*

Suffering has moulded life on Earth. Much of our suffering is because we interact with a physical world and not heaven, as we may perceive. We need to feel pain in order to protect ourselves from injury. No one expects God to place a cushion in front of us when we fall. Yet we question our

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<sup>12</sup> As reviewed by E. Ylusmaki and V. Cerullo, *Design and Current Opinion in Biotechnology*, 65 (2020), 25–36.

suffering. A gene mutation or genetic disorder can cause debilitating pain and suffering and early death. It is terrible, but it is not a punishment from God, and it was not his will that any person was to suffer like this. It was not a result of sin. It was an accident like falling over, only it occurred at the molecular level in the person's DNA. In the same way, hunger motivates the cheetah to exhaust herself hunting until she succeeds, only to have her prey stolen by a lion. Without success she would die of starvation. Suffering drives her to succeed. Her success means fear and a quick death for a young antelope and grief to its mother. Without suffering our world would be a very different place. Life could not have evolved in the same way and would lack the variety. There would certainly be no lions or cats and dogs or any predators of any kind. The population size and fitness in the animal kingdom would have to be controlled by means other than predations and availability of food sources. Low variety would also mean reduced ecosystem stability and a poor ability to adapt to any environmental changes, such as in rainfall and temperature. There would be no drive for evolution and no drive for brain development. It would seem unlikely that we could have evolved and progressed sufficiently to develop cultures and technology. We might be lazy and careless with no need to help or care for one other. There would be no sense of achievement or joy in our own or another person's success. In fact, there would be no motivation to live.

While a pandemic was inevitable, the unpredictability and apparent infrequency of their emergence led governments into a false sense of security. I can only begin to understand the frustration that virologists and epidemiologists must have felt watching the pandemic disaster unfold in this under-prepared world, despite repeated warnings over many years. The sudden appearance of SARS-CoV-2 and the rapidity of its spread has highlighted the consequences of neglected preparation and ignored expert advice. How can we question God for letting this happen? This is a natural process in the biological world, and we have already developed the expertise and tools to manage and control pandemics. It is tragic that governments are forced to choose between losses of lives and livelihoods. These are man-made dilemmas. It is sad that we have developed societies which rely on continuous productivity and trade, and with little preparation for the future.

### *A personal story*

My older brother died from a brain injury before he was two. It was terrible. He did not suffer but my parents have suffered their whole lives. It was an accident. As a result, no subsequent children in our family and extended family were ever bathed or changed on anything other than the floor. It is humbling for me that I was there as an eight-month-old foetus while my

parents endured this ultimate human suffering. I was born soon after and gave them reason to live, to carry on, to love again and to live the lives that God gave them. I do not believe that it was God's will that my brother died. It was an accident, but God allowed it to happen. That is a hard fact to accept. Many more of us are struggling in this way as a direct result of COVID-19. For religious people, the only comfort is that our earthly lives are fleeting compared to eternity and we have the hope of heaven.

I have been privileged enough, working in the international world of science, to have met colleagues of different faiths. I have asked a few of them for their reflections on the COVID-19 pandemic (see below). While, like me they are guided by their religion, we all acknowledge that our views are more personal than general.

*A Buddhist and scientist, reflections on suffering and the pandemic*

Buddhists don't believe in a loving creator in the same way as Muslims, Jews and Christians do and therefore do not struggle with suffering in the same way. It has been described as an atheistic religion. The Buddhist model of suffering is to aim to decrease and eventually liberate oneself from it.<sup>13</sup>

Buddha stated that everything is transient — happiness, sadness, wealth and our own bodies. In this pandemic, we have seen this play out in front of us. Buddha also warned against heedlessness. This pandemic exposed many consequences of heedlessness, including some governments' slow and complacent response to the threat of the pandemic. We should have been prepared all along for any inevitable pandemic.

Buddhism is very good at appreciating the interconnectedness of everything, which is indeed something that many of us are becoming more aware of in the light of the effects of our activity on the planet, including climate change and practices which infringe on nature in a way that brings about pandemics. The COVID-19 pandemic, for all the bad it has done to the world, should be a lesson to remind mankind that there are more important things in life than material wealth.

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<sup>13</sup> Tsong-Kha-Pa, cited by B. A. Wallace, 'Buddhism and Science', in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*, ed. by P. Clayton and Z. Simpson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 24-40. The article was originally written in 2000.

*Islam and one scientist's personal reflections on the pandemic*

As a Muslim scientist, I strongly believe that we should follow the instructions from doctors and experts. Our Prophet Muhammad instructed that 'if you hear of an outbreak in a land, do not enter or leave that land', showing that confinement and distancing is the best way to avoid the spread. Although I believe in science and an eventual treatment and vaccine, I firmly believe that it is God who is protecting me and all of us and without his mercy and will, nothing can happen.

*Sikhism and one scientist's personal reflections on the pandemic*

Sikhism teaches that Karma (our actions) is one of the causes of misery or happiness. Sikhs believe that God does not create any misery or suffering, but these are the consequences of our deeds/actions. Thus, Sikhs believe in freewill, and that we are free to make our choices on whether we lead a virtuous or sinful life. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, there are certain teachings of Sikhism that I would like to emphasize. As Sikhs believe that all creation is as per God's will, therefore, death is also accepted as part of God's plan. It is what we make of our life and how we spend our time on Earth that decides the outcome of our soul once we die. The Sikh Gurus emphasize 'Simran', which is reflecting on God's name and selfless service. These virtues can help our souls escape the repetitive cycles of birth and death and attain salvation. In India, during these tough times, I see many charities run by Sikhs are helping people irrespective of their social status, religion, or nationality. This is considered as a duty of every Sikh and is part of the moral code of conduct as laid down by the Sikh Gurus. As per Sikhism, it is mandatory for every Sikh to respect the beliefs of all other religions and to protect the weak in times of oppression or injustice. No matter what happens, Sikhs live by the tenet, 'Sarbat ka Bhala' (meaning, may good come to all), which is a humble request from Sikhs to the Almighty towards prosperity and peace for every person in the world. These are the final words in the Sikh's 'Ardas' (Prayer) and are spoken by every practising Sikh as a part of their daily prayers.

*A Christian GP and reflections on COVID-19*

The coronavirus pandemic is causing suffering and death on a scale that the health service has not encountered before. In just a few weeks we have had to completely change the way we work. Doctors and nurses who have a duty to their patients have risen to the challenge. Many have contracted COVID-19 and tragically some have died. It is this sacrifice that has led to the worldwide increase in appreciation of all health care workers. In many ways this crisis has brought out the best in people. On a national level, while work and businesses close, people are pulling together in

communities and volunteering to help those in need. Factories changed to producing ventilators or PPE. In our practice we are working very much as a team and as differences are laid aside the bonds between us have strengthened. A few patients have been able to support us in return, for example we have a patient making us masks with visors to supplement our inadequate personal protective equipment (PPE).

I do not believe that God planned this pandemic or that it is a test. Nor do I believe that faith alone will protect us from infection. We live in a physical world and bad things happen. What is important is how we respond to this crisis. God has given humans the intelligence and skills needed to enable us to deal with it, for example the rapid development of a vaccine. God has not abandoned us. He is very much with us. And there is hope.

### *Closing remarks*

It has been a humble and fascinating experience to write this article. The same professor whom I mentioned above, suggested that I write a book exploring religion in the light of science and stated that there was very little literature on the subject. That was in 1983 and now there are many scientists who write wonderfully on their relationship with God and science. Many of these people also have theological training, which I do not. I am an ordinary scientist, professing to be Christian and above I have laid down some of my own thoughts on suffering in the light of my own learning, faith and experience over the years.

In this life we may never have all the answers we seek, especially when our prayers seem to be unheard. Pain and suffering are inescapable consequences of living in a physical universe. As individuals we can minimize this for ourselves and have a responsibility to do so for others. We must take stewardship of our planet and protect it for future generations. When dark times come again, though we may feel alone and that God is far away, we can reach out for that peace which passes all understanding.

### *\* Definitions*

Endoplasmic reticulum, Golgi and mitochondria are a few of the many organelles within the cells of plants and animals. The endoplasmic reticulum is responsible for the manufacture of proteins, for example insulin and antibodies. The Golgi apparatus works with the endoplasmic reticulum to manufacture proteins and is responsible for their storage and

secretion from the cell. The mitochondria are the power houses of cells and use oxygen in the delivery of energy.

*Further reading*

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Knitter, Paul F., *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian* (London: Oneworld, 2009)

Porter, Roy, *Blood and Guts: A Short History of Medicine* (London: W. W. Norton, 2004)

Russell, R. J., 'Quantum Physics and Divine Action', in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*, ed. by P. Clayton and Z. Simpson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. xx-yy

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Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) and Faith Communities:  
A Pandemic of 'Pandemonium',  
A Historical Survey of Church Responses in Zimbabwe and  
Kuwait (January–June 2020)

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My interest in faith communities and pandemics arose from a study on how churches in the Manicaland province of Zimbabwe responded to HIV and AIDS between 1985 and 2007. The study indicated that HIV and AIDS, which emerged in Zimbabwe in the early 1980s, definitely affected churches and that churches also impacted on the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> There is a strong relationship between that study and the current coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) which will be explored in this essay. With the world still battling to end the AIDS pandemic, the novel COVID-19 epidemic surfaced at the end of 2019. This was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in January 2020. Though quite recent and fresh, and with ongoing devastation, it is important to locate the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of other earlier epidemics including HIV and AIDS, cholera, and influenza. There are both close similarities and differences between COVID-19 and HIV pandemics. Both are historical phenomena and thus responses to earlier epidemics are important. Responses to the HIV and AIDS pandemic by Christian communities bear similarities to church responses to COVID-19. The way HIV and AIDS affected Christian communities and how churches impacted on the pandemic compares well with COVID-19. Both AIDS and COVID-19 are public health issues and interventions by individual states and WHO became critical. The State's legislative policies and interventions became decisive in determining the response to COVID-19 by members of the public including Christian communities. To a greater extent, while churches were affected by the pandemic, to a lesser extent, churches also impacted on COVID-19.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Mbona, 'The response of the Roman Catholic, Anglican and United Methodist Churches to HIV and AIDS in Manicaland, Zimbabwe (1985-2007)' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2012).

*COVID-19 in the context of other earlier epidemics*

The reaction of the public to COVID-19 cannot be divorced from the way society has always responded to other earlier epidemics and the following general pattern as described by Charles Rosenberg cited by Philippe Denis has been manifest:

The gradual acceptance of the epidemic, whose existence was denied by the principal social actors, constitutes the first act. The second act highlights the disorganised efforts of the authorities to conquer the disease. Act three sees the galvanisation of collective action which is better informed and more effective. The fourth and last act [...] shows the slow withdrawal of the epidemic.<sup>2</sup>

Rosenberg suggests that epidemics are a social phenomenon and have a dramaturgic four-fold form and thus observed: 'Epidemics start at moments in time. Proceed on a stage limited in space and duration, following a plotline of increasing and revelatory tension, move to a crisis of individual and collective character, then drift towards closure.'<sup>3</sup> At the onset of an epidemic, there is always denial and stigma. As the epidemic progresses people accept it and eventually develop solutions. Historically, COVID-19 is comparable to AIDS and shares common trends with other great epidemics, notably the bubonic plague or Black Death (sixth to eighth and fourteenth centuries, 1894 to 1902), influenza (1918 to 1919), and their intermittent epidemics, as well as outbreaks of diseases such as yellow fever, typhoid and cholera.<sup>4</sup> One of the major characteristics of an epidemic is that it kills vast numbers of people. For example, between 25 and 75 percent of the population of Western Europe perished as a result of the bubonic plague from 1337 to 1350.<sup>5</sup> The influenza pandemic of 1918 was the most severe in recent history. It was caused by an H1N1 virus with

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<sup>2</sup> Philippe Denis, '[Towards a social history of HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa](#),' in *The HIV/AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa in a historical perspective*, ed. by P. Denis and C. Becker (Online edition, October 2006), p. 20 [accessed 5 May 2009].

See also Charles E. Rosenberg, *Explaining epidemics and other studies in the history of medicine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 279.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> K. J. Doka, *AIDS, fear and society: Challenging the dreaded disease* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1997), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

genes of avian origin. Although there is no universal consensus regarding where the virus originated, it spread worldwide from 1918 to 1919. In the United States, it was first identified in military personnel in spring 1918. It is estimated that about 500 million people or one-third of the world's population became infected with this virus. The number of deaths was estimated to be at least 50 million worldwide with about 675,000 occurring in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

Georg Scriba notes that the Black Death was an epidemic that ravaged Europe, beginning in the middle of the fourteenth century, and continued intermittently throughout the late Middle Ages to the middle of the seventeenth century. It is estimated that around 20 million Europeans lost their lives due to this epidemic.<sup>7</sup> How society in general and religion, in particular, has responded to earlier epidemics has a bearing on the responses of Christian communities to the current COVID-19 pandemic. There are some similarities between the behaviour of those infected by the Black Death and COVID-19. The initial response of society including Christian communities to the plague in the sixteenth century in Western Europe was one of panic and confusion with some people choosing to minister to the needs of the sick while others fled to nearby cities.<sup>8</sup> The public response to a pandemic five centuries ago indicates that such diseases were held in dread because of the massive effects they wielded on families, communities, and society in general. As Doka noted: These diseases wiped out families and communities. They profoundly altered social institutions. They were epochal events that altered the very course of history. The bubonic plague provides many examples of this.<sup>9</sup>

The public response to the plague in sixteenth-century Western Europe showed a mixture of reactions. One of the most common reactions was that of blaming the Black Death on others. This tendency to blame others was also manifest during the HIV and AIDS era and that is the case with COVID-19. This pattern of apportioning blame on others became a hallmark of AIDS denial and stigma as Scriba observed:

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<sup>6</sup> Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, '[1918 Pandemic \(H1N1 virus\)](#)' [accessed 17 May 2020].

<sup>7</sup> Georg Scriba, 'The 16<sup>th</sup> century plague and the present AIDS pandemic: A comparison of Martin Luther's reaction to the plague and HIV/AIDS pandemic in southern Africa today', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 126 (November 2006), 67.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Doka, *AIDS, fear and society*, p. 4.

Within the church HIV and AIDS was often seen as a punishment from God for the sins of mankind [*sic*], and the clergy called for a moral regeneration of society against immoderate eating and drinking, immoral sexual behaviour, excessive luxury, and congregants were called to repentance.<sup>10</sup>

Apportioning blame was not only confined to the churches but was also common among members of the general public. At the time of the Black Death, 'other people' were accused of spreading the disease. In line with this assertion, Scriba also stated that there was the widespread belief that the disease was caused by the outcasts of society, the beggars and the poor Jews (in the case of Germany), and popular fury would turn against them. They were accused of poisoning the wells, and in some areas were massacred for that.<sup>11</sup> The case of the COVID-19 pandemic whose origins are traced to Wuhan, China, is similar to the Black Death. Within society, there is a perception that the people of Wuhan got coronavirus infection from eating bats. Similarly, the rise of cholera that devastated parts of Europe in the nineteenth century was blamed on poor countries because cholera originated and spread fast in areas where sanitation was poor. As a result, the poor suffer disproportionately. As with AIDS, the victims were blamed for their fate.<sup>12</sup> The same turned out to be true when China reeled under COVID-19 before the pandemic spread to other parts of the world.

Apart from drastically reducing the population of Europe, in the time of the Black Death epidemic, 'some villages became depopulated and eventually disappeared, and several towns declined substantially'.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the devastating effect of HIV made the Shona-speaking people of Zimbabwe give different labels to AIDS. Consistent with this assertion, Aquilina Mawadza observed: 'One of the words used to refer to HIV/AIDS in Shona is *mukondombera* which means 'plague'.[...]AIDS in Shona is *shuramatongo*, which means an 'abandoned homestead, a cursed place, or a scene of catastrophe'.'<sup>14</sup> Similarly, with the current pandemic, local communities in Zimbabwe use the Shona words *nyamusenga*, *binya*, or *gandanga* to mean a bandit or outlaw referring to COVID-19. It is also

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<sup>10</sup> Scriba, '16<sup>th</sup> century plague', pp. 68–69.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>12</sup> Doka, *AIDS, fear and society*, p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> Scriba, '16<sup>th</sup> century plague', p. 69.

<sup>14</sup> Aquilina Mawadza, 'Stigma and HIV/AIDS discourse in Zimbabwe', *Alternation*, 11/2 (2004), 423–24.

termed *chirombo* meaning a fierce monster that kills.<sup>15</sup> The recent pandemic is therefore considered as a threatful and invading enemy of society and justifies its description using local languages. Similar to earlier epidemics that devastated lives, COVID-19 rapidly spreads and kills people who are exposed to the infected including medical personnel, community, and family members.

While epidemics throughout history were often eradicated through collective interdicts, differences in the understanding of COVID-19, especially among the religious and medical fraternity, have undermined progress in responding to the pandemic. Consistent with this observation and concerning the cholera epidemic of 1832, Rosenberg showed that ‘the picture of a consistent if occasionally awkward coexistence between religious and rationalistic or mechanistic styles of thought was characteristic of mid-nineteenth-century Anglo-American society’.<sup>16</sup> Measures taken to deal with the cholera epidemic were similar to responses to HIV and AIDS and now the current COVID-19 pandemic. The experience of the city of Florence was typical of many others in the control measures that were introduced and widely used across the rest of Europe. These included: (1) the rigorous policing of human movement from plague-infested regions; (2) the compulsory burial in pits of those who had died from the plague and the destruction of their personal belongings; (3) isolating the sick in special houses and the quarantining of their families; (4) introducing special taxes to provide free medical services and food for people in isolation; (5) providing subsistence to those whose livelihoods had been wrecked.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, the general mitigatory measures prescribed against the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic adopted throughout the world include the following: (1) Rigorous limitations on human movement globally, continentally and nationally by any mode of transport under lockdown or travel ban; (2) compulsory special burial in pits or cremation for the deceased under strict regulations; (3) compulsory testing of suspected cases and quarantining of the infected and affected for 2 weeks or more; (4) mobilizing for and the provision of special resources and medicines and food for people in isolation; (5) providing subsistence to those whose

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<sup>15</sup> The author is aware of the terms used to describe the recent coronavirus pandemic among the Shona speaking people of Zimbabwe. Such words have gained new meanings as communities express panic and fear from being attacked by COVID-19.

<sup>16</sup> Rosenberg, *Explaining epidemics*, p. 286.

<sup>17</sup> S. Watts, *Epidemics and history: Disease, power and imperialism* (London: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 16–17.

livelihoods have been wrecked by COVID-19. Despite this, the extent to which different countries have implemented such measures has not been uniform. Notwithstanding the variations, it is quite evident that the measures adopted in responding to some earlier epidemics have been adopted in responding to the current pandemic.

Comparatively, there is a difference between HIV and AIDS and COVID-19, and that accounts for the adoption of particular mitigatory measures and prevention approaches. Though this might appear as common knowledge it is important to note that, by and large, HIV is transmitted through the body fluids including blood, semen, pre-seminal fluids, rectal fluids, vaginal fluids, and breast milk. HIV transmission is only possible if these fluids come in contact with a mucous membrane or damaged tissue or are directly injected into the bloodstream (from a needle or syringe). Having anal or vaginal sex with someone who has HIV without using a condom or taking medicines to prevent or treat HIV and sharing injection drug equipment such as needles with someone who has HIV infection also transmits the disease. It can also be spread from a woman with HIV to her child during pregnancy, childbirth, or breastfeeding. One cannot contract HIV from casual contact with a person who is positive through a handshake, a hug, or a closed-mouth kiss. Neither can one get HIV from contact with objects such as toilet seats, doorknobs, or dishes used by a person who is HIV positive.<sup>18</sup> COVID-19 is airborne which makes it similar to flu and therefore its mode of transmission quite different. This is mainly through contact with an infected person. Measures of prevention of transmission have generally included the following: (1) regular and thorough cleaning of hands with an alcohol-based sanitizer, soap and water; (2) maintain a social distance of at least one metre (approx. three feet) between yourself and others; (3) avoid going to crowded places; (4) avoid touching eyes, nose, and mouth; (5) follow good respiratory hygiene by covering the mouth and nose; (6) stay home, self-isolate, and wear a mask to avoid infecting others.<sup>19</sup>

Responses to epidemics also possess a history of different degrees of collaboration or the lack thereof between the various actors including churches. For instance, Christians did not speak with one voice on the use of condoms as prophylactics in HIV prevention, and the same trend was noted from responses to COVID-19 by some churches. Particular responses

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<sup>18</sup> This has grown to be general knowledge for the prevention of HIV transmission. See also USA Department of Health and Human Sciences, '[The Basics of HIV prevention](#)' [accessed 20 May 2020].

<sup>19</sup> World Health Organization, '[Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\) advice for the public](#)' [accessed 18 May 2020].

to an epidemic emerge from different levels of the ecclesial structure as noted by Philippe Denis who argued that each church level made a unique contribution either negatively or positively in the response to an epidemic.<sup>20</sup> While this observation was based on church responses to HIV and AIDS this is relevant and applicable when analysing church responses to COVID-19. The input of church leaders be it positive or negative, makes a huge difference in confronting COVID-19. The effectiveness of the church's compliance with the mitigation rules set by the government has a direct impact on containing the spread of COVID-19. In the context of HIV, the realization that people within the church community are infected and affected by HIV and AIDS was of paramount importance.<sup>21</sup> The same observation is important in understanding the public perception of COVID-19, including church communities.

### *COVID-19 perception issues*

While the WHO declared COVID-19 as a pandemic and issued guidelines to national governments and their ministries of health, the direct engagement between WHO and faith-based organizations came three months later.<sup>22</sup> The document was intended to sensitize, assist, and guide religious leaders and faith communities on ways of responding effectively to COVID-19. The fact that the document was only made available to church leaders in April may mean that a lot of damage had already occurred. Religious and faith communities are found in one form or another, large and small, throughout many communities and countries of the world. On its part WHO thus noted:

Religious leaders are integrated into their communities through service and compassionate networks and are often able to reach the most vulnerable with assistance and health information and identify those most in need. Religious leaders are a critical link in the safety net for vulnerable people within their faith community and wider communities.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> For a detailed analysis of this see Philippe Denis, 'The Church's Impact on HIV Prevention and Mitigation in South Africa. Reflections of a Historian', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 134 (July 2009), p. 68.

<sup>21</sup> Daniela Gennrich, *The Church in an HIV+ World: A Practical Handbook* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2004), p. 56.

<sup>22</sup> WHO, 'Practical considerations and recommendations for religious leaders and faith-based communities in the context of COVID-19 Interim guidance', 7 April 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.



Due to practical considerations, the guidelines will not be discussed in detail here, suffice to mention that they focused on the need for compliance with local authorities' regulations on public gatherings, social or physical distancing, encouraged hygiene, discouraged touching and kissing, encouraged conducting faith activities remotely/virtually, conducting funerals under stipulated constraints, educating members on COVID-19, upholding human rights and addressing stigma and discrimination.

Within Christian circles, there was a perception that connected COVID-19 to the work of evil spirits or Satan which can be cured by exorcism and prayer. For instance, in Zimbabwe, some members of the Johanne Marange Apostolic Church serving in a food retail company in Harare reportedly refused to be tested for COVID-19. This is part of mandatory testing done regularly on workers to reduce the spread of the virus and ensure that the public is well protected.<sup>24</sup> Their refusal to be tested mirrors the denial that COVID-19 is a disease that can infect anybody, Christians included. This attitude has the potential to fuel the spread of the disease and reflects the perception, during the previous pandemic, that HIV and AIDS were prevalent only outside the church.<sup>25</sup> Complacency 'ruled the roost' as church followers claimed that they were 'immune' to contracting HIV. Elisha Kabungaidze of Hilltop United Methodist Circuit in Mutare mentioned that many church members including him thought that people in the church were safe from HIV infection and could not contract AIDS under the false comfort that the new disease only attacked promiscuous people.<sup>26</sup> They were surprised later to realize that AIDS, literally 'did not know' that one is a Christian.<sup>27</sup> Kabungaidze further explained: 'You know, the problem with us church people is that we practise self-righteousness. We get to a point where we do not see ourselves as part of this world. With a disease like AIDS, many of our Christians never thought it might come to them but it did.'<sup>28</sup> That the

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<sup>24</sup> Robert Tapfumaneyi, ['Two Vapostori Bakers Inn workers to lose jobs after rejecting Covid-19 tests'](#), *New Zimbabwe* [accessed 20 May 2020].

<sup>25</sup> Christinah Mombe, interview by author at the Catholic Diocese of Mutare Community Care Project Centre, St Joseph's Mission, Mutare on 19 August 2010.

<sup>26</sup> Elisha Kabungaidze, interview by author at Hilltop United Methodist Centre, Mutare on 13 August 2010.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. See also Sophirina Sign, interview by author at the Zimbabwe East Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church office, Mutare on 23 September 2010. See also Andrew Mhondoro, interview by author in Rusape on 17 August 2010.



scourge of HIV and AIDS also infected and affected members of the United Methodist Church was testimony to the fact that everyone was vulnerable. To their shock and consternation, the ordained leadership of the church experienced the same fate.<sup>29</sup>

The secrecy and misconceptions that surrounded COVID-19 are quite similar to what transpired when AIDS initially appeared in Africa and Zimbabwe included. For instance, in Burundi in 1985 the Ministry of Health prohibited a research team from presenting results of the investigation on HIV and AIDS at a conference in Brussels and blocked publication of the findings in a medical journal.<sup>30</sup> Marta Zaccagnini mentioned that African governments such as the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1983 and Zimbabwe in 1987 instructed doctors not to mention AIDS on death certificates.<sup>31</sup> In Zimbabwe, AIDS was a source of discomfort for the government because the epidemic threatened the viability of the tourism industry at a time when the newly independent state was seeking to market itself. Dunmore Kusano, a medical doctor who trained in Zimbabwe in the late 1980s, mentioned that the government's fear of losing potential tourist arrivals was a case of complicity in denying HIV and AIDS.<sup>32</sup> Many of the people who died from AIDS-related diseases had pneumonia, TB2, or resistant malaria stated as the cause of fatality. Consistent with this observation, Vuyelwa Chitimbire, who worked in the public health sector before joining the Zimbabwe Association of Church Hospitals, also mentioned that the Church and the State were not angels in the way Zimbabweans, in general, responded to HIV and AIDS.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Kabungaidze interview, 13 August 2010. See also Sign, interview, 23 September 2010. See also Mhondoro interview 17 August 2010. See also Adulight Mapa, interview by author at Dangare in Mutare on 13 August 2010.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Kocheleff, 'AIDS in Burundi and South Africa: A Day-To-Day Experience', in *HIV/AIDS Epidemic in Sub-Saharan Africa*, ed. by Denis and Becker, p. 146.

<sup>31</sup> Marta Zaccagnini, '[History of HIV & AIDS in Africa](#)', May 2009, p. 5. [accessed 25 May 2009]

<sup>32</sup> Dunmore Kusano, interview by author at Makuma Medical Centre, Rusape on 21 September 2010. See also Kabungaidze interview 13 August 2010.

<sup>33</sup> Vuyelwa Chitimbire, interview by author at the Zimbabwe Association of Church Hospitals office, Harare on 5 October 2010.

*COVID-19 and Churches in Zimbabwe*

The responses to COVID-19 at the institutional level by churches in Zimbabwe were a mixed bag. On the one hand, some churches supported the stance taken by the State including the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC). This is an ecumenical body comprising of twenty-two affiliate denominations including the five dioceses of the Anglican Church. The call to churches and members of the public urging all to comply to government regulations was announced by the ZCC Secretary-General, Revd Kenneth Mtata, as was noted:

Since the disease has been declared a global pandemic, it was time for the churches to also take a firm stance to protect their parishioners by following the World Health Organisation (WHO) guidelines. It is very clear that COVID-19 has now been declared a pandemic and is spreading fast all over the world and faith communities are particularly vulnerable to the virus [...] religious practices like baptism, handshakes, laying of hands, embraces, kisses of love were all physical and would put congregants at risk.<sup>34</sup>

The other denominations are the Evangelical Lutheran Church with three dioceses, each represented by a bishop, the United Methodist Church, the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, the Reformed Church, among others. The Roman Catholic Church has observer status. The majority of the member churches were founded by missionaries and operate healthcare and educational institutions countrywide. The mission-founded clinics and hospitals are a critical arm of the healthcare system in Zimbabwe. The ZCC also has a welfare arm called Christian Care, whose mandate entails responding to any disasters affecting Zimbabweans.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the ZCC, as an ecumenical body, serves as a platform for member churches to express a collective opinion in addressing issues that affect the citizens.

On the other hand, some denominations especially independent churches reacted differently to government regulations. For instance, Bishop Nehemiah Mutendi of the Zion Christian Church, one of the largest independent churches, insisted on holding Easter celebrations at the church's shrine in Bikita near Masvingo. About 4000 pilgrims were

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<sup>34</sup> Vanessa Gonye, Phylis Mbanje and Presious Chida, [‘Zimbabwe confronts coronavirus’](#), *Newsday*, 15 March 2020 [accessed 2 May 2020].

<sup>35</sup> [Zimbabwe Council of Churches](#) [accessed 20 May 2020].

expected.<sup>36</sup> The leader of the Apostolic Christian Council of Zimbabwe, Bishop Johannes Ndanga, though he urged affiliate churches to follow Government regulations on COVID-19 prevention, strongly insisted on honouring church festivities as thus noted:

As much as we consider COVID-19 a health threat, the virus cannot be a barrier to church tradition. Now that we are heading for Easter holidays, I figure it is wise that the Ministry of Health and Child Care deploys its health workers to such gatherings in a bid to prevent the spread of the virus because we cannot postpone such gatherings as it is a Bible mandate. I encourage fellow Christians countrywide to take this wise move and liaise with the ministry and inform them on upcoming events so that they can be tested and get advice on precautionary measures.<sup>37</sup>

The position taken by Bishops Nehemiah and Johannes had the effect of sending mixed signals in which church members would be caught between either holding gatherings for the Easter celebrations or aborting the same by total avoidance of gatherings as advised by the State. The fact that some church leaders showed reluctance to conform with stipulated rules issued by the State was less helpful in stemming the spread of the disease among their members.

Lack of conformity remained entrenched at the institutional level characterized by either low key engagement with the pandemic or a display of totally negative reactions. There is also a perception that responses to COVID-19 by some churches were informed by a warm relationship with the State. For example, after donating sanitary materials for COVID-19 at a State prison in Mutare, the national leader of Johanne Masowe eChishanu, Andy Makururu, pleaded with the State for permission to meet and pray in their respective churches as noted:

We are fasting and praying that our God provides solutions in the fight against the deadly coronavirus [...] Today, I am just pleading for a small request to President Emmerson Mnangagwa, to give us churches a role to play in the fight against the coronavirus. We are saying he (Mnangagwa) should give us a chance as church leaders to meet at our respective

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<sup>36</sup> Paul Nyathi, '[Coronavirus shuts down churches](#)', *ZimEye*, 15 March 2020 [accessed 2 May 2020].

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

shrines or churches to meet and pray for a small period of time weekly be it 30 minutes or one hour. Each church has a spiritual place, so we are saying that we should meet, at least five or ten people who are church leaders, while also observing social distancing and also wearing personal protective equipment (PPE). Sometimes, it is difficult to pray at home, so if we meet as leaders, we are able to give each other strength to pray for the country. We are already praying, but I am just pleading for only church leaders to meet.<sup>38</sup>

That there was always ongoing confusion over the most effective way of responding to the pandemic was again evident. The negative attitude displayed by some church leaders had the undesirable effect of sending mixed messages to the ordinary church members. This would prove to be less helpful in stopping the spread of COVID-19 by faith communities.

On a positive side, the national leadership of Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in Zimbabwe discontinued services at the instructions of their superiors in the United State of America.<sup>39</sup> Such decisions, though unpopular with some, proved to be the best, given the need to do everything necessary to stop the spread of COVID-19. Similarly, the ZCC issued the following as both advice and warning to churches:

In light of this fact, the following hygiene conventions are being recommended in order to prevent any possible spread of COVID-19. We encourage the faithful across all religious communities to avoid handshakes or any physical contact. We exhort that all religious and liturgical processes that entail physical contact be halted. [The]ZCC has put on halt all work-related travels on the continent and internationally, [...] discouraged private travel among its staff and congregants. The group also approved alcohol-based hand sanitisers. [...] mass gatherings have all been suspended in the interest of public health until further notice; where possible, visual meetings will replace physical meetings.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Kenneth Nyangani, [‘Johanne Masowe leader pleads with ED’](#), *Newsday*, 2 May 2020 [accessed 2 May 2020].

<sup>39</sup> Paul Nyathi, ‘Coronavirus shuts down churches’.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Tapfumaneyi, [‘Church group urges alcohol-based hand sanitisers amid coronavirus threat’](#), *New Zimbabwe*, 18 March 2020 [accessed 2 May 2020].

The set requirements were all new to the Christians and thus set a new tone in their practice of faith and understandings of personal and public health. Leadership became a critical aspect of the way churches responded to COVID-19.

Further to the above, the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference issued a statement declaring the suspension of all church services in line with the Government ban on all gatherings as a precaution against the spread of coronavirus. It is worth noting that the church fathers went a step further by alerting the clergy and members of the church on the need to avoid overstretching the ailing national public healthcare system.<sup>41</sup> In another letter issued a week later, the Catholic bishops of Zimbabwe repeated the same message but further called on the faithful of the church to be obedient to both the State authorities and church leaders. Part of the ecclesial letter thus read as:

It is essential to obey both civic and ecclesial authorities as the COVID-19 pandemic wreaks havoc around the globe. The most effective witness we can give first of all is serene and committed obedience to what is demanded by those who govern us, both at the state and ecclesial level, to all that is disposed to safeguard our health, both as private citizens and as a nation. It has happened before. Plagues and viruses have been with us since the dawn of humanity, with the only difference being plagues tended to be regional, COVID-19 is global. The world is increasingly becoming a global village, with its advantages and disadvantages.<sup>42</sup>

It is crucial to observe that panic, anxiety, and fear naturally created discomfort for Christians and people of other faiths. Admittedly COVID-19 brought with it fear, panic, and confusion in the church and society at large. The insistence of the Catholic bishops of Zimbabwe that epidemics, including the novel COVID-19 pandemic, were historical phenomena was meant to address that and therefore came at the right time. It was common knowledge that the public healthcare system in Zimbabwe was a cause for concern and church hospitals and clinics took much of the burden of healthcare provision. In this regard, the ZCC Secretariat also highlighted the same message issued by the Catholic bishops noting the unreadiness of

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<sup>41</sup> Staff Reporter, '[Catholic Church suspends obligatory mass](#)', *New Zimbabwe*, 18 March 2020 [accessed 2 May 2020].

<sup>42</sup> Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference, 'Further ZCBC statement on Covid-19', 26 March 2020.

the national healthcare system to cope with COVID-19, given seven months of job action by doctors: 'It makes us very vulnerable. If there is an outbreak, we won't cope [...] Crisis moments are tricky moments.'<sup>43</sup>

*The Anglican Church in Zimbabwe confronts COVID-19*

The Anglican Church in Zimbabwe, Botswana, Zambia, and Malawi constitute the Church of the Province of Central Africa under the leadership of the Most Reverend Albert Chama. One of the earliest responses to COVID-19 from the Anglican Church in Zimbabwe was contained in the Archbishop's letter distributed to all the fifteen dioceses. Among the crucial points contained in the message, the Archbishop encouraged Christians to be cautious, equip churches with hygienic materials, avoid physical contact among members, avoid large gatherings, withdraw the chalice and receive Holy Communion in one kind only, and to cooperate with the Ministry of Health requirements in individual countries.<sup>44</sup> This message resonated well with messages issued from other parts of the Anglican Communion notably the Church of England and the Episcopal Province of Jerusalem and the Middle East of which the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf is a part. We shall return to this at a later stage.

Following the letter from Archbishop Albert, the five bishops from the Anglican Church in Zimbabwe published a joint pastoral letter. The bishops being; Ignatius Makumbe (Central Zimbabwe and ACZ Chair), Godfrey Tawonezwi (Masvingo), Cleophas Lunga (Matabeleland), Erick Ruwona (Manicaland) and Farai Mutamiri (Harare). In a statement to members of the church it was clearly stated that due to COVID-19 rapid changes to church life were unavoidable as was thus noted:

All our churches, offices and schools should be closed indefinitely with no baptisms, no weddings, no communion, no requiem masses, and no classes until further notice, as we join in the battle to stem the spread of the virus. The staff will now work from home. We urge all clergy to maintain the ancient pattern of daily prayer. Where possible and resources permitting live-streaming their worship. Clergy are also called to guide the faithful by providing them with an order of services,

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<sup>43</sup> Anli Serfontein, '[Coronavirus is not a European problem, says Archbishop of Cape Town](#)', *Church Times*, 20 March 2020 [accessed 2 May 2020].

<sup>44</sup> Albert Chama, 'Pastoral letter in the face of Covid-19', The Church of the Province of Central Africa, Kitwe, Zambia, 15 March 2020.



reflections, and resource material for meditation and sermons.<sup>45</sup>

The content of the letter served to illustrate that COVID-19 disrupted the fabric of the Anglican Church in Zimbabwe as much as it did elsewhere. The pandemic imposed new ways of doing church, which became both a challenge and opportunity for congregations and the clergy. The fact that the letter came after the one issued by Archbishop Albert, the statements from the ZCC, and the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference arguably served to illustrate that the collective voice of the Anglican bishops of Zimbabwe might have been long overdue. However, given the need for pastoral guidance, this became one of the key documents that directed national church responses to the pandemic at the leadership level.

Due to practical reasons, responses to COVID-19 have been selected from two dioceses but do represent a general trend across the country. The earliest statement on COVID-19 from the Diocese of Manicaland was issued on 18 March 2020, seven days after the State declared the pandemic a national disaster. The pastoral letter acknowledged the recent input received from Archbishop Albert and also Bishop Erick further highlighted pastoral concerns:

As a faith community, we are also a people of hope and compassion [...] giving thanks to the many professionals who continue to risk their health to treat the sick, be near the dying, contain the virus, and protect their communities [...] May God's peace hold us in the fears that swirl around our communities and at times within our hearts. May we find the courage to compassionately care for one another and find strength in the community. May we find comfort in the knowledge that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ (Romans 8. 38-39).<sup>46</sup>

Similarly, within the Diocese of Harare, Bishop Farai made a follow up to the earlier letter issued by the Anglican bishops in Zimbabwe and cautiously urged church members to consider COVID-19 as a new reality as noted:

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<sup>45</sup> Anglican Bishops in Zimbabwe (CPCA), 'Pastoral letter on coronavirus in Zimbabwe', 26 March 2020.

<sup>46</sup> Erick Ruwona, 'Bishop's message on Covid-19', Diocese of Manicaland, 18 March 2020. See also Erick Ruwona, final published 'Covid-19 schools guide', Diocese of Manicaland, 16 May 2020.

Quarantining yourself and your loved ones is not an option but a MUST [must]. The COVID-19 pandemic is not a conspiracy theory, neither is it a political gimmick by a political party. It is real and let us all take the necessary steps to protect ourselves and those dear to us and above all to prevent it from spreading.<sup>47</sup>

As already mentioned earlier, the arrival of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe coincided, as in other parts of the world, with Easter. The disruption was most unwelcome and unbelievable. Bishop Erick also wrote: 'This year we celebrate Easter against the background of COVID-19 that has affected the entire world. It is characterised by the closure of churches, lockdown, and infections of the rich and poor, powerful and weak, young and old.'<sup>48</sup> COVID-19 forced the church in Manicaland to conduct Easter services using Zoom, Facebook, and WhatsApp. This had the unfortunate effect of limited access to services for members affected by low levels of internet access and the lack of suitable cellular phones.

Within the Diocese of Manicaland, the fact that information regarding the pandemic was disseminated from the church headquarters, was different from what had transpired in the early years of the HIV and AIDS pandemic whereby there was a lot of secrecy and denial.<sup>49</sup> For instance, at Holy Name parish, Sakubva in Mutare HIV and AIDS rarely featured in the official business of the parish meetings between 1985 and 1994.<sup>50</sup> Parishioners Jessie Chimwaza and Edgar Mbutsa in separate interviews concurred that from the time of the earliest appearance of HIV and AIDS in the 1980s and the surge in HIV infection between 1990 and 2000 the epidemic received minimum attention from the leadership of the parish.

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<sup>47</sup> Farai Mutamiri, 'Follow-up to Anglican Council in Zimbabwe letter', Diocese of Harare, 27 March 2020.

<sup>48</sup> Erick Ruwona, 'Bishop's Easter message to the clergy and people of God', Diocese of Manicaland, 6 April 2020.

<sup>49</sup> For this and in respect to the Anglican Church in Manicaland, Zimbabwe, see Michael Mbona, '[HIV and AIDS: an epidemic of "pandemonium" amid denial and stigma by the Roman Catholic, Anglican and United Methodist Churches in Manicaland, Zimbabwe \(1985-2002\)](#)', 1 August 2012 [accessed 25 May 2020].

<sup>50</sup> Holy Name archives, Sakubva (HNM), Minutes of Council Meeting, 6 August 1982, Minutes of Council Meeting, January 1990. Minutes of Council Meeting, January 1993, Minutes of Council Meeting, 30 June 1993.



People simply moralized about the strange disease.<sup>51</sup> The trend was common in other parishes including St Cuthbert's Denzva in Nyazura<sup>52</sup> and St Matthews in Vengere, Rusape.<sup>53</sup> The fact that at the local parish level HIV and AIDS was not a regular item on the agenda of council meetings was indicative of a denial of the existence of AIDS by churches. Similarly, during the early years, the Roman Catholic Christians rarely engaged in discussions on HIV and AIDS. This was noted from the parishes in Rusape<sup>54</sup> and Mutare.<sup>55</sup> Given the reality that lay members looked up to the clergy for guidance and leadership, low levels of awareness and denial at the parish level in the early years caused possible harm by offering spiritual solutions to the epidemic. This served to illustrate that grassroots Christians might have lacked the courage to accept HIV and AIDS as a biomedical reality and not necessarily the work of witchcraft and occult forces. With the deadly nature of the novel pandemic, the awareness levels and mitigatory action against COVID-19 by church leaders and their followers might have reduced the spread of the pandemic.

#### *Advocacy in the context of COVID-19*

The extent to which statements issued by the Church translated into positive action on the ground has always been debatable even where an estimated 87.1 percent of the population of Zimbabwe in 2020 are considered to be Christians.<sup>56</sup> In the case of Zimbabwe, there was considerable evidence to show that in many communities, ordinary people were at the receiving end of the pandemic. Limited access to the right detailed information, and to preventative materials including alcohol-based

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<sup>51</sup> Edgar Mbutsa, interview by author at Holy Name Anglican parish, Sakubva, Mutare on 25 August 2010. See also Jessie Chimwaza, interview conducted by author at Holy Name, Sakubva, Mutare on 25 August 2010.

<sup>52</sup> Benita Makoni, interview by author at St Cuthbert's Denzva, Makoni on 15 August 2010.

<sup>53</sup> Jesmine Mavhima, interview by author in Rusape on 17 August 2010.

<sup>54</sup> St Simon Stock Catholic parish archives (SSCPR), Rusape, Minutes of Parish Council Meetings, 1991–1994.

<sup>55</sup> The Cathedral of the Holy Trinity archives, Mutare (CHT), Minutes of Parish Council Meetings, 17 November 1987 and 15 December 1987. See also CHT, Minutes of Parish Council Meetings for 16 February 1988, 15 March 1988, 28 April 1988. See also CHT, Minutes of Parish Council Meetings for 16 February 1988, 15 March 1988, 28 April 1988. See CHT, Minutes of Parish Council Meeting, 30 March 1991.

<sup>56</sup> [Zimbabwe Religious Demography Affiliation](#), Pew-Templeton Global Religious Features [accessed 20 May 2020].

sanitizers, masks, and water, as well as COVID-19 testing facilities for both the rural and urban population, were noted.<sup>57</sup> Church members were part of the general public and faced the same predicament. This compromised the effectiveness of interventions amidst the challenges of mobility to access basic services or urgent business. For instance, Chief Fortune Charumbira, a member of the Senate, complained that people in rural communities were failing to travel to access healthcare facilities or attend to urgent business. This was because they had no access to special letters authorizing them to move from their homes.<sup>58</sup> Lack of access to healthcare facilities by communities potentially undermined the State's commitment to mitigate COVID-19. This concern was an expression of the practical challenges faced by ordinary citizens. Chief Taruvinga also informed the Senate on the high levels of chaos experienced within rural communities whereby villagers were exposed to COVID-19. They had no access to face masks and rarely observed social distancing while queuing for basic commodities such as mealie-meal and sugar.<sup>59</sup> Given the foregoing, the lack of solid mechanisms of providing for some of the basic prevention materials exposed the population of Zimbabwe to high risks.

We can catch a further glimpse of the situation that ordinary people in Zimbabwe faced from statements issued by the ZCC. While on one hand advising members of the public to observe set regulations, the ZCC on the other hand reminded the State to address the acute challenges faced by the citizenry. In a statement issued on 22 April the ZCC, highlighting major concerns, noted:

Citizens were caught unprepared when the 21-day national lockdown was declared and this will be worsened by the 14-day extension. The greater populace who largely rely on hand to mouth from the informal sector and whose wages fall below the poverty datum line was unprepared for this eventuality as they had no time to stock food and other necessities. This grossly affected the compliance levels in high-risk areas, densely populated residential areas as well as the informal economy.

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<sup>57</sup> Information supplied to author by Luke Chigwanda, Dean at St John the Baptist Cathedral, Mutare, Zimbabwe, 15 May 2020. The author is a Zimbabwean and keeps track of the situation through regular contacts with family and other people.

<sup>58</sup> Anna Chibamu, '[Chief Charumbira annoyed by Government's chaotic Covid-19 restrictions](#)', *New Zimbabwe* [accessed 23 May 2020].

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. See also Jenifer Mbizi, information supplied to author on 25 April 2020.

Many citizens expected better flow of information on COVID-19 yet there have been inconsistent policy pronouncements, to the extent of information media sources publishing inaccurate news. There is deepened mistrust of government by the citizens with regards to accurate statistics as the general feeling has been that the impact of the pandemic is being underplayed. There is little information being shared on the extent of preparedness of health facilities in response to COVID-19 and the publishing of minimal accurate legal measures to combat COVID-19.<sup>60</sup>

Within the church in Zimbabwe, the ZCC and the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference separately, or jointly under the Heads of Christian Denominations, often engage with the State on matters of concern on behalf of the citizens. Thus, the ZCC serving as the collective voice of the affiliate churches reminded the State of urgent COVID-19 related concerns:

Citizens further remain concerned that the COVID-19 testing, tracking and monitoring remain very minimal thereby hindering effective control of the Virus. While we are aware of the financial challenges at hand, we implore authorities to deploy significant resources towards this urgent need as the risk of the spike in cases will be huge for the country and overwhelm the ailing health delivery system.<sup>61</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic placed challenges on the Zimbabwean economy, whose performance has left the majority of the citizens to be employed in the informal sector. Given that such people survive from hand to mouth, the effects of lockdowns deprived them of their livelihoods. Further to the above-stated, the ZCC called upon the State to be accountable for donated resources by noting: 'It is our strong belief that transparency and accountability are vital for resources to be deployed to the areas of need. The reduced oversight role of Parliament to track the administration of COVID-19 funds from Treasury and donations is a great concern.'<sup>62</sup>

### *Churches in Kuwait respond to COVID-19*

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<sup>60</sup> ZCC, 'Statement on containment and mitigatory measures against Covid-19 in Zimbabwe', 22 April 2020.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

The responses to COVID-19 by some religious leaders in Kuwait, in particular, and the Gulf region, in general, were similar to those issued by church leaders elsewhere in the world, including Zimbabwe. In the early days of the pandemic, there was very minimum public attention given to COVID-19 by churches. For instance, at the Gulf Churches Forum meeting held on 28 and 29 January 2020 at the Greek Orthodox Church in Salwa, Kuwait, COVID-19 was not on the agenda and neither did it come up under 'Any other Business' where it could have been expressed as a matter of interest or concern. The disruptive and ravaging nature of COVID-19 caused the closure of churches including the building where we met. This occurred only a month later. The silence on COVID-19 could be explained in two ways. Either church leaders cared little about it or they perceived the pandemic as being distant. As time was to tell, an element of regret among some of the delegates including the author could not be misplaced. This ecumenical platform had delegates that included two Catholic bishops and clergy from Oman, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait.<sup>63</sup>

Two other important meetings for the Anglican Church both hosted in the United Arab Emirates followed. The Anglican Alliance workshop was held at Christ Church, Jabel Ali (29 January to 2 February), and the diocesan synod in Abu Dhabi (3 to 7 February). The delegates that attended the Anglican Alliance workshop were drawn from East and Southern Africa, Cyprus, Asia, the Middle East, and the United Kingdom. The deliberations focused on 'Safe Migration in the Gulf'.<sup>64</sup> At that time, though COVID-19 was already in the public space, it did not attract open attention. For this, there might have been two possible explanations. Either the participants were less informed regarding the epidemic or they perceived it as a 'Chinese disease' that had no potential to spread fast across the whole world and infect and affect humanity as it proved to be. This was despite access to media reports that regularly highlighted the pandemic.

Within two weeks, by mid-March, the Anglican Alliance office in London indicated awareness of COVID-19 through a publication. The pushing factor in doing so lay in the recent experience of the pandemic in many parts of the worldwide Anglican Communion and advice was given as thus stated:

From the Church's experience of responding to other emergency and epidemic situations, we know that there are

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<sup>63</sup> Michael Mbona, the author, attended the meeting representing the Anglican Church in the company of Bill Schwartz, Archdeacon of the Gulf and Andrew Thompson, Chaplain of St Andrew's Church, Abu Dhabi.

<sup>64</sup> Michael Mbona, the author, was one of the delegates at the workshop.

three key roles the Church can play in such times to promote preparedness and resilience: To give hope and combat fear with accurate information and encouragement through our faith. To keep the worshipping and wider community connected, if necessary, via messages, phone and online, in case of quarantine and disruption. To show God's compassion and care to those affected in our communities, remembering that those already most vulnerable will be most affected.<sup>65</sup>

The Anglican Alliance, whose key focus areas are development, relief, and advocacy, provides leadership and coordination to the church provinces, dioceses, and parishes of the Anglican Communion. The regional office for the Middle East which covers Kuwait is located in Jordan. In that capacity, churches would look up to the Anglican Alliance for direction and guidance on responses to the pandemic. Given the overwhelming nature of COVID-19 and its increasing challenges of infections and deaths, the proposed guidelines and advice to churches became an important resource. However, we might not be surprised that while some 'rich' churches were resourceful in availing sanitary items and material support for their members and their communities, others would have expected to receive material aid from the Anglican Alliance. Given that the pandemic is still around, we could leave this to the future.

It is worthwhile to mention that the diocesan synod in Abu Dhabi occurred one month after WHO declared COVID-19 as a pandemic. The theological reflections focused on 'Discipleship in Context' and the synod agenda and motions and the discussion were silent on COVID-19.<sup>66</sup> Perhaps it was then too early to deliberate on a pandemic whose presence was still associated largely with China. It would seem that the general perception among the delegates was that COVID-19 would not spread its tentacles quickly to grip the whole human family within a few months as it did. Among the synod attendees, there were delegates from the Diocese of Exeter and other representatives (United Kingdom), the Episcopal Church in the United States (USA), the Diocese of Thika (Kenya), Clergy and laity from all chaplaincies and parishes in the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf, the

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<sup>65</sup> The Anglican Alliance, (Development, Relief and Ddvocacy), ['Faith in a time of COVID-19 \(coronavirus\)'](#), 18 March 2020 [accessed 2 May 2020].

<sup>66</sup> For this see Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf, 'Scene @ synod 2020. See also Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf, 'Diocesan synod 2020 programme', 3 February 2020. The author Michael Mbona was present at the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf synod meeting as a delegate from St Paul's Anglican Church, Kuwait.

Mission to Seafarers, the Near East School of Theology (Lebanon) and the Regional Anglican Alliance office (Jordan).<sup>67</sup> However, within a few weeks, church business took a different turn and literally forced the church leadership and its members to contend with the new reality.

Within the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf, one of the earliest statements from Archbishop Michael Lewis, Primate of the Episcopal Province of Jerusalem and the Middle East, was contained in a pastoral letter entitled 'Coronavirus: advice for churches'. The specific guidelines addressed new cautious ways of celebrating Holy Communion in the context of the emerging pandemic. Part of the key aspects addressed included: maintaining good hygiene by priests and servers washing hands and using alcohol-based hand-sanitizer before Holy Communion, availability of hand-sanitizers for parishioners to use, complete avoidance of communion by intinction to reduce chances of infection, exercising good personal hygiene in all pastoral contacts, the receiving of communion in one kind by parishioners with coughs and sneezes.<sup>68</sup> The decision on whether or not to completely suspend church services including the celebration of Holy Communion was left to local contexts in which the rules of the hosting states had to be adhered to. Decisions on the implementation of the prevention of COVID-19 took different shapes in respective Gulf states.

That the application of COVID-19 prevention regulations depended much on the strategies adopted by each government, became a widespread pattern the world over. The pandemic undermined 'the power' of church authorities including bishops and priests over the administration of the sacraments and one could not be surprised with the Archbishop's advice: 'Regularly check government websites for any rules regarding gatherings, especially if there are confirmed cases of the virus in the country. If services have to be suspended for any period, including a Sunday, inform the Archbishop and Archdeacon.'<sup>69</sup> The guidelines from the Archbishop were prompted by churches raising pastoral concerns regarding handling the COVID-19 pandemic. In the meantime, State authorities in Kuwait issued via the Cabinet a six-point statement on 26 February 2020. Part of which read thus:

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<sup>67</sup> See Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf, 'Synod participants and list of guests, observers and others', Abu Dhabi, 3 February 2020.

<sup>68</sup> Michael Lewis, 'Coronavirus: advice for churches', Episcopal Province of Jerusalem and the Middle East and Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf, 28 February 2020.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

Urging all citizens and expats [expatriates] to avoid gatherings, which may help spread infection and the epidemic, and embody constructive cooperation as well as understand measures aiming to ensure their safety and protection from the disease, and ignore rumours and informal information circulated.<sup>70</sup>

The interpretation of this resolution by churches evolved. For some, it meant a total ban of any church gatherings while for others it was taken to imply that services would be continued but with restricted numbers. That the rule was initially interpreted differently by various church actors, was regrettably apparent and this was further exacerbated by the haste to take the right steps in moving forward.

Within Kuwait, as is the case in the Gulf, the Chaplain is expected to take the first initiative in responsibility to respond to ecclesial matters. This is done in consultation with the archdeacon and bishop. Both senior church officials reside elsewhere, in Bahrain and Cyprus respectively. Given the degree of urgency on the subject, after consultation with the parish council and with advice from some embassies, the local Anglican chaplaincy in Kuwait issued its first statement on the suspension of services as was noted:

Therefore, taking the above factors into account, mass gatherings are deemed not appropriate and feasible and hence, we recommend all churches/congregations to have their Holy Mass and services cancelled until further notice with immediate effect. We have to be sensible, wise and act accordingly because mass gatherings will only hasten the infection under the circumstances.<sup>71</sup>

This discontinuation of church services at the Anglican Church in Kuwait affected the Anglican community and twenty other churches hosted at its premises located within the Kuwait Oil Company area of Ahmadi. The decision proved to have been expected and acceptable by some and yet least expected and unacceptable by the congregations. That had to be expected given the short notice and the uncertainty of returning to the church buildings soon. One of the church leaders who visited the locked

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<sup>70</sup> Government, '[Kuwait Cabinet make series of decisions to control coronavirus](#)', *Kuwait News Agency (KUNA)*, 26 February 2020 [accessed 26 May 2020].

<sup>71</sup> For this See Michael Mbona, 'Coronavirus and suspension of services at St Paul's Anglican Church', 27 February 2020.



church buildings on 28 February argumentatively observed: 'If we have faith in Jesus Christ we should not accept to be challenged by the coronavirus. Closing the church is a sign of little faith.'<sup>72</sup> This perception resonated well with the view expressed by the leader of the Johanne Masowe eChishanu Church in Zimbabwe as discussed earlier.

COVID-19 proved to be a rapid game changer, not only for the secular world but for the church too. There was a shift in the perception of the pandemic by some pastors as was noted from a questionnaire on how COVID-19 affected the churches. This was distributed to congregations worshipping at the Anglican Church in Ahmadi. The pastor mentioned above conceded to the decision that he had contested before as noted: 'It was sad but necessary because gatherings could have spread the virus.'<sup>73</sup> It must also be borne in mind that Christians felt the same effects of COVID-19 as did all other people. Increasingly, church members serving on the frontline as medical personnel in Kuwait shared their experiences with others and often sought prayer support. Thus, the reality of the pandemic as a threat to human life got closer to home for many congregations.

Initially, the church leaders in Kuwait lacked coordination in responding to the State's recommendations for halting the spread of COVID-19. Panic and anxiety gripped the church leaders amidst the haste to deliver workable solutions. This was typical of responses to HIV and AIDS and COVID-19 by churches in Zimbabwe as already hinted above. There are several churches in Kuwait but the officially recognized eight are the following: the National Evangelical, the Greek Orthodox, the Armenian Orthodox, the Coptic Orthodox, Greek Catholic, the Roman Catholic, the Maronite, and the Anglican Churches. Other established Christian traditions include the Mar Thoma Church, the Syrian Orthodox, Church of South India (Anglican), the Light House Church, and numerous independent formations that worship either in villas or meet at officially sanctioned places.<sup>74</sup> While the Light House Church (hosted at the National Evangelical Church compound), the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church issued

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<sup>72</sup> These words were spoken in a conversation between the author and a pastor from one of the congregations that worships at St Paul's Anglican Church, Kuwait.

<sup>73</sup> Information supplied to author by a pastor of guest congregations based at St Paul's Anglican Church, Ahmadi on 2 May 2020.

<sup>74</sup> For a detailed history of the Christian church in Kuwait, see Andrew Thompson, *The Christian Church in Kuwait: Religious Freedom in the Gulf* (Kuwait, Saeed and Sameer, 2010). See also Hamza Olayan, *Christians in Kuwait*, (Kuwait, That Al-Salasim, 2018).



statements individually, they all took the position of suspending church services immediately until further advised.<sup>75</sup>

The National Evangelical Church, under the leadership of the Revd Ammanuel Ghareeb is the largest church establishment in Kuwait. The centre, located close to the Government Legislature building, is host to 85 congregations and pastors. The first step taken by the leadership was to issue a letter on 26 February, whose intention was to (a) inform congregants on the emerging pandemic and (b) to highlight COVID-19 safety precautionary measures.<sup>76</sup> It is crucial to note that not much information on the pandemic was in the public realm and the attempt to inform churches that patronize the compound became important. However, the fact that within two weeks the arrangement was reviewed served as a reminder that stiffer measures were necessary to protect the congregants as was thus noted:

Considering the present situation and in compliance with the government restrictions, we have decided to suspend all our meetings and gatherings in NECK [National Evangelical Church, Kuwait] with immediate effect for the time being (until further notice). The main sanctuary hall will be open to individuals to pray. In case you are visiting the church to pray, please follow the guidelines provided by the MOH [Ministry of Health].<sup>77</sup>

Three factors could have contributed to the shift in the position taken earlier by the leadership of the National Evangelical Church. One of the key factors was that cases of COVID-19 infection were on a steady rise as indicated by the constant updates by the state of Kuwait. The potential of spreading infection from church gatherings came into the spotlight. The second factor was that the state of Kuwait imposed a ban on worship at mosques for an indefinite period with effect from 12 March 2020. This had the consequence of putting pressure on church leaders to follow suit and closing doors of churches was no longer optional.

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<sup>75</sup> For this see Pastor Gerald Golbeck, TLC Update News, WhatsApp message posted to members on 27 February 2020 and later verified by author. See also Chancellery Office, 'To all priests, religious, and lay faithful', Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Arabia, 28 February 2020. See also Michael Mbona, 'Coronavirus and suspension of services'.

<sup>76</sup> Ammanuel Ghareeb, 'Letter to all churches with attached information sheet and guidelines on Coronavirus prevention', National Evangelical Church, Kuwait, 27 February 2020.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

The outcome of the ecumenical meeting held at the Greek Orthodox Church in Salwa, Kuwait, might be the third factor of change. The meeting held on 12 March 2020 was solely convened to get churches to establish a common position on whether or not to open or close churches. That the church leaders drew up a resolution, which then became a reflection of their common position was noted from the declaration as orally thus stated:

As churches, we fully comply with the government declarations and directives on prevention of the spread of the coronavirus including the ban on public gatherings issued by the State of Kuwait's cabinet on 24 February, and all the subsequent statements made in the extension of the ban from 12 March to 26 March.<sup>78</sup>

The need for churches to avoid doing anything that would undermine the rules of the State cannot be overemphasized. Within the Gulf region, Christianity is a 'guest faith.' We also need to remind ourselves that it was at the same venue that the same church leaders had hosted the clergy and delegates from the Gulf Churches Forum meeting at the end of January 2020. Retrospectively and introspectively, one cannot help but conclude that the pandemic dictated the pace and church leaders trailed behind, at times bewildered by its effects. While this is the case, the government's decision to discontinue services in mosques from Friday 12 March did set the appropriate tone.

#### *Churches and COVID-19 related stigma*

Stigma is one of the undesirable attitudes that has dominated public reaction to pandemics including HIV and AIDS, and COVID-19. It is largely related to the assumptions, stereotypes, generalizations, and labelling of people as falling into a particular category based on associations.<sup>79</sup> In the early years of the epidemic, the Zimbabwean healthcare system also stigmatized people infected by HIV. The public was barred from getting in contact with the bodies of people who succumbed to AIDS as they were wrapped in black plastics and placed in a sealed coffin. Special personnel

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<sup>78</sup> The special meeting was convened by Revd Ammanuel Ghareeb and information was given to Michael Mbona and circulated to churches. See also, Michael Mbona, 'Further suspension of church services at St Paul's Anglican Church, Ahmadi, Kuwait', 12 March 2020. See also, Chancellery Office, 'To all priests, religious, and lay faithful', Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Arabia, 12 March 2020.

dispatched from the hospital and police officers accompanied the body of the deceased to the burial place. Mourners including family members were scared of breathing 'polluted' air and this was accompanied by fear of contagion. Such incidents were common in Manicaland and widespread in Zimbabwe at that time.<sup>80</sup> The highly infectious nature of COVID-19 creates health risks more than the case with HIV.

The general tendency by society to associate COVID-19 with particular people, including the Chinese and returnees from certain parts of the world, indicated stigma. In Zimbabwe, among senior Government officials, there was a perception that COVID-19 was God's punishment on the oppressive western nations.<sup>81</sup> This has the undesirable effect of misleading the public and translates into stigmatization. Such perceptions have dominated the COVID-19 discourse throughout the world and Christians have not been an exception. For instance, before the imposition of lockdowns in Kuwait, some church members expressed reservations at mixing with Christians from China and the West. Fellow expatriates were discouraged from visiting their families in fear of them contracting COVID-19. Before the lockdown was officially imposed in Kuwait in March, some parishioners declared that they would stop coming to the church if quarantining was not done to certain categories of fellow Christians who had recently travelled.<sup>82</sup> It must be well noted that the infectious nature of COVID-19 naturally generated a high level of stigmatizing reactions. As a statement of fact, the need to be cautious and to maintain the required preventative measures was ultimately quite important. However, if unchecked, stigma has the potential to develop into permanent attitudes which might negatively undermine social relations. Ezra Chitando correctly stated that churches condemned people living with HIV by reducing the issue to one of an individual or personal morality.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Warren Parker and Karen Birdsall, *HIV/AIDS, Stigma and Faith-based Organisations: A Review* (Washington DC: DFID/Futures Group MSP, 2005), p. 5.

<sup>80</sup> The author Michael Mbona experienced these incidents in Manicaland, Zimbabwe in the late 1980s. Teresa Nyawera, interview by author at St Paul's Catholic parish, Dangamvura on 5 September 2010.

<sup>81</sup> Farai Mutsaka, '[Zimbabwe official says coronavirus punishes US for sanctions](#)', *Associated Press*, 16 March 2020 [accessed 25 May 2020].

<sup>82</sup> These are experiences by Michael Mbona the author at the parish in Kuwait.

<sup>83</sup> Ezra Chitando, *Living with Hope: African Churches and HIV/AIDS 1* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2007), p. 19.

The predisposition to perceive COVID-19 as an ‘imported disease’<sup>84</sup> also encouraged stigmatization among Zimbabweans including Christians. Apportioning of the blame for the disease had adverse effects on those interventions aimed at the eradication of the pandemic. Elsewhere, in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa, the Most Revd Thabo Makgoba used his Sunday sermon to confront stigma and denial by dispelling the myth that coronavirus was a European disease:

I am desperately worried that the coronavirus is described as a European problem by some of the media. As we know, viruses do not have passports, they don’t know borders, they don’t respect race or colour. The virus [...] will affect us in South Africa, because there is also the notion that if there is a pre-existing condition, the virus, the coronavirus, is much more severe. You can imagine in Africa — or let me look at South Africa, in particular, where the scourge or the incidence of TB and HIV and AIDS is high; so when corona[virus] strikes, a lot of people will be affected.<sup>85</sup>

The leadership of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa sought to avert a crisis in a region where poverty levels, poor healthcare infrastructure, and migration for work prevailed. A joint statement was further issued by Desmond Tutu and Njongokulu Ndungane (both retired Archbishops of Cape Town) and Thabo Makgoba and read thus: ‘The virus has no boundaries: it cuts across all communities, rich and poor, in north, south, east, and west. Only mutual love and care for one another will get us through the crisis.’<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Phylis Mbabje, [‘Covid-19 cases surge to 132’](#), *Newsday*, 28 May 2020. [accessed 8 June 2020].

See also Paidashe Mandivengerei, [‘Zim Covid-19 cases rise to 287 as more SA returnees test positive’](#), *New Zimbabwe*, 8 June 2020 [accessed 8 June 2020].

See also Staff Reporter, [‘Covid-19 cases now 282 as 2 returnees from SA, one South Sudan test positive’](#), *New Zimbabwe*, 8 June 2020 [accessed 8 June 2020]. See also Nqobani Ndlovu, [‘Covid-19: Bulawayo \(Zimbabwe\) residents make panicky calls’](#), *Newsday*, 9 June 2020 [accessed 9 June 2020].

<sup>85</sup> Anli Serfontein, [‘Coronavirus is not a European problem, says Archbishop of Cape Town’](#), *Church Times*, 20 March 2020 [accessed 2 May 2020].

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

*COVID-19 and the Chalice as a 'Cup of Death'*

Church leaders addressed the effects of COVID-19 on the flock by seeking to fight stigmatization within the church and the community. Stigma had the undesirable effect of dividing members of the church, often understood as the 'Body of Christ'. Within the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf, Archbishop Michael reminded the Anglican Church flock on the importance of maintaining their identity as the 'Body of Christ'. He encouraged Christians to remain united as a community despite the pain of physical separation caused by COVID-19.<sup>87</sup> The fact that COVID-19 caused the suspension of church gatherings meant that Christians bore the brunt of living in physical isolation and almost literally became 'non-existent' as a community. In a brief survey in Kuwait, church leaders strongly expressed common sentiments that the loss of physical meeting opportunities by congregations undermined their desire to pray and support each other amid the crisis.<sup>88</sup> Consequently, the fragmentation of congregations denied the pastors and the church members the opportunity for pastoral engagement even in stressful moments including ill health and mental stress arising from the pandemic.

The closure of church doors due to COVID-19 dealt a major blow by denying Christians the opportunity to share the communion cup. One of the ways of expressing the oneness of the body of Christ is in the communion cup, in which Christians partake of the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Practically, COVID-19 changed the way churches administered this central and key sacrament. Gradually, and often grudgingly, churches had to accept the new ways of distributing the elements of Holy Communion. COVID-19 is an infectious disease, sparing none including Christians and sharing of Holy Communion following the traditional method became a 'death trap.' This was similar to what transpired in churches in Zimbabwe in the time of HIV and AIDS especially in the early years between 1985 and 2002.<sup>89</sup> This became particularly the case within the Anglican Church in the Diocese of

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<sup>87</sup> Michael Lewis, 'We are the body of Christ', Episcopal Province of Jerusalem and the Middle East and Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf, 17 March 2020.

<sup>88</sup> For this see information supplied to the author through a questionnaire from leaders of guest congregations worshipping at St Paul's Anglican Church, Kuwait on 12 May 2020.

<sup>89</sup> For a detailed discussion on this see Michael Mbona, 'HIV and AIDS: an epidemic of "pandemonium" amid denial and stigma by the Roman Catholic, Anglican and United Methodist Churches in Manicaland, Zimbabwe (1985-2002)', *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, vol. 38, Supplement, August 2012, 181-204.

Manicaland. For instance, out of the fear of HIV infection communicants at St John the Baptist Cathedral, Mutare, discontinued the practice of drinking wine from the chalice (communion cup). This change was insinuated by messages that were received from public health circles. A handful of church members were aware that the contact with the blood or saliva of HIV infected persons could lead to contracting the disease.<sup>90</sup> It became apparent to communicants that the chalice was no longer 'the cup of salvation', but one of 'deadly poison' leading to death through contracting HIV from fellow members of the body of Christ.

It is worth noting and relevant to mention that within the Church of England, HIV infection and the chalice became a subject of debate in 1987. Archbishops Robert Runcie and John Habgood of Canterbury and York stated thus:

Public concern about AIDS has aroused fears among some people that the sharing of the common cup might be a possible means of infection. The advice given to us by the highest medical authorities is that such fears are groundless. The virus which causes AIDS may occasionally be present in saliva, but recent research has shown that saliva inhibits the activity of the virus and that it has not been transmitted by being swallowed. [...] People who are infected by the virus or who have AIDS will be usually susceptible to other infections and may wish, and should be allowed, to receive communion by intinction or in one kind.<sup>91</sup>

The fact that the House of Bishops of the Church of England issued this statement testifies to the concerns emanating from members of the church. The same concerns could have filtered through to Zimbabwe and were first evident in Manicaland. However, this was not the first time when fears of infection from the chalice were raised from within the Anglican Communion. According to David Gould of the Episcopal Church in the United States of America, the influenza epidemic in 1917 raised similar

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<sup>90</sup> Kingston Nyazika, interview by author at the Anglican Diocese of Manicaland office, Mutare on 1 September 2010. See also information supplied by Obert Murakwani in October 2020.

<sup>91</sup> ['Administration of Holy Communion during a flu pandemic with annexes A, Hygiene and the chalice \(1987\), and B, Pandemic flu and the common cup in communion services'](#), 11 June 2009 [accessed 7 November 2011].

concerns and the controversy has surfaced periodically since the sixteenth century.<sup>92</sup>

The effects of COVID-19 on the Church of England bear similarities to what transpired in response to HIV and AIDS three decades ago. In a letter circulated to all the bishops in the Church of England, Archbishops Justin Welby and John Sentamu of Canterbury and York respectively gave pastoral guidance to maintain compulsory hygiene and social distancing. The celebration of the Eucharist would take a different practice as noted:

Public worship will have to stop for a season. Our usual pattern of Sunday services and other mid-week gatherings must be put on hold [...] Where you can and where it is prudent, we encourage all clergy to continue their pattern of daily prayer and, if it is your practice and can be done within the constraints as set out, a daily Eucharist. It is vital to observe strictly the protocols of hygiene and, where necessary, self-isolation and social distancing. This will not be public worship that everyone can attend, but an offering of prayer and praise for the nation and the world.<sup>93</sup>

The Anglican Church has an established tradition of receiving communion remotely in circumstances where the communicant cannot do so physically. There was a notable change that was attributed to COVID-19 whereby the churches were encouraged to use online communion. COVID-19 shifted the church's long-established understanding of both the body of Christ and communion. Guidance from the church's leadership became necessary as thus noted: 'The Church of which we are members is not defined by the walls of a building but by the Body of Christ of which we are members. In making our communion spiritually, we are joining with Christians everywhere to be nourished by the one who tells us, "I am the Bread of Life".'<sup>94</sup> Chances of infection from sharing the same chalice were completely ruled out. However, while this might be acceptable among some communicant members of the church, others could perceive this same differently. It was not unusual that other church provinces and dioceses tended to emulate decisions taken in the Church of England.

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<sup>92</sup> David H. Gould, ['Eucharistic practice and the risk of Infection'](#) [accessed 7 November 2011].

<sup>93</sup> Justin Cantuar Sentamu Eboracensis, ['To All Church of England Clergy'](#), The Church of England, 17 March 2020, [accessed 8 June 2020].

<sup>94</sup> Church of England, ['Guidance on Spiritual Communion and Coronavirus'](#), March 2020 [accessed 2 April 2020].

*Conclusion*

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, whose genesis was traceable to China, has stormed the world since late December 2019. We have attempted to show that the new pandemic is similar to other earlier epidemics and therefore, a historical phenomenon. Church responses to COVID-19 mirror responses to HIV and AIDS. The coronavirus pandemic drew ambivalent and ambiguous responses from Christian communities because it challenged existing dogma, faith practice, and personal and public health. In the first six months of COVID-19, the reaction by the churches in Zimbabwe and Kuwait compared favourably with the response to HIV and AIDS by the Roman Catholic, the Anglican, and the United Methodist churches in Manicaland province of Zimbabwe between 1985 and 2002. Denial, stigma, and discrimination became the norm. Though church leaders in Zimbabwe and Kuwait generally encouraged their members to follow given State interventions, at times some of the clerics appeared overwhelmed. The pandemic in Zimbabwe and Kuwait witnessed high levels of engagement by church leaders seeking to save the lives of their members and the community in general through active guidance. The pandemic tore the fabric of the church and scattered the 'Body of Christ', and denied communicants the opportunity to receive Holy Communion in the normal way. Church leaders are commended for seeking new ways of managing to keep the flock intact using new forms of reaching out. Finally, with the pandemic still around, an assessment of how it affected the church economy will be left for another day.



## Christian Spirituality in a Time of Isolation

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Comfort, we beseech thee, most gracious God, all who are cast down and faint of heart amidst the sorrows and difficulties of the world: and grant that by the quickening power of thy Holy Spirit they may be lifted up to thee with hope and courage, and be enabled to go upon their way rejoicing in thy love; through Jesus Christ our Lord.<sup>1</sup>

The Church is a community — its members at once called out (that is the literal meaning of ‘ecclesia’ — ἐκκλησία from ἐκ and καλέω) and who come together in celebration. The liturgist Paul Bradshaw has written concerning the Eucharist that ‘the word ‘celebrate’ [is] one of the central verbs in the anamnesis of the Thanksgiving.’<sup>2</sup> The literal meaning of the Latin verb *celebrare* is to visit frequently or in large numbers, to come together. As we now find ourselves living in isolation from one another, often on our own, and unable to gather physically as a community for worship or fellowship, in what sense do we remain a ‘church’, a community of the gathered? For most people we can still hear and see other people, albeit at a distance, through the radio or television. Those of us who have access to online facilities can maintain a semblance of being together via our computer screens, and that is a great deal, though it is not available for large numbers of people. Earlier this week I said Morning Prayer ‘with’ four fellow Christians using the technology of Zoom — but we found it to be an odd experience, though not altogether unhelpful. We were together — and yet not together in one place.

Yet isolation, being on one’s own and solitary, has always been part of the Christian life and indeed vocation, beginning with our Lord himself, who prefaces his ministry on earth with forty days spent as a solitary in the wilderness (Matthew 4. 1–10; Mark 1. 12–13; Luke 4. 1–13). During his

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Comfort’, a prayer by R. M. Benson, in *Westminster Collection of Christian Prayers*, compiled by Dorothy M. Stewart (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), p. 37.

<sup>2</sup> P. F. Bradshaw, ‘Celebration’, in *The Eucharist Today: Studies in Series 3*, ed. by R. C. D. Jasper (London: SPCK, 1974), pp. 130–41 (p. 130).

subsequent ministry it was his custom to leave the crowds to be on his own to pray (e.g. Matthew 14. 23; Mark 1. 35; Luke 6. 12; Luke 9. 18; John 6. 15). It was not long before the early church recognized the spiritual calling to be solitary even within and as part of the community of Christ. One of the most well-known instances is recounted in the *Life of St Anthony of Egypt* (c. 251?–356), sometimes attributed to St Athanasius. Anthony's desire to be a hermit drew him ever deeper into the Egyptian desert, where he lived for many years 'cut off from the sight of men'.<sup>3</sup> Holy people — men and women — have chosen the solitary life throughout the history of the Christian Church, from St Anthony, to Dame Julian of Norwich to Thomas Merton nearer our own time. Merton was an American Trappist monk, full of restless life who chose first the life of a monastery in Kentucky where he was 'enclosed in the four walls of my new freedom'.<sup>4</sup> Later he felt called to live the solitary life of a hermit, but what strikes one about his description of this life in an essay entitled 'Day of a Stranger' (1965) is its *ordinariness*:

The hermit's life is cool. It is a life of low definition in which there is little to decide, in which there are few transactions or none, in which there are no packages to be delivered. In which I do not bundle up packages and deliver them to myself. It is not intense. There is no give and take of questions and answers, problems and solutions.<sup>5</sup>

Now, we might agree that few, or none, of us can be compared to a St Anthony, a Julian of Norwich, or even a Thomas Merton. But we may learn from them in our current necessary isolation from one another, at least something of the ministry of silence and being with God in our everyday lives. One of the things that strikes one in reading the Lives of the early Desert Fathers and Mothers in the fourth century, is how *ordinary* they are in some ways, ordinary in their humour, their understanding of what it is to be human — and yet how extraordinary in their lives. But in the quiet of our current manner of life as I write, quiet that is, for most of us at least, unless we are doctors, nurses or 'front line' workers (more of them later), we may have an opportunity to discover something of the riches to be found in a manner of life that we try so desperately to escape, by being

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<sup>3</sup> 'Life of St Antony by Athanasius', in *Early Christian Lives*, trans. by Carolinne White (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998), p. 40.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1998), p. 410.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Merton, 'Day of a Stranger', in *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master*, ed. by Lawrence S. Cunningham (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), p. 217.

always so busy, by the noise of radios, television and so on. I am struck as I write these words how unusually quiet it is outside my house with few cars or passers-by, no trains in the distance or planes overhead — and perhaps that silence is a chance for me to listen more carefully to the voice of God.

I do not pretend that this is easy. Anyone who has tried a silent retreat or attempted the spiritual exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola will know how hard these can be. But they can also be deeply rewarding and spiritually nourishing. And as we find that now we have more time than we have had before, and yet how we rush to fill empty hours with busyness or distractions, we may also find more time for prayer, which may be no more than being in silence and waiting upon God. I once wrote after an extended period of retreat, and the words come home to me now:

‘Every person is by nature solitary.’ I think it was Thomas Merton who said that. Well, of course we are — in the end. All of us. And maybe it is important to be reminded of that now and then, and go back to our ‘nature’ in silence, without communication or distraction.<sup>6</sup>

There is an odd verse in that oddest of scriptural books, Revelation, which reads: ‘When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour (8. 1). It is not clear why there was this silence, except perhaps as a form of reverence in the presence of God. Thomas Merton, whom we have already encountered, wrote a book about the silence that is at the heart of the life of a Trappist monk. It is entitled *Elected Silence* (1949). Silence, indeed, has always been a part of all true worship, and now is a time to recover something of its value in the life and growth of the spirit within us. If nothing else, such silence provides an opportunity for more careful and measured saying of our prayers than is usual, not least the prayers of intercession.

Intercessory prayer has always been at the heart of the Christian life and liturgy. It is not simply that we pray for others and their needs, but the prayers of intercession are part of our offering ourselves and the world to God. Prayer, too, draws us together even when we are solitary, so that we never pray alone but always we pray as a part of the whole Body of Christ that is the church. And even more than that, our prayers of intercession and praise join us to the church of all ages and in heaven, as we are reminded in the great Prayer of Thanksgiving in the Eucharist, just before the singing of the Sanctus:

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<sup>6</sup> David Jasper, *The Sacred Desert* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. v.

As children of your redeeming purpose  
 we offer you our praise,  
 with angels and archangels  
 and the whole company of heaven,  
 singing the hymn of your unending glory.<sup>7</sup>

In our prayers uttered alone we join with all the Church, living and departed, and the angels of heaven in one great voice.

Michael Hollings, a parish priest, once wrote, rather crisply that ‘intercession is work for others.’<sup>8</sup> In my own life this was a lesson that I learnt very early on. As a young man I taught for a while in a school in Bihar, North India. During one school holiday I was taken to an orphanage which was run by a community of nuns. The younger sisters were kept fully occupied caring for, educating and entertaining the children, and I found myself sitting on a verandah beside an elderly sister who was too frail to participate in the busy life of the orphanage. I asked her if she was sad not to take part in this life and if she was ever bored with just sitting on the verandah. I could not have been more wrong. She turned to me with a look of utter amazement and exclaimed that she was never bored and always busy. ‘These young women’ she said, ‘have all these children to care for and entertain. Sometimes they do not even have time to say their prayers. I pray for them and that keeps me quite busy!’ In the church there is always something to do.

It was a salutary lesson that I have never forgotten. I am aware that as I sit here in my house, my movements now restricted to occasional trips for food and exercise, others are working round the clock to fight the pandemic that has broken out — doctors and nurses, social workers and delivery drivers, and so on. I can pray for them, and when we pray we are never alone, but one in Christ.

It is required of bishops, priests and deacons in Scottish Episcopal Church that the daily offices of Morning Prayer (Mattins) and Evening Prayer (Evensong) are kept regularly. By extension all members of the Body of Christ are called to a life that includes daily prayer and now, perhaps, is a good time to remember this discipline. I readily admit that for me this has become a habit that is ingrained into my daily life, entered into not always with a glad heart and sometimes from a sense of duty. But just as we all have bad habits of one kind or another, so good habits should be nurtured — and they will see you through good and bad times. I look at it

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<sup>7</sup> [Scottish Liturgy 1982](#).

<sup>8</sup> *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. by Gordon Wakefield (London: SCM Press, 1983), p. 310.

this way. God is prepared to take me even when I am in a bad mood or my grumpiness comes through in my prayers. But they are prayers, nonetheless.

As I write the Church is facing a Holy Week and Easter without congregations or public worship. But that should not mean that we simply abandon our Christian calling or, indeed, our celebration. Indeed, the call has never been stronger and more deeply felt. The Church's ministry of care may take the practical form of maintaining contact with the lonely and the isolated. But in addition, as Christ went out into the wilderness to pray in solitude, so we should continue the Church's never-ending ministry of prayer, praise and thanksgiving. Some of us will find the absence of the Sacrament of the Eucharist difficult, perhaps even a kind of bereavement and especially at this time of the year. But if in the Eucharist we find the presence of Christ, so Christ is present with us also in our yearning and desire — and perhaps we may find joy in the spiritual communion that is yet ours even when we cannot gather together in our churches during Holy Week and Easter. It was recognized from the earliest days of the Church that there will be times when it is simply impossible to attend the Sacrament and receive communion in bread and wine, on account of illness, imprisonment for the faith, or geographical separation, and that a 'spiritual communion' may be recognized and known.<sup>9</sup> This is stated explicitly in the Anglican tradition from the 1549 Prayer Book and in the Book of Common Prayer of 1662, which make it clear that if the one who truly believes with a humble spirit:

doth eat and drink spiritually the body and blood of our Saviour  
Christ profitably to his soul's health, although he do not receive  
the Sacrament with his mouth.

The devotion is enjoined, among others, by Bishop Jeremy Taylor,<sup>10</sup> and, more recently, Archbishop William Temple.<sup>11</sup> It may be that, in a remarkable way, the trials of the present time may bring us all to a new

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<sup>9</sup> See, Darwell Stone, *A History of the Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist*, 2 vols (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909), II, p. 138. Several ancient sources are cited, demonstrating a widespread practice in the early Church. See also F. Procter and W. H. Frere, *A New History of the Book of Common Prayer, with a Rationale of its Offices* (London: Macmillan, 1941), p. 629.

<sup>10</sup> *The Worthy Communicant; or a Discourse of the Nature, Effects, and Blessings consequent to the worthy receiving of the Lords Supper* (1660), 7.3.

<sup>11</sup> *Thoughts on Some Problems of the Day* (London: Macmillan, 1931), p. 111.

understanding of our community of faith this Holy Week and Easter, and to a new appreciation of the Sacrament, and that we shall know the light of Christ in the present darkness in a manner hitherto not realized in us.

At the end of the offices of Morning and Evening Prayer in the Book of Common Prayer (1662) there is printed a series of Prayers and Thanksgivings. The prayer entitled 'In Time of any Common Plague or Sickness' has its origins more than one hundred years before in a prayer found in the 1552 Second Prayer Book of King Edward VI.<sup>12</sup> I suspect that this prayer has been little used in more recent times, but it stands as a reminder that we remain frail in our human condition in spite of our arrogance and technology. Here it is in full:

O Almighty God, who in thy wrath didst send a plague upon thine own people in the wilderness, for their obstinate rebellion against Moses and Aaron; and also in the time of king David, didst slay with the plague of Pestilence threescore and ten thousand, and yet remembering thy mercy didst save the rest; Have pity upon us miserable sinners, who are now visited with great sickness and mortality; that like as thou didst then accept of an atonement, and didst command the destroying Angel to cease from punishing, so it may now please thee to withdraw from us this plague and grievous sickness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This prayer of 1552 is one that hardly speaks to the spirit of our times, emphasizing perhaps too much (or perhaps not?) the 'obstinate rebellion' of God's people who are but 'miserable sinners'. In our present crisis the Church and its ministers are called to find new prayers that find the right tone and note suitable to our condition, drawing us together in petition but also thanksgiving that God is with us in all things and in all places.

As our church buildings close, so the ministry of the Church continues in its care and finding new ways of sustaining its ancient vocation of prayer and praise.

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<sup>12</sup> F. E. Brightman, *The English Rite*, 2 vols (London: Rivingtons, 1915), I, p. 189.

# Eucharist, Church, and Judgment: Initial Questions about the Liturgical and Ecclesiological Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The closure of places of public worship, which began in the UK's Anglican provinces from 17 March 2020, and was still in force at the time of publication, could be viewed as a time of crisis for the churches of these islands. The immediate response of some incumbents and others with the cure of souls was to begin live-streaming services from their churches or homes. While some priests ceased the celebration of the Eucharist altogether, others continued to hold celebrations with their households, either in the church building, or at home, according to their circumstances and the jurisdiction in which they lived.<sup>1</sup> Bishops gave permission for priests to celebrate the Eucharist with no one else present. In Scotland, beginning with the Primus, the diocesan bishops began to webcast, in turn, each Sunday — and on Maundy Thursday and Ascension Day — a recorded celebration of the Eucharist, either from their domestic chapels, their cathedral churches, or their kitchen tables (sometimes with bowls of green bananas, oven gloves, or pots of steaming casserole as liturgical ornaments).<sup>2</sup> Local incumbents followed the bishops' example. In many congregations — and in meetings of SEI staff and students — the daily office was prayed in virtual gatherings hosted on internet platforms, the most popular being Zoom.

Anyone who reads this journal at the time of publication will know the scenario just outlined. 'The church buildings remain closed — the Church remains open', was the slogan used throughout the country by bishops and many other clergy.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the churches have been fulfilling

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<sup>1</sup> Whereas church buildings in Scotland could be used for private prayer, or worship by members of the same household, those in England, on the other hand, were closed for any kind of worship from 24 March to 7 May.

<sup>2</sup> The services were pre-recorded because the reliability of a live feed was not deemed sound enough for a province-wide webcast. See the [SEC's guidance](#) [accessed 30 May 2020].

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, posts from the [Diocese of London](#) [accessed 30 May 2020] and the [Scottish Episcopal Church](#) [accessed 30 May 2020].

their mission through their support for the vulnerable in their local communities. The elderly and isolated, shielding at home, receive a telephone call for comfort and encouragement, and to ensure their needs are being met. Food banks continue to operate from church buildings. The clergy and their lay assistants are displaying heroic charity in their efforts to provide and co-ordinate pastoral care under the new circumstances. Why then might one point to a crisis for the churches of the Anglican provinces in Great Britain and Ireland, brought on by the closure of places of public worship in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic? In what follows I offer some preliminary questions to be considered as we reflect on the liturgical and ecclesiological implications of our experience since mid-March 2020.

### *The Eucharist and the Church*

Let us take the Eucharist as our starting point. We can say that the Eucharist is the sacrament of the new creation where all things are restored by God's love.<sup>4</sup> As the sacrament of restoration — of putting right — it is therefore also the sacrament of judgment and of salvation. The Eucharist is ultimately the existential and eschatological sacrament, closely related to Baptism, which is the sacrament of new birth by which we enter the family of God and become incorporated in the Body of Christ.<sup>5</sup> The Church — the household or *familia* — of God, is made, exists, and is sustained by Baptism and Eucharist. The Church is therefore, first of all, a worshipping community of all the baptized, with the Eucharist at the heart of a corporate life.<sup>6</sup> It is in the Eucharist above all that we meet Christ, truly become the Body of Christ, and are fed by him in Word and Sacrament, and are sent out into the world to love and serve the Lord.<sup>7</sup>

Only with the Eucharist as the centre of our lives, then, can we know who we are, and be known for who we are; and only with the Eucharist as the centre of the life of the Church can the love of God reach beyond the act of worship and into the everyday life of the world. For the liturgy shows us how to see the world, and how to live in the world, and is therefore for the life and transformation of the world — for salvation. What then happens when we cannot celebrate the Eucharist? Do we face an existential crisis?

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<sup>4</sup> [Scottish Liturgy 1982](#), Eucharistic Prayer I, Opening Prayer; Section 24, Prayer (a).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., Eucharistic Prayer I, Prayer of Petition; ARCIC I, '[Agreed Statement on Eucharistic Doctrine](#)' (1971), § 11 [accessed 30 May 2020]

<sup>6</sup> *Scottish Liturgy 1982*, Eucharistic Prayer I, Prayer of Petition.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., Thanksgiving and Sending Out.



Just as the High Priest and the Temple existed for the sake of Israel, and Israel existed for the sake of the world, so the Church is gathered and built up in faith through the Eucharist only in order to be sent into the world, for the life of the world, as a witness to God's reconciling love for the world in Jesus Christ. If we cannot gather and be sent out into the world for this purpose, does the Eucharist lose its purpose? Does the Church lose its purpose? For the Church exists not for its own sake; rather, it exists in the world, is part of the world, and is here for the sake of the life of the world. The Church cannot be turned in on itself but exists to reach constantly outwards and forwards.

We must therefore ask how a Eucharistic community gathered virtually on a video-conferencing platform can reach outwards and forwards — and how the faithful sitting at home can participate in a Eucharistic celebration that was recorded several days earlier, or a livestreamed webcast with which they cannot interact.

*The administration of Holy Communion: Questions of order*

An important set of considerations in the way we think about the Eucharist in the future must relate to order — catholic and apostolic order. Although some may consider these to be legalistic questions, they nevertheless penetrate to the heart of our concerns about the nature of the Eucharist and the manner in which the liturgy can be validly and efficaciously celebrated.

Beyond the classic definition of the Prayer Book catechism, that a sacrament is 'an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given unto us', we could say that, in the sacraments, the Church promises the faithful an objective encounter with the living Word of God<sup>8</sup> In the sacraments the Church promises us that we meet Christ.

The way the Church guarantees this promise is through apostolic order (as acknowledged in the very motto of the Scottish Episcopal Church).<sup>9</sup> The Eucharist is presided over by a rightly ordered representative of the Church in a controlled environment, as to the matter of the sacrament, the rite, and the participants in the sacrament.

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<sup>8</sup> This is the only official definition provided in the formularies of the Scottish Episcopal Church; *The Scottish Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church* (Edinburgh: Cambridge University Press, 1929; rev. edn 1962, reprinted 1986), p. 423. Cf. ARCIC I, '[Agreed Statement on Eucharistic Doctrine](#)' (1971), § 8 [accessed 30 May 2020].

<sup>9</sup> 'Evangelical Truth and Apostolic Order'.

The report of the Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission, Phase I, on Ministry and Ordination, provides us with, at the least, some kind of consensus view of the role of priests in the Eucharist, which can be accepted by most Anglicans:

[Priests] share through baptism in the priesthood of the people of God, but they are — ‘particularly in presiding at the eucharist’ [*sic*] — representative of the whole Church in the fulfilment of its priestly vocation of self-offering to God as a living sacrifice (Rm 12:1). Nevertheless their ministry is not an extension of the common Christian priesthood but belongs to another realm of the gifts of the Spirit. It exists to help the Church to be ‘a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, to declare the wonderful deeds of him who called them out of darkness into his marvellous light’ (1 Pt 2:9).<sup>10</sup>

The gathered congregation is the celebrant, on whose behalf the presiding priest, representing also the universal Church, speaks and performs the appointed manual acts.<sup>11</sup> What authority does an individual at a computer have to address God on behalf either of a (non-existent) gathered congregation or on behalf of the universal Church. Can a private piece of bread and glass of wine be an offering of the Church?<sup>12</sup>

The eucharistic liturgies authorized after the *Scottish Book of Common Prayer* (1929) (i.e. Scottish Liturgy 1970 and Scottish Liturgy 1982), however, contain very limited rubrics and make no mention of the nature of the elements to be used for Holy Communion or to the number of people who must be present. A sound principle is that, where the Code of Canons and the liturgy is not prescriptive, what has been set down before is the most authoritative precedent to be followed. So, a fair linen cloth should be set on the Holy Table, the finest wheat bread, whether loaf or wafer, is desirable as the Bread for the Holy Communion; a little pure water may be mixed with the Wine. Communion is to be delivered into the hand

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<sup>10</sup> [‘Agreed Statement on Ministry and Ordination’](#) (1972), § 13 [accessed 30 May 2020].

<sup>11</sup> See [Scottish Liturgy 1982](#), Eucharistic Prayers I–V, Anamnesis and Oblation.

<sup>12</sup> These kinds of questions were dealt with in some detail in 2009 by Nicholas Taylor, *Lay Presidency at the Eucharist? An Anglican Approach* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), pp. 142–76.

of the communicant by the minister. The presence of the people is presumed though not explicitly required.<sup>13</sup>

The Scottish Episcopal Church may wish to consider its rubrical provisions as the unforeseen circumstances of online worship and quarantine have their effect on tradition. But where such simple provisions cannot be met by force of circumstance, we must ask larger questions.

In the case of ‘online communion’ — especially the currently illicit, but widely discussed, practice of remote consecration — apart from the issue of catholic order and the discipline of the sacraments, where all should happen in a controlled environment, with the priest being the authorized representative of the Church, ensuring the validity of the matter and form of the sacrament, there is also the question of sacrifice. Is there any sense in which sitting in front of a computer with a piece of one’s own loaf and a glass of one’s own wine, so that the individual can ‘receive’ Holy Communion, is sacrificial?

In wishing to point to the rubric that requires the Bread and Wine to be provided by the churchwardens at the expense of the parish, one finds that, as with the rubric requiring the presence of at least three people, what was there in the 1912 *Scottish Book of Common Prayer* was removed in 1929. This seems to have been intentional, but what was the significance of its removal?

The point nevertheless remains, that the matter of the sacrament, the Bread and Wine, must be under the control of the priest, should be bought out of the common fund, taken and offered on the altar, and then shared by the community. If this is not required in our liturgical formularies, we need to have a good answer about why not.

### *The eucharistic sacrifice*

Nicholas Taylor has warned of the tendency in our post-modern society, with its relativistic culture of individualism, to be accustomed to thinking of ourselves as having a private relationship with God, and ‘even to look for ways to experience communion with God which do not involve interaction with other people’.<sup>14</sup>

Jesus is reduced to a ‘personal’, meaning [incorrectly] ‘individual’ Saviour, and it has become easy to regard the relationships and obligations which accompany membership of

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<sup>13</sup> Here I summarize the rubrics of the Scottish Liturgy in the *Scottish Book of Common Prayer* (1929).

<sup>14</sup> [Online reflection for Pentecost](#) [accessed 30 May 2020]. Nicholas Taylor took up office as convener of the SEC’s Liturgy Committee in June 2020.

the Church as an irrelevance, if not a nuisance. So it may in fact be quite convenient not to be expected to leave home, commune with other people, and participate in worship in a congregation gathered together for the purpose, praising God together, hearing the Word, receiving the Sacrament, and moving our bodies accordingly. Far easier to stay where we are, relax with a cat and a cup of coffee, and log in.<sup>15</sup>

The apparent desire for online Eucharistic worship and even remote consecration and reception of the Eucharistic elements, leads us to ask whether we have developed a liturgical piety that concentrates too much on the reception of Holy Communion — the benefits received by us — and whether we need to pay more attention to a spirituality of participation and sacrifice, where, in making ourselves one with Christ, we offer the Eucharistic gifts of bread and wine to the Father, ‘and with them ourselves, a single, holy, living sacrifice’.<sup>16</sup> Yet, in fact, the theology of the Eucharistic Prayers in Scottish Liturgy 1982 has made a significant shift away from the personal benefits of reception, compared with the orders for the administration of Holy Communion in the *Scottish Book of Common Prayer* (1929) and Scottish Liturgy 1970.

In his study of the Eucharist, Thomas O’Loughlin has reminded us about the ethical demand to feed the hungry and its connection to the theme of food and worship, pointing to Isaiah’s exhortation to the people that ‘fasting, as prayer, was useless unless linked to justice for the poor, the needy and the hungry’.<sup>17</sup>

Is this, then, a question of teaching and liturgical practice? Do we need to renew our teaching about the self-giving contributions of the people of God, the collective sacrifice that makes up a full view of the Eucharist? The self-sacrificial offerings of time, money, music, mutual care, and not least the proclamation of the gospel to the world in word and deed, are all a necessary part of the corporate offering.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Scottish Liturgy 1982, Eucharistic Prayers I–IV; Eucharistic Prayer V reads, ‘Together with him we offer you these gifts: in them we give you ourselves’; Scottish Liturgy 1970, together with the Scottish Liturgy of the Scottish Book of Common Prayer, has, ‘And here we humbly offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee’.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas O’Loughlin, *The Eucharist: Origins and Contemporary Understandings* (Bloomsbury T&T Clark: London, 2015), p. 78.

*The presence of God in the Word*

In our teaching about the Eucharist, do we also need to re-emphasize the importance of the Word of God? We can say that, in the liturgy the Church experiences God's presence in a special way, but within that context, the two fundamental categories of experiencing God's presence are word and sacrament. Benedict XVI explained that, 'the liturgy is the privileged setting in which God speaks to us in the midst of our lives';<sup>18</sup> and Augustine of Hippo likewise taught that we should 'listen to the Gospel just as if to the Lord if he were present [...] For the body of the Lord in which he arose can be in one place; but his truth is spread out everywhere'.<sup>19</sup>

The recognition of the deeply embedded place of Scripture in worship was expressed by Jeremy Taylor in the seventeenth century as he defended the *Book of Common Prayer*: 'Very much of our liturgy', he said, 'is in the very words of Scripture. The Psalms and Lessons and all the Hymns, save one are nothing else but Scripture.'

In fact, one could go further and argue that our liturgies are the most concrete way in which the texts of the Bible have been preserved and transmitted. The liturgy therefore provides the Church with a constant and stable place and space in which the Scriptures are read, authentically interpreted, and passed on from generation to generation. The Eucharist is not only the celebration of the sacrament of Holy Communion but is also a celebration of God's Word. The liturgy, rather than private study, is the place where the Word is definitively received, and the Lord's presence is known.

Luke's account of two disciples who meet Jesus on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24. 13–35) is the classic instruction in such an understanding of the Eucharistic liturgy. The risen Lord asks what the two are discussing, and one of them, Cleopas, recites the whole story about the events of the preceding days. Jesus, after rebuking them as fools, slow of heart to believe in all the things about which the prophets spoke, then sets out for them the whole of the biblical story, 'beginning with Moses', and showing how it was necessary for the Messiah to endure the things that had happened and enter into his glory. Next, sitting down with them for a

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<sup>18</sup> Benedict XVI, [\*Apostolic Exhortation: Verbum Domini\*](#) (2010), §52; official English translation online [accessed 30 May 2020].

<sup>19</sup> 'Audiamus euangelium quasi praesentem Dominum ... Corpus enim Domini in quo resurrexit, uno loco esse potest: ueritas eius ubique diffusa est' (*In Ioannis euangelium tractatus CXXIV* ['124 Tractates on the Gospel of John'], 30, i; trans. by John W. Rettig, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 88 (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), p. 22).

meal, Jesus 'took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.' Repeating the actions of the Last Supper, Jesus made present for them the sacrifice of the cross. And at that moment, when the Scriptures and the meal and the sacrifice came together as a coherent whole, the two disciples recognized him, and he became really present to them.

Can those who are not able to break bread during the period of quarantine take comfort that the risen Lord is encountered in and through the Scriptures? For the proper setting for reading the Scriptures is our common prayer, and when we cannot have gathered prayer or gathered worship, we can still have common prayer. As we say our prayers day by day, and read in common the same scriptural passages prescribed by the Church in the daily office, this hallowing of time can be a participation in the Eucharistic life of the Church, as part of Christ's one offering of prayer to the Father.

### *Discerning the Body of Christ*

Rather than thinking of the Eucharist as being a way of making Christ present, however, of confecting the Lord's Body and Blood, in order that we may receive it, should we rather concentrate our attentions on how the Eucharist allows us to recognize the Body of Christ in the space and action of the liturgical assembly?

Both Karl Barth and Jean-Yves Lacoste have warned that God's revelation or phenomenality is not an object directly perceptible to the human senses. Although we have been given both the natural world and specific signs and symbols through which God can be known, and have been promised an objective and physical encounter with Christ in the Eucharist, there is nevertheless still a hiddenness, and a sense in which the experience and knowledge of God cannot be pinned down.<sup>20</sup>

Should we therefore be recognizing, rather, what the liturgy lets us see; how the liturgy objectively reveals or manifests the oneness of the Body of Christ, the unity that is the working of the Holy Spirit. For the worshipper is not simply someone who believes, but is also one who sees, spiritually, intellectually, and physically. This seeing, this illumination or

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<sup>20</sup> See especially *Church Dogmatics. Volume I: The Doctrine of the Word of God, Part 1*, transl. by G. W. Bromiley (London: T&T Clark, 2004), § 4.3; cf. Jean-Yves Lacoste, 'Perception, transcendence and the experience of God', in *Transcendence and Phenomenology*, ed. by Conor Cunningham and Peter M. Candler (London: SCM, 2007), pp. 1–20.



opening of the eyes — heart, mind, spirit — to recognize the Lord, is part of the gift we receive in the administration of the sacraments.<sup>21</sup>

The principle that guided the liturgical reforms of the later twentieth century was the ‘fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations’ by all the people of God.<sup>22</sup> In order to participate fully and consciously, liturgical rites not only have to make sense as text, they need to make sense as action, and allow for a liturgically engaged human body. True worship is not something that happens inwardly, with our eyes closed, and the rest of the world shut out. In fact, our external actions tend to express our internal understanding. External actions are also significant for those whose intellectual capacities are not mature or developed, as well as for those whose sensory perception is impaired. The physical presence of a Christian community, gathered in a real space, in a liturgical action that involves movement and the stimulation of all the senses, makes for worship that involves everyone present, one way or another.

Karl Barth (again) warned about a theology that focused on the human rather than on God.<sup>23</sup> He was concerned for a tendency that Christian piety, the external and internal disposition and emotion of the human person, had become theology’s object of study. To think about God, in this theological mindset, was a scarcely veiled method of thinking about the human.

The point here is that, when we turn our theological attentions to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis of 2020, should not our focus be on what is being revealed about God, and then our response to that revelation, rather than to begin with the response of human piety and emotions? Is it a mistake to think first of our perceived spiritual need? What in fact are we to see in this temporary withdrawal of the sacrament?

### *The Eucharist: Truth and judgment*

If, for whatever reason, we cannot make the act of thanksgiving in which we offer ourselves as a single, holy, living sacrifice to God the Father, through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, should we not conclude that we have entered a time of testing and a period of judgment?

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<sup>21</sup> Lacoste has written about how the presence and experience of God cannot simply be pinned down to specific things or actions or places, so that the worshipping believer who takes part in the liturgy, while seeking, does not grasp or take hold of what is sought, but only receives (ibid.).

<sup>22</sup> [\*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy\*](#) (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*) §14 [accessed 13 December 2018].

<sup>23</sup> ‘The Humanity of God’, trans. by John Newton Thomas, *Cross Currents*, 10 (1960), 70–79 (p. 71).

God does not make it difficult to celebrate the Eucharist. The simple requirements, as we have already seen, are for two or three to be gathered together, one of them in priestly orders, a table with a fair linen cloth, a loaf and some wine. If we cannot do this, we must be facing an existential crisis, a point of judgment, an eschatological moment.

Judgment (Hebrew דִּין, *dīn*; Greek κρίσις, *krisis*) is a moment of choice, of decision, and also a time for putting right. It is a moment that sets us in front of the choices that need to be made. All of us have had, and will have, moments of crisis. This pandemic is a moment of social crisis. When we are ill in any way, it is a period of testing and judgment, because we are facing that existential crisis, that eschatological moment.

What, then, is the nature of God's judgment? Joseph Ratzinger argued that judgment can be existential, 'located in our present life, our present history', and exposes us to the truth.<sup>24</sup> Judgment is also God's response of love.

How, we must therefore ask, is the power of God's love responding and how are we responding in love to the present crisis? Could the judgment be, 'Love one another as I have loved you'? (John 13. 34). For this new commandment of love is the other side of the ritual sign of the breaking of bread: it is at the heart of the Eucharist, as the celebration of the 'Eucharist of the Lord's Supper' on Maundy Thursday brings home to us. Why is it that the tradition has handed down to us, in this rememorative celebration of the Lord's Supper, the gospel of the new commandment?<sup>25</sup> The baptismal significance of the foot-washing reminds us of the corporate nature of the Lord's Supper ('Unless I wash you, you have no share with me', John 13. 8) and shows us what loving the members of Christ's Body means. Can washing our own feet be an act of charity or can watching someone else wash the feet of others likewise be an act of charity ('You also ought to wash one another's feet', John 13. 14)?

If the Eucharist is the place in which we learn how to live in the world, how can we love one another in our isolated fastness? It is possible to maintain a relationship of charitable love with those whom we already know face-to-face, in an established personal connection. Life online, however, is not the way we are called to be in the world. This, I would argue, is one of the truths that is being revealed to us in the reaction to the pandemic. While, on the one hand, we are learning that the internet is keeping us connected, and even re-connected with friends who have moved away to distant parts of the country or even abroad, and we are

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<sup>24</sup> *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, trans. by Michael Waldstein, 2nd edn (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), pp. 204–09.

<sup>25</sup> John 13. 1–17, 31b–35.



discovering the genius of video-conferencing platforms, the imposed isolation is also holding up a mirror to the de facto isolation that we have been imposing on ourselves in normal times through our 'online' lives.

How, then, does one react in a moment of crisis? The way we react at such a time is also a moment of judgment. The Gospel of John (6. 48–71) links a moment of crisis to the Lord's Eucharistic teaching. Having declared that he is the bread of life (6. 48), the Lord tells the disciples, 'Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you' (6. 53). This is about actually 'munching' or 'chewing' (φαγεῖν, *phagein*) the flesh of Jesus. This is necessary — indeed, the physical eating is essential.<sup>26</sup>

But the Lord's disciples must also go beyond an understanding that reduces their wish to be his followers to a way of being fed with free bread. The Word became flesh, and the Word must also be heard before the flesh can be the bread of heaven that feeds and saves, and for that to happen, the spirit must help them.

Jesus goes on to tell those disciples who question his hard saying, about eating his flesh, which they cannot accept, that 'it is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life' (6. 63). 'From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed Him' (6. 66). Jesus then questions the apostles. "'You do not want to leave too, do you?'" Jesus asked the Twelve'. The Lord asks them to make a decision. This is the point of crisis. Peter then makes his second confession: 'Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God"' (6. 68–69). When Peter made his first confession, 'You are the Christ, the son of the Living God', Jesus began to explain the passion that was to come. At that time Peter stopped his master and responded, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.' The Lord then rebukes Peter (Matthew 16. 16–23). But in John's gospel, Peter has matured, and he does not remonstrate with Jesus, even though he may not necessarily understand the Lord's teaching about eating his flesh and drinking his blood (John 6. 54–56). He may not understand, but he trusts the Teacher, and he makes this confession, 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life'.

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<sup>26</sup> There are questions about the originality of vv. 51c–58, but they are still part of the canonical text; see C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd edn (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1978), pp. 283–84, who argued, against Bultmann, that the ideas expressed here are 'complementary rather than inconsistent' (p. 284).

Here we are given an example in how to live through a moment of crisis. Steadfastness in the faith is Peter's response to the decision with which the Lord confronts the Twelve. Those who left sought another teacher who was not so 'hard'. Moments of crisis, including the long periods of confinement and isolation during the COVID-19 crisis, demand perseverance, and a certain degree of silence: to stay where we are, steadfast, listening in the silence in order to receive the words of life. The time of crisis is not the moment to change what we believe about the word of life, about the Eucharist. A crisis is an opportunity for faithfulness.

Nicholas Taylor has written about the Church's situation during the 'Stay Home' regulations in the following way.

When the Body is dispersed, it is not thereby dismembered, and it certainly does not cease to exist. We have received God's Spirit in our Baptism, and we continue to exercise the gifts we have received, conscious that we are doing so as members of a Body which is unable to gather together, but is nonetheless Christ's Church. We are assured that the nourishment we are accustomed to receive in public worship is still given to us; our desire for the blessings bestowed on Christ's Body and received in the Sacrament is assuaged, not through imitating the Eucharist on our own, but in seeking communion with God, and fellowship in the Body of Christ, spiritually, i.e. in prayer.<sup>27</sup>

In his study, *Paul on Baptism*, Taylor has drawn out Paul's theology of Baptism as expressed in Paul's letters, and has pointed to Paul's focus on Baptism as the means of becoming part of the Body of Christ. Christian identity, for Paul, is essentially corporate, with much of his epistolary writing being about the corporate life of the churches that he had founded. Very closely related to the principle of corporate identity is the sense of identification between the person baptized and Christ himself, that is, identity with Christ in his death and resurrection. For Paul, that identity with Christ is the key to understanding Christian salvation. Related to identity with Christ, moreover, are the gifts of the Holy Spirit; and it is in and through Baptism that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are received by members of Christ's Body.<sup>28</sup>

Taylor has therefore argued that it is 'precisely because we are the Body of Christ, incorporated through our Baptism and renewed in the

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<sup>27</sup> [Online reflection for Pentecost.](#)

<sup>28</sup> Nicholas Taylor, *Paul on Baptism: Theology, Mission and Ministry in Context* (London: SCM Press, 2016), especially pp. 21–92.

Eucharist, and have received the Holy Spirit given by God to the Church, that we are able to sustain ourselves through this period of isolation'.<sup>29</sup>

*The Crisis of the Eucharist and the existential crisis of the churches*

None of this is intended to diminish the central importance of the Eucharist, or the real, physical, and objective encounter with Christ which takes place in the reception of Holy Communion. Far from it. The very importance of the Eucharist as the existential heart of the Church and the Christian life is why I would wish to ask so many questions before drifting into new patterns of online (quasi-) Eucharistic worship. For if these are not really the Eucharist, then we will cease to be the Church. If circumstances prevent us from meeting physically to celebrate the Eucharist, our response cannot be to provide a feigned likeness in order to comfort ourselves or those for whom we have pastoral care.

For the past half century, liturgical theologians and other students of liturgy and worship have been perceiving — in prosperous 'western' societies at least — an inward-looking focus on subjective experience.<sup>30</sup> In a post-modern and relativistic age we must beware of coming to the Eucharist in order to find ourselves rather than to find Christ.<sup>31</sup> As Christians, we are called to worship not simply in order to fulfil our own spiritual needs, but for the sake of the life of the world — the *kosmos*, the created order — in which that worship takes place.<sup>32</sup>

The current crisis will come to an end, and is coming to an end. We must recognize that any form of online worship is a temporary solution to a chronologically limited period. It is, as the term 'lockdown' suggests (borrowed as it is from the American penitentiary system) like a prison sentence — or house arrest. A prison sentence, one way or another, is finite. If there ever comes a time when we are not able to worship in person again as a gathered community, or celebrate the Eucharist, then we shall know that we shall have come to the end of the age, the eschaton will have arrived.

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<sup>29</sup> Online reflection for Pentecost.

<sup>30</sup> See David W. Fagerberg, *Liturgy Outside Liturgy: The Liturgical Theology of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann* (Hong Kong: Chorabooks, 2018), pp. 191–205, who explains Schmemmann's work of the 1960s and 70s; Bryan D. Spinks, *The Worship Mall: Contemporary Responses to Contemporary Culture*, Alcuin Club Collections 85 (London: SPCK, 2010).

<sup>31</sup> See the critique made by N. T. Wright, 'Freedom and framework, spirit and truth: recovering Biblical worship', *Studia Liturgica* 32 (2002), 176–95.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. John 6. 51; Scottish Liturgy 1982, Section 19, 'The Breaking of the Bread'.



## @Coronaworship: Material and Digital Liturgies

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In this article, I want to discuss two different liturgical topics that have occurred under the early corona crisis. The first topic is the identification by the American sociologist Tim Hutchings of the difference between 'online churches' and 'churches online'. He describes how established online communities differ from traditional brick-and-mortar churches that were forced to go online due to the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> The second topic is how some of us consider digital services as something totally different from material services with physical presence. It means that material brick-and-mortar services seem to be perceived as the only valid way of worshipping, while digital services are perceived as invalid and substitutional. The German American liturgical scholar Teresa Berger, in her monograph *@Worship. Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds*,<sup>2</sup> challenges several ideas of materiality, physical presence, community and liturgy, and she argues for a less dichotomous understanding of online and offline services, something that probably will enlighten the discussion of digital worship.

On 13 March 2020, I found myself on the plane from Edinburgh to Oslo. In January, I went to Scotland to spend the semester as a visiting scholar at the School of Critical Studies, University of Glasgow. My research project was to be a study of Scottish services examining changes in contemporary prayers. I did observations and interviews in Scottish parishes for the project 'Prayers in a New Culture. Theological Anthropology in Intercessory Prayers'. I was excited to find out whether Brexit would be reflected in the liturgies, or if other burning issues were brought up in intercessory prayers. Several cases of extreme weather passed by during January and February and caused flooding and damage in the UK, and I thought the situation was very interesting from a researcher's point of view. But at some point, the situation changed even more

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Hutchings, 'What Can the History of Digital Religion Teach the Newly-Online Churches of Today?', in [\*The Distanced Church. Reflections on Doing Church Online\*](#), ed. by Heidi A. Campbell (Digital Religion Publications. An imprint of the Network for New Media, Religion & Digital and Culture Studies 2020), pp. 61–64 (p. 62) [accessed 5 June 2020].

<sup>2</sup> Teresa Berger, *@Worship. Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).

dramatically. Throughout my stay in Glasgow, the news of the coronavirus, COVID-19, became increasingly alarming. I was following the news on the BBC and on NRK (Norwegian broadcasting) simultaneously. Norway seemed to be ahead of the UK concerning drastic measures, and on 12 March the Norwegian Government announced a comprehensive lockdown due to the virus. Norwegians abroad were told to come home as soon as possible. From one day to another, I had to buy plane tickets, cancel appointments, pack my stuff and make all the necessary arrangements for a hasty departure, without being able to say goodbye to my new friends and colleagues in Glasgow. At Oslo airport, the airport staff informed me to go directly to my house where I was quarantined for two weeks, unable to meet friends, family and colleagues. I was just sitting in my apartment, trying to figure out how to handle the new situation and mourning my interrupted stay in Scotland. I used a lot of time watching and reading the news and keeping an eye on social media. Regarding the main topic of my research project, 'Prayers in a New Culture', the situation seemed to be surreal in every sense of the word, even liturgically. All services were cancelled, churches were closed, and the 'new culture' I wanted to explore turned out to be a nightmare far beyond all imagination.

### *Churches going online*

After some days, something occurred on Facebook. One of my Facebook friends, Dean Kari Alvstrud Mangsvåg in the Church of Norway, posted a video where she invited anxious people to pray with her. It was all very simple and unpretentious, recorded in her house with her husband behind the camera.<sup>3</sup> She lit a candle, read some verses from the Bible, prayed for the corona situation and all the suffering caused by the virus, and then concluded by praying Our Father. The response was overwhelming. Even if it is complicated to estimate the exact outreach on social media, the video doubtlessly reached far. It was shared more than 800 times and watched more than 60,000 times.<sup>4</sup> It was considered remarkable as not only the Christian newspaper *Vårt Land* wrote about this sensation, but so did NRK.<sup>5</sup> Suddenly religious life exploded on social media and several other digital platforms like YouTube and parish websites. Ministers streamed

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<sup>3</sup> Reynert, Per Åsmund, '[Overveldet prost etter Facebook-bønn om korona: Aldri opplevd en respons som dette](#)', *Vårt Land*, 12 March 2020 [accessed 5 June 2020].

<sup>4</sup> Statistics at Facebook are difficult to analyze because a three-second viewing is counted as one full viewing.

<sup>5</sup> Bjørke, Christian Nicolai, '[Stenger kirkedørene i hele Norge – vil trøste og berolige på nett](#)', at nrk.no 13 March 2020 [accessed 5 June 2020].

prayers and sermons from their studies and living rooms, some parishes streamed services from the churches with the ministers and organists only, and sometimes also with a small choir group singing, and NRK broadcast services through the whole Easter week and every Sunday morning. Some of the services were characterized by ad hoc technological solutions. Others were live streamed with high digital expertise, like the ones from Oslo Cathedral, which has a lot of experience with prestigious liturgical events like royal weddings and funerals and other services of national importance. And finally the TV services, produced with several decades of expertise in broadcasting liturgical events and made especially for this medium, a professional level which makes comparison to the ad hoc services unfair.

As a liturgical scholar, I observed that the situation challenged several of my prejudices regarding digital and online services. I consider myself a digital novice as I did not touch a computer before I was 25. As a middle-aged academic, through the years it has been necessary to learn how to use data technology in order to do my job. I am on some social media with a private user profile, but I am not an eager explorer of digital technologies. My scepticism towards digital services is fierce. I have felt a certain curiosity about online religious practice, mostly because I think it is weird, but I have not paid much interest to it because I have always been convinced that a brick-and-mortar service is the real thing. Without materiality and physical presence, I consider Christian liturgies to be meaningless. According to Gordon Lathrop, one of the most influential contemporary Lutheran liturgical scholars, *things* in the sense of *materiality* are constitutive for worship. In *Holy Things. A Liturgical Theology*, the first of three publications in his liturgical theological trilogy, he pinpoints that worship is constituted by both materiality and biblical texts, and the one cannot exclude the other.<sup>6</sup> The words spoken without bread and wine on the table are meaningless, and baptism with only water and no biblical words does not make it a sacrament. *Things* in the sense of physical present people are also included in his definition of materiality, and so is the church building, the liturgical furniture, vestments and books. Finding myself as an eager participant @Coronaworship, in front of my monitor in the early COVID-19 crisis, partaking in the hymns, readings and prayers in an online community with fellow digital participants, some of my prejudices have been challenged. When you have no choice but watching live streamed and recorded services due to lockdown, and the Christian community has no other option than practising online, it is impossible to reject it as weird and unreal. At some point it started to feel

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<sup>6</sup> Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things. A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

familiar. The situation inspired me to go more deeply into the existing research field on digital religious practice.

Similarly, the research on digital liturgies in the corona crisis started almost immediately after the outbreak of the pandemic. Heidi A. Campbell, professor in communications at Texas A & M University, well known for her work in digital religion and new media, published in April 2020 an anthology of thirty contributions from various churches in different countries under the pandemic, *Distanced Church. Reflections on Doing Church Online*. Sixteen of the contributions share experiences with digital Christian presence after the outbreak, including theological reflections. The remaining half share insights of general research on online and digital theological practice. Several scholars of digital religion are contributors. The anthology gives a fresh overview of the situation in the first phase of the pandemic. The situation seems to be much of the same all over; churches without specific digital competence have been forced to adapt quickly and find digital solutions when society, including brick-and-mortar churches, was locked down.

It is important to discuss whether the digitalization of services and liturgies is a shift or a continuum in religious practices. Further on, I would also like to discuss to what extent digital liturgies under the corona pandemic differ from brick-and-mortar liturgies regarding materiality and physical presence. But first some observations on how online practices seem to represent the state of normality for several religious practitioners and how it affects and is affected by traditional liturgical practice.

### *Back to normal?*

One of the contributors to the anthology *The Distanced Church*, Troy Shepherd, writes in his article: 'The idea that 'all will go back to normal' after a global, life-altering pandemic is likely not going to be the reality.'<sup>7</sup> The same point is claimed by several others. The socio-economic consequences of the pandemic are impossible to overlook at this moment. The world might never be 'normal' again, and that is probably a better way for the future for most of us, except for the most privileged. If the pandemic forces us to make a more just and less exploitative global society, this might be a new normal that would benefit humanity and nature.

In the short term, the longing for normal probably means something more prosaic: an everyday existence where we can go to crowded bars, shopping centres and concerts, or whatever we may long for. It is the longing for trivialities like coming home from the grocery store not having

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<sup>7</sup> Troy Shepherd, 'Is Your Church Ready for Social Distancing?', in *Distanced Church, op. cit.*, pp. 37–40 (p. 39).



to wash every single item in the bag or washing our hands desperately for thirty seconds each time we have been outside. It is the longing for the routines we knew, an everyday life with less fear and more physical connectedness.

Most church people are longing for crowded churches, the Eucharist without fear of virus contamination at the distribution, holding hymn books in our hands and singing out loudly, without fear of aerosols spreading around and causing sickness. The longing for physical presence in the churches we know and love seems to be the strongest desire for some of us. Live streamed liturgies and prayers do have definite limitations, even if this is the only alternative right now.

So, what about 'back to normal' for churches? When the lockdown is over, will churches go back to the situation from before the pandemic? Will the live streamed services end?

The chief of the communication department of the Norwegian Church Council Ingeborg Dybvig has, during the pandemic, several times asked us to keep in mind that we must not expect to go back to the situation that was before 12 March, the day the Norwegian lockdown was announced. The use of digital technology has pushed a lot of church employees with technology scepticism into deep water, and they have found themselves afloat. It worked. The digital services reached far. People who never or seldom visit churches, have been watching live streamed and recorded services online.

This is partly caused by the fact that digital services were not a new appearance on the liturgical scene. They have been there for a long time. My ignorance of online and digital practice has not taken account of the fact that online religious practices have already existed for thirty-five years.<sup>8</sup> I might not be the only one suffering from ignorance. Online digital services are already an established liturgical practice. Some of the viewers of the 'corona services' will most likely be familiar with online participation in digital services, while others are new participants. It is too early in the pandemic to know the exact number of old and new participants, but it is possible to attempt to figure out to what extent the churches are experienced or not in digitalizing their liturgical practices.

### *Church online and online churches*

In the article 'What Can the History of Digital Religion Teach the Newly-Online Churches of Today?', Tim Hutchings refers to a useful distinction for the current situation, 'Church online' and 'online churches'. 'Church online' are traditional churches that are moving into the digital space. 'Online

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<sup>8</sup> Hutchings, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

churches' are communities that mostly exist as an online phenomenon and are acting in the digital sphere, most aware of the rules of the digital game. In the next paragraph, I will present several examples of online churches when I am going to dig deeper into the questions of physical presence and materiality, according to Teresa Berger's observations and analysis of online services. Hutchings claims that online churches have been driven by three common ambitions throughout their thirty-five years of existence: the desire to amplify, to connect and to experiment. The religious messages are amplified on the technological terms, and so are the connections. The experimental ambition is possible due to the delimitations of the digital space.

Hutchings develops the analytic concept from the digital religion scholar Christopher Helland, who through his previous research has observed two categories of religious digital activity:

Religion online, which tried to translate the traditional messages of religious institutions into the new environment without undermining old ideas and hierarchies, and online religion, which allowed new practices and social structures to emerge within digital culture.<sup>9</sup>

Several other scholars of digital religion are pinpointing the same features of online religion. So far, it seems that under the corona crisis, the majority of churches which have gone online are established churches that are trying to translate traditional messages into the new environment. Most of these churches seem not to be aware of the traits which are important for religious online activity. Heidi A. Campbell is distinctly critical of the idea that it is possible to transfer traditional messages to digital platforms, and even trying to translate them. She argues for transforming strategies instead of transferring, and claims that religious and liturgical practice needs to adapt to the new media.<sup>10</sup> Though I think Campbell lacks some critical perspectives in her discussion of the digital liturgical practices, it is most useful to be aware of how churches under the corona crisis risk are using the transferring and translating strategies online without being aware of how it might work or not work at all in a quite different medium.

However, Hutchings makes an interesting observation regarding how churches online and online churches have developed. He says:

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>10</sup> Heidi A. Campbell, 'Social Distancing Leads to Rethinking Church' in *Distanced Church*, *op. cit.*, pp. 49–52.

In my own writing, I have argued that the last ten years of Christian digital worship shows a steady move from the second type back to first. To paraphrase Helland, the attention of Christian denominations has moved from 'online church' to 'church online'.<sup>11</sup>

How are the corona services affected by this tendency? Have the services under the pandemic integrated the existing practices or created something new? Hutchings argues that both are happening:

In the wake of the pandemic, we have seen many churches continue this turn to amplification, using livestream and videos to continue the work of preaching and prayer. Amplification is a powerful use of digital media, but the long experience of online churches shows that this alone cannot be sufficient to maintain a community.<sup>12</sup>

On the one hand, it seems that the liturgical activity could be characterized as a traditional church online, which does the same things as they usually do, only moving the activity from church space to digital space. The examples from the Church of Norway mentioned in the introduction, showed that ministers prayed and read from the Bible whilst in their studies, or gathered an organist and a choir in the empty church buildings and held services quite similar to the ordinary Sunday service, even if the pews were empty. On the other hand, according to Hutchings, it also seems like the churches under the corona crisis are practising in ways that are typical for online churches. Hutchings explains why:

In this time of social distancing, mediating connection is more essential than ever. Churches are also beginning to experiment again, creating new liturgies, rituals and prayers for a new kind of crisis. These may be digital — like the virtual 'Choir of the Nation' launched by St Paul's cathedral in London — or resolutely low-technology, like the simple act of lighting a candle at home. Churches need to find ways to ensure that every member of their congregation and wider community feels engaged in the shared work of prayer and worship,

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<sup>11</sup> Hutchings, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

including those who cannot yet access digital networks, and simple home-based rituals are part of the answer.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the examples Hutchings mentions above, it is worth noting that the Church of Norway bishops recommended ringing church bells to mark the beginning of the weekend, something that has not been done in Norway for more than one hundred years. It might be an example of finding new ways to include every member of the congregation and the wider community; for them to feel engaged and be reminded of the church's existence, despite the lockdown. Simultaneous lighting of candles in the windowsills in private homes has been organized by the Church of Norway as a token of common prayer. Worth mentioning also, is the fact that the Church of Norway traditionally has not had the same way of engaging in Daily Prayer as the Episcopal Church, the Catholic church and other historical denominations. We do have an order, but it is less authoritative than the Daily Prayer in other churches, and the practice is more random. Under the early corona crisis several parishes began streaming morning and evening prayers from the local churches, among them my own local parish of Sagene in Oslo. The liturgy was simple, but also allowed for the current situation with prayers written for the special corona situation, and hymns that reflected fear, grief and hope. Digital lighting of candles has been offered at the website of the Church of Norway for several years. Now Oslo Cathedral made it possible to pay a small amount to have your personal physical candle lit by the staff in the cathedral. Parish ministers were quite visible on Facebook and other websites, offering conversations, counselling and prayers by phone calls and chats.

New rituals were doubtlessly made during the early corona crisis. There is reason to believe that this will continue when we go back to the 'new normal' after lockdown, but time will show.

So far it seems like the distinctions between online churches and churches online have become more transparent during the corona crisis, and that the new normal will include both digital and non-digital practices. Fluid borders and diverse practices are, according to the digital religious scholars, a marked feature of contemporary religion. Fluidity, but also continuity, are typical features of digital religious practices, and in the next paragraph I will argue for why the corona crisis seems to be one step further in a long continuum.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

*Mediating worship*

A most interesting discussion of digital liturgical practices is done by Teresa Berger in the previously mentioned monograph, *@Worship. Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds*. It was published three years before the corona crisis but is certainly helpful in analysing the actual situation. For those of us with prejudices and scepticism regarding digital services, Teresa Berger initially states: '@Worship is predicated on the conviction that digital media technologies stand in a long line of liturgical mediations — without which there is no im/media/cy of encounter with the Divine.'<sup>14</sup> Berger considers digitalization as one of several forms of mediating, and from her insights as a liturgical historian over decades, she points to how mediating is an inseparable part of liturgy:

The point I seek to stress here is that Christian worship should not be understood as an originally unmediated or pre-mediated world to which (artificial?) media technologies then came to be added. Rather, Christian worship has only existed in practices of mediation, and these practices are fundamentally material and sensory in nature. There is no original, pristine moment in liturgical history when worship stood apart from media forms.<sup>15</sup>

From her Roman Catholic point of view, Berger is referring to practices like *The Pope App* which provides opportunity to observe the Pope celebrating the Eucharist wherever he is, but in her studies she also includes Evangelicals, Protestants and Pentecostals, and pure online communities with no special denominational identity or tradition:

They range from broadcasts of liturgical celebrations over the internet, virtual altars, online chapels, cyber rosaries, prayer apps with streaming video and image galleries, memorial sites, online pilgrimages, digitally mediated Eucharistic Adoration and novenas to new resources such as a 'twomplet' (Compline on Twitter, in tweets), digital Advent and Lenten calendars, and an app for Catholic Meditations on Purgatory. There are also communities of faith that exist online alone, for example in web-based interactive virtual reality environments such as Second Life. Clearly, digitally mediated liturgical life is rich,

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<sup>14</sup> Berger, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

multifaceted, and effervescent. It is also ceaselessly expanding.<sup>16</sup>

Berger also describes the possibility of gathering in 3D virtual reality environments via avatars, the *Church of Fools*, an internet-based ecclesiological community consisting of an online sanctuary built in *Shockwave*, a gaming portal,<sup>17</sup> and the German internet church [St Bonifatius](#) which has modelled its chat room on the interior of the former Cistercian Abbey Church of San Galgano in Tuscany.<sup>18</sup> Even if these examples seem weird to some of us, Berger argues that the digital liturgical turn represents a continuum in mediating liturgical practices. She also argues that it is not as simple as that online reality is changing our religious lives, but that religious lives have also changed offline. Heidi Campbell and Paul Teusener note:

Even before the rise of the Internet, people's lifestyles were becoming increasingly mobile and they tended to identify less with a local congregation or Christian denomination. Increasingly their religious identities are tied to personal networks of friends and acquaintances they know through telecommunication technologies.<sup>19</sup>

Online community formations have to be understood in the context of broader cultural transformations of sociality.<sup>20</sup> The new online religious practices are likely a reflection of offline religious practices. Also, the practices are fluid, which is a point I want to discuss finally.

#### *Physical presence and materiality*

The most burning issue which has occurred under the early corona crisis, is the lack of physical presence and materiality @Coronaworship. The Eucharist might be the most theologically significant issue, but also that the community is prevented from being present in the brick-and-mortar church.

Berger is definitely not embracing all the online practices, but she wants to problematize the instinctive objections which often come up in the discussions of digital worship, also under the pandemic. The objections are often caused by ideas of physical presence, spatial proximity and

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

simultaneity as necessary for valid worship. However, Berger delivers interesting arguments from church history to avoid taking for granted the objections. Her first example comes from one of the oldest sources of knowledge of the early Christian Mass, Justin Martyr:

From the mid-second century comes an initial glimpse of the fact that physical presence was not the exclusive determining factor of who belonged to a community gathered for the celebration of the Eucharist. Justin Martyr, in his well-known description of a eucharistic gathering of his community of Rome, insists that the deacons bring the Eucharist to those who are absent (not, as is sometimes still assumed, those who are sick). Ecclesial belonging and Eucharist sharing were — at least in this community — not predicated on physical presence and active participation.<sup>21</sup>

Berger uses several historical examples to mark her point, that physical absence does not necessarily make it impossible to take part in the Eucharist. Several of the female mystics in the thirteenth century describe visions of being present at the Mass. Even more interesting, the Church validated these experiences. Claire of Assisi is another example of spiritual, not physical presence:

One Christmas night when Claire was too ill to leave her cell, she was given visionary sight of the Mass celebrated in the Basilica of St Francis in Assisi. Claire's visionary experience was so clear that she was later able to name individuals present at the Mass. In 1958, Pope Pius XII named St Claire the patron saint of television based on this visionary viewing.<sup>22</sup>

Even though it might not be a convincing argument for the twenty-first century digital pandemic generation to identify with medieval female mystics, it is interesting to observe that physical presence is not the only valid way of experiencing the Eucharist. In times like this, we need to encourage and confirm the validity of the non-physical presence. The idea of spatial proximity and simultaneity might not be an absolute demand, even if it has been the normal way of gathering before the pandemic.

What I find even more interesting, is Berger's discussions of materiality. As a Roman Catholic, she is familiar with a kind of materiality

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

which is much more comprehensive than Lutheran liturgical practice. Nevertheless, as I mentioned earlier, for Lutherans, materiality is also an inalienable part of worship. Online services are, at least at first glance, to a great extent something to observe, not to touch, feel, taste and smell. Even at this point, Berger argues for fluidity between online and offline practices:

The kinds of materiality involved in the two realms differ at some points, however. While both offline and online a human body is the core materiality of worship, in online practices of prayer, this human body is interfacing with an internet-accessing device. And it does so without necessarily being co-present to other worshippers. At the same time, interplays between online and offline practices of prayer and worship are clearly on the rise.<sup>23</sup>

Berger admits that the materiality online is different from offline. But she rejects that online worship is non-material. It seems to me that the interplay she describes as being on the rise, might to a large extent happen at this point of history. The pandemic forces a special kind of interplay between the two realms, which is a definite new situation.

*The new normal: Fluid liturgical lines off and on*

In this article, I have discussed the difference between churches online and online churches, and ideas of physical presence and materiality for valid worship. Under the outbreak of the pandemic, it seems that the major online liturgical activity was traditional churches that went online. These churches wanted to amplify their traditional messages by using digital technologies. Experimenting and making new practices seems to be a less pregnant feature. However, new practices have also occurred, like simultaneous lighting of candles and singing online.

At first glance it seemed that I was observing a liturgical paradigm shift. At second glance it seemed to be a continuum in existing digital practices. According to Teresa Berger, even the digital practices are in continuity with older kinds of mediation. The borders between these realms are not definite, but fluid, even when it comes to the demand for physical presence and materiality.

What will the new normal turn out to be when the pandemic has reached an end? It is difficult to predict. Even so, I am most sure that we will observe the same tendencies as described in the article: ongoing fluid

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.



practices online and offline. Being prevented from physical presence for months, maybe years, we will probably long for being at worship more than being @worship, but the one realm will probably influence the other.



## Proclaiming the Gospel of Holy Week and Easter under Lockdown

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The suspension of public worship under emergency lockdown measures would have posed challenges to Christian congregations and their clergy at any time of year. That Holy Week and Easter, the most solemn period in the Christian calendar on which so much of our faith and worship depend, should have fallen during the early weeks of lockdown, has meant that the Scottish Episcopal Church needed to adjust to very different circumstances very quickly.

At provincial level, strenuous efforts were made by the College of Bishops to issue pastoral guidelines sensitive to the spiritual needs of the SEC while also in conformity with the emergency regulations. The bishops have also played a leading part in providing on-line worship on Sundays and over the Triduum. They have also authorized, for use during the emergency period, material produced at short notice by the Liturgy Committee and others, and will undoubtedly continue doing so as lockdown continues, and, afterwards, when our churches are re-opened for public worship.

At the local level, clergy have been creative in seeking to provide some nourishment for their congregations, knowing that it cannot compensate for the lack of corporate life and sacramental worship. Some have undoubtedly acquired new skills in far from ideal circumstances, to make the best use of the communications technology available to them, while others have made strenuous efforts to reach members without internet access by other means. Much has been said and written about our being unable to observe the cherished liturgical traditions in our congregations, and about what some have termed the 'eucharistic hunger' being experienced by many of our faithful. Many have wrestled with theological questions concerning administration of the sacraments in the absence of their congregations, and this has raised profound issues to do

with the nature of priesthood in particular. Many of these are addressed elsewhere in this issue. Perhaps less thought has been given to sustaining the ministry of the Word, possibly because so many extra-liturgical resources have been developed over recent decades to assist the laity in their study of Scripture, but also because our church and its liturgical tradition have become primarily eucharistic in orientation. When the Eucharist is correctly understood, as a service of Word and Sacrament, and it is remembered that the Word is definitively received in worship rather than in private study, then these issues might be perceived rather differently. While some clergy have, commendably, chosen to livestream a Service of the Word rather than celebrate the Eucharist alone or with only their family present, others have preferred the latter option in which the Word has tended to be truncated.

It is of course all too easy to forget that many of our faithful do not have the facilities to avail themselves of these resources, however valued they have been by those able to access them. Social distancing measures have proscribed any well-intentioned attempts to remedy this by sharing material with neighbours. In some congregations, material has been posted, to isolated and vulnerable members in particular, and this has included transcripts of material posted on websites and social media.

It is important that these varied and numerous efforts by clergy and others to communicate the faith to the communities they serve, and more widely, form a part of our reflections on this experience, and the discernment on what we as a church need to learn from it. Livestreamed liturgies and other material, if recorded and securely archived, will be available elsewhere. What is provided below is not intended to be a definitive account of the way the Word is to be proclaimed during Holy Week and the Triduum in such circumstances as we have experienced, but rather an example of how theological learning and pastoral care together may serve this purpose in these extraordinary times. The clergy and some lay members of a group of congregations in a particular area, have posted a reflection on the social media pages of these churches each day of lockdown. There has been some diversity of genre and approach to the material, including meditations on pieces of music, poetry, and devotional art.

What is offered here are the reflections posted on Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter day, by two priests who are privileged to be scholars and theologians as well as pastors, and who serve on the Doctrine and Liturgy Committees of the SEC as well as on the Editorial Board of this *Journal*, and therefore perhaps have a wider responsibility to contribute to our reflections on the times we are

experiencing, and what the defining events of our faith may teach us in this period of crisis.

*Palm Sunday (DJ)*

Zion said: 'Why does he come? I have not called him.'

The prophet said: 'He is your king and he comes to reign.'

Zion said: 'I do not want him to reign over me.'

The prophet replied: 'He will reign over the Church,  
And you he will abandon.'<sup>1</sup>

This little fragment of a dialogue-meditation is part of what in the ancient Syrian church was known as a *Ba'utha* — that is a kind of argumentative hymn. It is said or sung in the context of the great event of Palm Sunday, Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, mounted on a donkey, an expression of its divisions and contradictions that will become so evident in the days of the coming week.

In one sense there is something absurd and comic about Jesus's procession into the city. You can almost hear the cynics in the crowd saying, 'Is this some kind of a joke — who does he think he is? There he is, a man playing at being a king, only he is sitting on a donkey while the children shout in glee around him.' We are told that when Jesus entered Jerusalem the whole city was in turmoil, people asking who this strange man might be. And then, to make it worse, as soon as he arrives, he goes and makes chaos in the Temple, the most holy of all places.

In another sense this is a great and deliberate theatrical event. It is meant to be challenging, and so it remained in the Church in what becomes known to us as the Liturgy of the Palms. Here at the beginning of the darkest week in the Christian calendar — the week of Christ's arrest, trial and crucifixion — remains this little bit of play-acting with palms and cheerful, triumphant songs. This will be the first year since I can remember when I will not have sung in church the great hymn, 'Ride on, ride on in majesty [...]'. Majesty indeed — but riding on a donkey in something like a fairground atmosphere — though the hymn sung on that first Palm Sunday was also deeply serious, 'Hosanna to the Son of David!' The great and humble king returns to his city, the city of King David.

One of my favourite figures in the early Christian Church is a Spanish lady called Egeria who, in the late fourth century made a journey to Jerusalem and wrote to her sister nuns in Spain of her experience of that city in Holy Week and Easter. She begins with Palm Sunday, when the

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Kenneth Stevenson, *Jerusalem revisited: The Liturgical Meaning of Holy Week* (Washington DC: The Pastoral Press, 1988), p. 15.

Christian community re-enacted the journey of Our Lord from the Mount of Olives into the city. Her description is vivid and thoroughly human:

The babies and the ones too young to walk are carried on their parents' shoulders. Everyone is carrying branches, either palm or olive, and they accompany the bishop in the very way the people did when once they went down with the Lord. They go on foot all the way down the Mount to the city [...] but they have to go pretty gently on account of the older women and men among them who might be tired.<sup>2</sup>

I love that last comment — typical of the very human Egeria! For two thousand years the Church, young and old, has followed Christ on his absurd journey. But at its heart it is of course profoundly serious — a momentary indication of the kingship of Christ before the terror that is to come, and a reminder that in this little piece of play-acting is a sign of the great truth of Easter morning, when Christ's majesty is wholly revealed in the resurrection.

Holy Week and Easter this year will be strange for all of us. This current pandemic is truly a great leveller. We are all in the same boat, all subject to the same isolating restrictions irrespective of age, wealth or rank. And part of the genius of Palm Sunday is that its very theatrical absurdity makes it appeal to our imaginations which we now can use more than ever. Here is no dry theology, no demanding dogma that you must believe, nothing that is too hard for us. But with the innocence of Egeria we can follow the crowd of Palm Sunday's great procession, in our minds hear the singing and dance with the children. (After all, there is no-one to see you or laugh at you — so why not sing and dance with them?)

In a curious way we can be more together in this season than ever before. We never pray alone, but each one of us can add our voices to the great cacophony of sound — 'Hosanna to the Son of David!!' People might think we are mad as we sing out loud. Let them think. Did they not think that Jesus and his first followers were also mad? St Paul was ready to be called a fool for Christ. You have good precedents.

#### *Maundy Thursday: The Last Supper (DJ)*

All four of the gospels as well as St Paul (in I Corinthians 11) contain an account of the final meal between Jesus and his disciples before the Passion, the meal that we now know as the Last Supper. Each year the Christian Church celebrates this on Maundy Thursday as the moment of the

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<sup>2</sup> John Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels* (London: SPCK, 1971), p. 133.

institution of what Christians call Holy Communion (properly the churches are dressed in white, the colour of celebration), and after it the altar and all elements of decoration in our church buildings are stripped away, leaving the church bare and silent as we begin, in spirit, to follow our Lord through his arrest in Gethsemane, trial and crucifixion on Good Friday.

It is difficult for us, perhaps, to think of the Last Supper without the image of it given to us by Leonardo da Vinci in the great picture that is still where he painted it on the wall of the refectory of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan. But as we go back to the New Testament this event becomes ever more mysterious and complex. For three of the Evangelists (Matthew, Mark and Luke), Jesus and his twelve disciples, including Judas, were gathered as Jews for a Passover meal, with all its resonant imagery of the Passover lamb. For the fourth Evangelist (John) the timing of the meal seems to be twenty-four hours earlier on the so-called day of Preparation. This is the moment when Judas goes his own way after receiving his piece of bread, and, John's account tells us, 'it was night'. It is also the occasion of those heavy, mysterious words of Jesus which, it seems, have been repeated by the Church from the very earliest times as the Eucharist is celebrated: 'Take, eat: this is my body.' 'Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant.'

But let us start with something simpler. This is a meal between friends on the eve of what they all knew would be a momentous event. Things were coming to a head — and they do what is most human. They eat together, just as we come together for meals to celebrate an occasion, to mark an anniversary, or sometimes to say farewell. For many of us the lack of an Easter meal with families or friends will be a hard thing to bear. And for the Church, celebrating the Lord's Supper, as we have come to know this meal, is an act of obedience. Jesus said, 'Do this in remembrance of me.' If the Christian life begins afresh here, in a sense, then it begins not with an act of faith or belief, but with an act of obedience, that Jesus be remembered. And this is more than just an act of memory, for in such remembrance Christ is indeed with us in our partaking of the bread and wine. One of the great rehearsals of this act of obedience in words is found in the pages of a book called *The Shape of the Liturgy*, by the Anglican scholar Gregory Dix. Dix reminds us how Christians have been obedient to their Lord in myriad fashions — Eucharists celebrated in great cathedrals with organ and choir, but equally in small churches, in prisons, in tents, in caves, and in all manner of human situations. 'And best of all, week by week, month by month, on a hundred thousand successive Sundays, faithfully,

unfailingly, across all the parishes of Christendom, the pastors have done this just to *make the plebs sancta Dei* — the holy common people of God.<sup>3</sup>

This year we cannot gather in our churches as we have always done. But we shall be there in spirit, and there will soon be a time when we can gather together for celebration again. Meanwhile we hold our obedience in our hearts — remembering the mysterious words of our Lord with their deep prophetic resonances and their promise to us. At the centre of the Last Supper is a profound mystery that recalls both the covenant which God gave his people after the exodus from Egypt, and also the new covenant of the last days as foretold by the prophets.

Holy Week this year has indeed been a time of suffering for many people, and especially for those touched by death and illness and those striving to care for them. But Jesus's last words to his disciples at this Supper in the account of St Matthew are words of hope that resonate as they set out for the Mount of Olives and Gethsemane. They speak of the Kingdom of Heaven and that messianic banquet that shall be shared with Christ. Such hope shines as a light on the darkness of Good Friday — and shines in our lives too, inextinguishably, in these days when our Lord comes to us in even the darkest place.

### *Gethsemane* (NT)

It is easy to imagine the Garden of Gethsemane as a place of quiet and tranquillity, to which Jesus and his disciples could retire from the bustle of the city and spend a peaceful night in relative comfort asleep on the moonlit grass. On this particular occasion, perhaps, Jesus would be composing his mind in the serenity of this quiet retreat, in preparation for the ordeal to come.

Gethsemane was, and still is, in fact, an area of stony ground on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, which for the duration of the pilgrim festivals was a place where pilgrims from all over the Middle East and further afield, and who could not find or afford accommodation in Jerusalem, would camp in the olive groves, along with their baggage animals. Animals for sacrifice were also corralled and traded there, and there were none of the most basic facilities we would expect at a campsite or roadside café.

Jesus had been able to obtain the use of a room in a house in Jerusalem for his meal with his disciples, and we should expect that the women and children of their party would have remained there for the night while Jesus and the men withdrew to Gethsemane. There, amidst the crowds gathered from all the Jewish world, the drama would unfold.

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<sup>3</sup> Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1947), p. 744.



One of the most telling episodes takes place while Jesus and the disciples are walking from the city to Gethsemane: Jesus tells the disciples that, that night, they would all desert him. The disciples do not make a favourable impression in the gospels in general, and in the passion narrative in particular, and this is especially true of Simon — Peter, the rock on whom Jesus would build the Church. Jesus responds to Peter's bravado — that even if the others failed, he would remain firm — by telling him, in no uncertain terms, that by the time the night was over, Peter would have denied him three times. As the narrative continues, Simon Peter of course does precisely that.

Jesus's agonized prayer, while the disciples slept, has captured the imagination of artists down the centuries. It is often easier for us to be captivated by their often-vivid imagery than to apprehend the profound horror of what is taking place. The reality is more harrowing than we can imagine. We need to let go the silent and deserted landscapes and see amidst the jostling crowds of excited pilgrims and their animals a man praying, desolate and desperately seeking communion with God in his moment of crisis and agony. Few of the bystanders would have recognized him as the one who, just days previously, had ridden a donkey into Jerusalem, attacked the merchants in the temple courts, and boldly proclaimed God's judgement. The vengeance of the rulers was imminent, he had sensed his disciples weakening in their resolve, and temptation to abandon his vocation and disappear into the crowd was overwhelming.

In his moment of crisis, Jesus found communion with God and the courage to face the ordeal which lay ahead of him. It is easy to look back from the comfort of Christendom, and to see a divine figure marching resolutely to his certain and inevitable triumph over the supreme enemy, his death little more than a stunt or, at most, a cunning means to the ultimate victory. In Gethsemane we are confronted with the vulnerable humanity of Jesus, helpless against powerful and vindictive enemies poised to destroy him in the most savage way imaginable.

It is all too easy to point fingers in judgement upon the disciples whose commitment wavered into cowardice and desertion. In their moment of peril, they did not have the benefit of looking back in comfort from the security of suburban Christianity to the triumph of God over evil, nor could they see the Church to be built on their blood and bones as well as their Lord's emerge to power and prominence in society. All the disciples could see was the man we so often fail to see, fragile, vulnerable, and fully human, inspired by God's Spirit with a vision of God's kingdom, who had called them to share that vision and to be partners in its fulfilment, but whose total dedication was meeting its severest test, the once assured outcome now at best very uncertain.

The question to ask ourselves, this night especially, is how often we have been the ones to desert, deny, and betray Christ in our own lives. It is when we identify with the disciples, and acknowledge in our own lives the human weakness and the moral failings of the disciples, that the power and the love of God will transform us. Just as God conquered evil and death in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, we like the first disciples are empowered by God's Spirit to share in Christ's triumph over sin and death. But, just as there could be no Easter without Good Friday, so there can be no Pentecost without Gethsemane.

*Good Friday: The Trial (DJ)*

One of the great hymns of the early Christian Church, dating from at least as early as the ninth century is known to us as the Reproaches. Although they purport to be words uttered by Christ from the cross, they are spoken from the depths of all his sufferings, from his degradation, pain and torture at his trial, spoken to his people whom he has come to save:

My people, what have I done to you?  
How have I offended you? Answer me!

They are indeed uttered as a challenge to us, his followers. It was at the trial of Jesus that even his friend Peter broke down, his human weakness overcoming his love and loyalty to Jesus, his humiliation expressed in one of the most poignant verses in Scripture: '[Peter] went out and wept bitterly' (Matthew 26. 75). I have mentioned in an earlier meditation the fourth-century Spanish nun Egeria and her account of Holy Week as it was kept by Christians in Jerusalem in her time. She describes the reaction of the people to readings of Jesus's trial and sufferings:

It is impressive to see the way all the people are moved by these readings, and how they mourn. You could hardly believe how every single one of them weeps [...] old and young alike, because of the manner in which the Lord suffered for us.<sup>4</sup>

The psychological realism of the trial of Jesus, caught and, in human terms, crushed between the forces of the Jewish Sanhedrin and the occupying soldiers of Rome under Pontius Pilate, is indeed stark. After all the words of his ministry, his teaching of his disciples, his sociable encounters and the adoring crowd of Palm Sunday just a few days before, Jesus is left alone and utterly defenceless. Human nature being what it is, his friends forsake him

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<sup>4</sup> *Egeria's Travels*, p. 134.

when it is clear that this is the end and there is only one outcome. At such a moment human nature despairs and gives it all up.

But it is precisely at his trial that Jesus gathers to himself his full nature. He too will know despair on the cross, for was he not fully human? But at his trial, in a way, he is every inch a king. In medieval mystery plays in towns like York and Coventry, the figure of Christ before Pilate and before Herod was generally silent, a dignified figure in the midst of noise, yelling crowds, anger and fear. In St John's Gospel there is a wonderful moment of double irony after Jesus is flogged as the soldiers ironically dress him up, bleeding as he is, in a purple robe, strike him and taunt him — 'call yourself a king then!' But the true irony is in fact against them — for the one whom they mock indeed is a king, and one who had just convinced the world-weary Pilate of his innocence. The brief exchange between Jesus and Pilate in this gospel (John 18. 33–38) is a marvellous example of what is sometimes called 'discontinuous dialogue'. In other words, Jesus repeatedly turns Pilate's questions against himself so that he throws Pilate's own words back at him: 'You say that I am a king. [Alright then, here is my reply — as a king.] For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.' To this all Pilate can reply, cynically, is 'What is truth?'

We believe that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Even before the crucifixion, at his trial he shows us his kingship, though clothed in a suffering and fraught with a danger that we cannot bear, and we are challenged in his Reproaches. In the New Testament accounts of his trial we see many dark sides of human nature — fear, hatred, bewilderment, confusion, mob violence. And shining through them all is the lone, slight human figure of our Lord whom even his great friend and disciple Peter abandons with a lie born of terror, 'I do not know the man.' Sadly, we can understand the fear — and the dishonesty — all too easily.

This year Holy Week will be especially hard for many if not all of us. But at the heart of all our prayers and even when we feel close to despair ourselves, that constant figure remains, with us, knowing all our worst feelings — for he has been there also. And at the end of it all it is not the cross, for we move with Jesus beyond that, to the greater joy that is Easter — when the King of Palm Sunday, the King of Pilate's inquisition, and the broken King dressed in purple and mocked by the soldiers, becomes indeed the King of Glory.

### *The Burial (NT)*

The final, and in many ways the most poignant, scene in the gospel for Good Friday is the burial of the dead body of Jesus. The gospels relate with some variations how Joseph of Arimathea, hitherto a clandestine disciple or

perhaps little more than an aloof but sympathetic observer, obtained official permission to take possession of Jesus's body for burial.

If we are to appreciate the episode that follows, we need to understand by 'burial' far more than the practical steps involved in disposing of a dead body — the equivalent word in most languages embraces the full range of funereal rites from the moment of death until the conclusion of mourning, and until quite recently that was the meaning of the English word also, hence the Book of Common Prayer refers to 'The Burial of the Dead'. Covering a corpse or other object with earth or other matter, such as papers on our desks, is a derivative, figurative, meaning, even if it has become the primary connotation of the term in modern English.

The melancholy procession of Joseph and his servants, followed by the women disciples, from the cross to the tomb must be understood as Jesus's funeral. Their devotions were cut short by the onset of Sabbath, and the tomb was closed before they had completed the customary observances. Hence their determination to return to the tomb once Sabbath was over ...

In the cultures of the ancient world around the eastern Mediterranean, it was the function of women to prepare the bodies of the dead, by washing and anointing with particular spices. Normally, this would take place before the procession to the grave, but it would not have been possible at the foot of the cross. Nevertheless, Christian art testifies to the intense significance of the moment Jesus's body was taken down from the cross and passed from the custody of the executioners to the care of the mourners. Depictions of his mother, Mary, holding in her arms the dead body of Jesus are a particularly powerful image of her pain and grief.

The grave was not simply a convenient and hygienic place to deposit the bodies of the dead. It was also the gateway to the life hereafter, from which those who had died would begin the journey to Paradise. Therefore, it mattered that funerals were conducted with due dignity and honour. Joseph and the women disciples would therefore have understood themselves to be making possible Jesus's transition from this world to his place at God's right hand, from whence he would return to establish the kingdom he had proclaimed. Far from being sentimental, and even foolhardy, devotion to the corpse which embodied their lost cause, their faith endured beyond the cross, and they sought in their way to make possible the completion of Jesus's work.

Joseph and the women quite clearly did not expect the resurrection in the way they and the other disciples were to experience it on the third day. But their actions and intentions testify to their faith and are an example for us.

Our church doors are closed, just as the tomb of Jesus was sealed, and we may feel our worship and corporate life have succumbed to disease and the fear of infection, that our leaders have capitulated to our political rulers rather than demonstrating our faith in public. But we have done what is necessary for those same church doors to open again, so that in due time we may not merely gather again for worship but welcome others into our fellowship. We do not know when this will be, or how it will come about. We may not know how we will sustain ourselves in the meanwhile. But we have the example of the women disciples, and of the secret disciple who declared his faith in public by claiming Jesus's body for burial. We, with them, must believe that God's work in Christ is not yet done, and that we still have our part to play in it.

### *Holy Saturday (NT)*

Holy Saturday has come to be regarded as something of a gap in the Church calendar, when we may perhaps catch our breath and recover from the rigours of Holy Week in anticipation of enjoying the Easter festivities. The Collect for the day refers to the body of Jesus resting in the tomb, and we may well be inclined to do the same. But it is worth thinking a little further about this.

In our modern society we have a very clinical understanding of death. The body dies when its vital organs cease to function, and is to be disposed of reverently but efficiently; however we may understand the life hereafter, it is unlikely to involve the physical matter committed to the ground or to the fire. For many, death is simply oblivion or annihilation, perhaps until such time as God may raise the dead to life immortal at some indeterminate moment in the future.

For the ancients, it was very different. When a person died and was buried, there began his or her journey to the place, and the state of being, of the dead. In the Old Testament, people are said to sleep with their ancestors or be gathered to their forebears. The traditional use of a family grave was a widespread but not essential symbol of this, but the journey to the place of the dead, commonly known as *Sheol* in Hebrew and *Hades* in Greek, was all-important.

When the apostles proclaimed that Jesus had died, they meant far more than the self-evident fact that the vital functions of his physical body had ceased when he had been crucified and hung from the cross for a number of hours. What they meant was that Jesus had made that journey to the place of the dead, or, as the Apostles' Creed expresses it, 'He descended to the dead'. The apostle Paul links this very directly with our Baptism, into Christ, into death, so that, as God had raised Jesus from the place of the dead, so God would raise us too.

In eastern Christian art especially, the skull of Adam is traditionally depicted at the foot of the cross, and beneath Golgotha in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is the Chapel of Adam. This reflects the understanding that, when Christ died and was raised again, he brought Adam and the patriarchs of Israel to the resurrection life with him. This is reflected in the gospel of Matthew, where at the death of Jesus, the graves are opened, and God's saints of the Old Testament are seen alive in Jerusalem after Christ's resurrection.

The traditions of Jesus, between cross and resurrection, breaking the gates of Hell, overcoming Satan, and releasing the dead to share in his resurrection (sometimes called the Harrowing of Hell), go beyond the words of the biblical accounts. But the several allusions, in the speeches in Acts, in Romans, and in I Peter, reflect that same understanding: that God's work in Jesus did not cease when he died on the cross, but in death he continued to proclaim God's kingdom, overcome evil, and bring healing, restoration, and liberty to the afflicted, and that he brought from the depths to new life those who had sought and served God in their lives in this world.

As we await the time when we are able to throw open once again the doors of our churches, we are reminded that the work of God continues. As we wait, and rest, and pray, we look forward to the day when the doors open once again, not only so we can go in to gather for worship, but also so that we may come out and proclaim the Gospel in the world.

### *Easter (NT)*

The gospel accounts of the first Easter speak of frightened people, hidden from public sight in whatever place of shelter they had been provided. Only a few of the women ventured out in the dawn, intent on completing the funereal rites which had been interrupted by the onset of Sabbath. This was women's sacred task in ancient culture, but, perhaps tellingly, none of the men accompanied them to assist with the task which preoccupied them as they made their way to the grave.

As it was, the most dramatic event of the day had already taken place by the time the women reached the tomb. The completion of God's purposes did not depend on their completing the customary rituals as they had intended, which may be of some comfort to us at this time. The stone which had been rolled across its entrance had already been removed, and the body of Jesus no longer lay there.

Jesus was not simply resuscitated, nor did he simply leave the tomb to resume his previous life. He passed through the grave to the depths of human death, and from there God raised him, and God raises us, to a life transformed by the conquest of evil and death, empowered by God's Spirit, and ultimately at home in God's eternal presence.

There are no witnesses to the resurrection. The empty tomb is vivid but circumstantial evidence. The faith of the disciples is founded on their experience of the risen Christ. They saw him, perhaps not always immediately recognizable as the one they had followed, but nevertheless clearly the same person. They heard him speak to them, perhaps in ways they understood more clearly than before. And, in obedience to him, they waited, until, empowered by God's Spirit, they set out to proclaim the gospel of the risen Christ in a broken and hungry world.

The fear that encompasses us this Easter is perhaps more hidden, but the restrictions imposed on our freedom no less real, than that which overwhelmed the disciples when Jesus was arrested. We do not know who will be next to be afflicted by life-threatening disease. We do not know whether we will escape, unharmed or severely debilitated. As the crisis continues, we are less certain of the social and economic basis of our human security, and many face an uncertain and precarious future long beyond the coronavirus pandemic. But we are offered the same vision of the risen Christ as inspired his first disciples; we may not compare his features with those of someone we have known in the flesh, but we can recognize in Jesus, risen from the dead, God at work in our day as in Palestine two thousand years ago. We have the opportunity to hear God's voice speak to us in Scripture, and, while we are separated from our corporate worshiping life, we are able to read, reflect, and pray that we may be attentive to God's holy Word. We have not been able to celebrate, as we have customarily done, the great Sacrament of his death and resurrection, receiving his body and blood at the Eucharist. But we have been transformed in our Baptism by the power of Christ's death to share in his resurrection.

When the time comes, we must once again emerge from our homes, not merely to continue our lives as previously, but transformed in the image of Christ and renewed in the power of God's Spirit, to worship together, and go out into a broken world to proclaim the gospel of God's healing love.

Christ is risen. We are risen. Alleluia.





## Lament in Times of COVID-19

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Lament is one of the prayer forms that the Judeo-Christian tradition has at its disposal. Times of crisis call for this kind of prayer that cries out to God for help. In the Christian liturgy, the time of intercessions is the time that lends itself particularly well to these cries of the heart. Indeed, especially in the first weeks and months of the corona crisis, which became a pandemic and resulted in the lockdown of many countries, intercessory prayers in many churches made the pandemic the central point of prayer. Not only intercessions, but also the words of welcome, the sermon, and sometimes other liturgical elements were addressing the pandemic and the difficulties that resulted from it. New prayers were written, including Collects and Eucharistic Prayers. And rightly so. The regular, public worship service is central to the life of Christian communities, and in it, the gathered community — even if gathered digitally — brings before God its hopes and dreams, its joys and sorrows, its praise and brokenness. If anywhere, this is the place where Christians cry out together to their God.

And yet, I found myself uncomfortable in some worship services, including their times of intercession in these first weeks (a discomfort that, several months into the pandemic and two months into lockdown in Scotland, where I live, has not yet gone away). I remember at least three items that were regularly in the news just before the pandemic breakout. These were: the economic and political crisis in Venezuela, causing millions of people to flee their country and thus resulting in a humanitarian crisis; the refugee crisis in Europe, and the maltreatment of refugees, including violence and other dehumanizing practices, sponsored by European money and politics; and the locust plague in East Africa, causing many to lose their livelihood and resulting in poverty and hunger. Almost overnight nothing was heard about these anymore when the first ‘cases’ of COVID-19 infections were reported in this country. Churches were not much different. Everything revolved around the new pandemic. Sure, times like these call for lament. But what makes a good lament? When the crisis is over a longer period of time, as with the current pandemic, does it warrant the neglect of praying for other situations? To ask the question with the words of Walter Brueggemann, a prolific writer on the lament psalms: what are the

‘necessary conditions of a good loud lament’?<sup>1</sup> Taking some cues from Brueggemann, this article offers some reflections on this question in the context of the current pandemic.

In recent years much has been written about the genre of lament, and churches are increasingly seeing the need for attending anew to this biblical genre of prayer.<sup>2</sup> This article is not repeating those arguments, but wants to highlight a few elements of prayers of lament in Scripture that might help us to lament well in the current crisis. First, we will see that lament is a form of truth-telling, that happens in a particular relationship between God and people. Secondly, I will briefly comment on some common components of lament psalms. I will then move to the current crisis and point out how the relationship and the idea of truth-telling work out in our times, reflecting on truth and what to ask for in our prayers. Two ‘disclaimers’: this article does not claim to have definitive answers but is meant to help us reflect on these issues; also, I am writing as a member of the Scottish Episcopal Church, living in North East Scotland, which influences my points of view.

### *Lament: Truth-telling in relationship*

The Bible tells the stories of the people of God as they travelled — often literally — with their God. It is opening a world where Israel and the early

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, ‘Necessary Conditions of a Good Loud Lament’, *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 25 (2003), 19–49.

<sup>2</sup> To mention just a few examples: Kathleen D. Billman and Daniel L. Migliore, *Rachel’s Cry: Prayer of Lament and Rebirth of Hope* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999); Matthew Boulton, ‘Forsaking God: A Theological Argument for Christian Lamentation’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55 (2002), 58–78; Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller, *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005); Rebekah Eklund, *Jesus Wept: The Significance of Jesus’ Laments in the New Testament*, Library of New Testament Studies (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015); Eva Harasta and Brian Brock, *Evoking Lament: A Theological Discussion* (T&T Clark, 2009); Emmanuel Katongole, *Born from Lament: The Theology and Politics of Hope in Africa* (Eerdmans, 2017); John Swinton, *Raging With Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007); Bruce K. Waltke, James M. Houston, and Erika Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Lament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2014); Andrew Williams, ‘Biblical Lament and Political Protest’, *Cambridge Papers towards a Biblical Mind* 23, no. 1 (2014): 1–4.

followers of Jesus acknowledge the love and lordship of God. Both the people and God speak their minds, sometimes against each other. God confesses God's love for the people time and again, but also expresses hurt, disappointment, and anger when the people walk away from the covenant relationship and condemns them when needed. However, the hermeneutical key is the ever-present possibility of return to the covenantal relationship. Likewise, the people confess their praise and adoration, their love for God's way (Torah), but also their indignation when they feel treated unjustly by God. Whilst many contemporary Christians may feel uncomfortable at the level of honesty and expression of raw emotions, and churches may struggle to incorporate in their worship services the fierce lament we find in Scripture, Scripture contains many examples of prayers that don't hesitate to speak the truth. Abraham is not afraid to negotiate with God, Moses refuses to lead the people if God does not go with them, Hannah cries out to God for a child, Jeremiah complains about his calling and the way he feels God has left him, Job almost sues God for being maltreated, Rachel cries out and refuses to be comforted, and even Jesus bitterly cries 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?!' The stories of the people and God travelling with each other are stories full of honest truth-telling, comfortable or not.

As a matter of fact, this honest — sometimes raw — truth-telling is key to the relationship that God and people have with each other. Brueggemann argues that the language of lament has been lost in churches in the wake of the Enlightenment with its values of self-sufficiency, coupled with scholastic catechisms that declared God 'omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent.'<sup>3</sup> He claims 'that the serious practice of lament is difficult to the point of impossibility for persons and communities that are deeply and uncritically situated in the ideologies of technological, therapeutic, military consumerism.'<sup>4</sup> Lament says something about the partners involved. 'Lament is not possible if God be only a shadowy warm fuzzy or a settled scholastic proposition incapable of forceful dialogical engagement.'<sup>5</sup> One of the preconditions of a good lament, therefore, is to ask ourselves what we believe about this God that we address, or better, who we believe this God is. Have we subsumed God to scholastic precision and lost the mystery and personal relationship characterized by love, wonder, and sometimes by doubt and hurt? Is God the one who turns the tables, who announces the inbreaking of God's reign in Jesus Christ, the One who sets the followers of Jesus on fire with the Holy Spirit?

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<sup>3</sup> Brueggemann, 'Necessary Conditions', pp. 19–20.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Similarly, if lament reveals our beliefs about and in God, it also reveals what we believe about ourselves. Another precondition of lament, Brueggemann says, is 'An emancipated sense of self fully present to self who is able to recognize harm, hurt, and dysfunction in one's own bodily existence or in one's own community.'<sup>6</sup> To support this claim, Brueggemann cites the highly descriptive language of the psalms, e.g. 'my heart is like wax [...] my mouth is dried up like a potsherd' (Psalm 22. 14–15, NIV). For the purposes of this paper I want to highlight the 'dysfunction ... in one's own community.' The psalmists point out that their distress is often because of social injustices, harassment and oppression. 'All day long they seek to injure my cause; all their thoughts are against me for evil' (Psalm 56. 5). A precondition for a good lament is that we know who we are and that we know our communities.

### *Structural components of lament Psalms*

Lament has an address (God) and a petitioner (people). This is one of the characteristics of lament psalms. In his seminal work on the Psalter, Claus Westermann identified five structural components of lament psalms: address, lament, confession of trust, petition, and the vow of praise. Some would argue that the assurance of being heard should be mentioned as another typical component. So, the list is as follows:

1. Address
2. Lament/complaint
3. Confession of trust
4. Petition
5. Assurance of being heard
6. Vow of praise.

These six components can be found both in individual and communal psalms of lament.<sup>7</sup> The following example from Psalm 13, sometimes called a proto-typical psalm of lament, illustrates these components.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981); Claus Westermann, 'The Role of the Lament in the Theology of the Old Testament', *Interpretation* 28 (1974), 20–38; Craig C. Broyles, *The Conflict of Faith and Experience in the Psalms: A Form-Critical and Theological Study* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989); Paul Wayne Ferris, *The Genre of Communal Lament in the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992); Walter Brueggemann, 'Formfulness of Grief', *Interpretation* 31, no. 3 (1 July 1977), 263–75.

- <sup>1</sup> How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?  
How long will you hide your face from me?
- <sup>2</sup> How long must I wrestle with my thoughts  
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?  
How long will my enemy triumph over me?
- <sup>3</sup> Look on me and answer, Lord my God.  
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,
- <sup>4</sup> and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"  
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.
- <sup>5</sup> But I trust in your unfailing love;  
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
- <sup>6</sup> I will sing the Lord's praise,  
for he has been good to me.

The address (#1) is found in verses 1 (Lord) and 3 (Lord my God) and in the persistent 'you' and 'your' throughout the psalm. The first third of the psalm (verses 1–2) is entirely lament (#2), apart from the address. It is noticeable how much space is given to the lament or complaint itself. Moreover, the language used does not hide anything under a veil of politeness, but is direct and accusing: 'How long will you hide your face from me?' To refer back to the comments on the relationship above, the psalmist does not address God as someone passive who might be persuaded into action if God one day bothers, but as the God who actively hides and forgets. Whilst this may be uncomfortable for us to hear, it is an important point to note, because if God is that active, God can also actively come to the psalmist's aid — which of course is exactly what the psalmist prays for. Indeed, the confession of trust (#3) knows God to be unfailing in love (verse 5). Note that the turning point of the psalms of lament very often is this small word 'but' (in Hebrew just one small letter as a prefix to another word).<sup>8</sup> In Psalm 13 the petition (#4) is found in verse 3: 'Look on me and answer [...] Give light to my eyes.' The psalmist asks God to turn from active hiding to doing the opposite: look, answer, give light (i.e. give life). The last line contains the assurance of being heard (#5): 'for he has

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<sup>8</sup> Whilst the common pattern in the lament Psalms is from lament to praise, this pattern is not always followed Federico G. Villanueva, *The 'Uncertainty of a Hearing': A Study of the Sudden Change of Mood in the Psalms of Lament* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008). An example of a reverse pattern is Psalm 88, which ends with the depressing comment 'Darkness is my only companion.' Note again the fierce language in the preceding line: 'You have taken from me friend and neighbour' (Psalm 88. 18).

been good to me.’ It is not clear what causes the turn of the psalmist, from lament to trust and assurance of being heard. It is outside the scope of this article to review the several theories that have been put forward.<sup>9</sup> For now, it is enough to note that there is a turning point, and that somehow the psalmist is able to see the situation with new eyes. Finally, the psalmist praises God (#6, verse 6).

One part of the psalm we have not identified with the six components listed above is the last part of verse 3 and the whole of verse 4. Here the psalmist gives a reason why God should listen and come to the psalmist’s aid. Whilst not one of the six typical components, it is quite common in both praise and lament psalms to find reasons to praise or petition. Typically, the psalmist remembers God’s goodness, or, as in the case of Psalm 13, reminds God that the dead cannot praise God’s name. Both notions are related to the context of the prayer, i.e. the covenantal relationship. Here another one of Brueggemann’s proposed preconditions comes to the fore, which is fidelity. Lament is ‘a practice grounded in fidelity about which issues of infidelity can be boldly raised [...] The premise of fidelity, however, is premise and not conclusion.’<sup>10</sup> Brueggemann explains that this premise further presupposes the goodness of the Creator, who reliably governs the created world. Only in such a context will it make sense to speak about infidelity. However, Brueggemann is realistic and knows, like the psalmists know, that the straightforward belief in reward for goodness and punishment for wickedness often runs against experience in daily life (cf. Psalms 1 and 73). This is exactly where lament comes in: ‘It [fidelity] is a premise against which the vicissitudes of lived reality come, and when reality clashes with premise, issues must be raised.’<sup>11</sup> The reasons for both the complaint and for the confession of trust are ultimately grounded in this premise of fidelity.

### *Lament in COVID-19 times*

What can we learn from this brief introduction to the genre of lament in Scripture? I would like to highlight two — closely related — aspects. Firstly, lament is based on a loving, relational knowledge of both partners, i.e. God and ourselves. Secondly, if truth-telling is the key, we need to consider carefully what the truth is we want to tell. We need to reflect on the reasons for our lament. Here the biblical concept of remembering will be informative.

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<sup>9</sup> For such an overview, see Villanueva, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> Brueggemann, ‘Necessary Conditions’, p. 28.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

*The partners.* First, the relational knowledge of the partners. Who is the God we pray to? Who do we want to complain to about our plight, who do we want to listen and respond? From the biblical poets of lament we learn that this is a God who has the power to defeat their enemies, who pulls them out of the pit, who ultimately can and needs to be trusted, as only then the prayer of lament makes sense, as we saw above. It is a God who is just, who blesses the righteous and ‘hates all who do wrong’ (Psalm 5. 5, 15). God ‘secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy’ (Psalm 140. 12). The theme of justice runs through the Psalter, and not only the Psalter, but also the so-called historical books and the prophetic literature. This is one of Israel’s basic claims and a comfort for the lamenter. At the same time, justice is held against the people of God by the prophets when Israel itself goes astray — even to the point that God detests their worship. God is crystal clear when God says by the words of Amos:

I hate, I despise your religious festivals;  
 your assemblies are a stench to me.  
 Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,  
 I will not accept them.  
 Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,  
 I will have no regard for them.  
 Away with the noise of your songs!  
 I will not listen to the music of your harps.  
 But let justice roll on like a river,  
 righteousness like a never-failing stream! (Amos 5. 21–24)

If justice does not happen, God’s anger is against the wrongdoer. And yet, this is also the God of whom this chorus sounds time and again: ‘But you, Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness’ (Psalm 86. 15). God’s compassion and justice go hand in hand and concern especially the poor (cf. Psalm 140, as just quoted). Importantly, Israel is to imitate God’s compassion and justice: God ‘defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt’ (Deuteronomy 10. 18–19). If Israel forsakes this duty of righteousness, it will be held against it as we just heard from Amos. James is equally clear when he writes to the Christian community: ‘Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world’ (1. 27). Looking at the life of Jesus, through which we see the justice and love of God (John 14.

9: 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father'), we can see that God's justice is not limited to the economically 'poor' or 'widow, fatherless and stranger' but extend to anyone who is excluded from the community and the worship of God. Who is the God we pray to? It is a God who is compassionate, who does justice and demands justice.

The other partner in the act of lament is us, as the ones who pray. As quoted from Brueggemann above, a precondition for a 'good loud lament' is that we know who we and our communities are. Much can be said here, but one thing I would like to highlight. A phrase that was and can be heard regularly with regard to COVID-19 is that the virus is an equalizer: it does not discriminate between sexes, ethnicity, poor or wealthy, etc. However, this phrase creates a misconception and is at best a half-truth (and therefore a lie). From the beginning it was clear that whilst the virus itself may not discriminate, its consequences do. Weaknesses in our social structures were — and are — painfully revealed. For example, the virus demonstrated the — often — dire living and working conditions in care homes, showing the vulnerability of residents and staff. In schools, online education meant that poorer and vulnerable groups did have less access to classes and educational materials offered by schools because of a lack of equipment or an internet connection. Those with low-paid jobs or temporary contracts were made redundant first or contracts were not extended. That affects some groups and people in society significantly more than others. A couple of months into the lockdown shows how some ethnic groups or neighbourhoods are disproportionately affected by the virus, both in terms of the number of infected people, including consequent deaths, and consequences of the virus like the ones just mentioned.<sup>12</sup> COVID-19 is not an equalizer. On the contrary, it makes those who were vulnerable even more vulnerable. In this context, what does it mean to cry out to a God who is the refuge of the poor (Psalm 14. 6), who defends the cause of those in need, 'giving them food and clothing' (Deuteronomy 10. 18)?

The least we can say in response to that question is that lament should make us aware of the justice of God. When looking to God for help in corona times, we also need to look around us and imitate God in dealing justly particularly with those who are vulnerable. Justice must 'roll on like a river' lest God despises our offerings of worship and prayer (Amos 5. 21–24). We need to realize who we are praying to, but we also need to know who we are and our communities. The prayer of lament is a prayer that arises from the needs of ourselves, but also the needs that we are in touch

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<sup>12</sup> ['Disparities in the Rise and Outcomes of Covid-19'](#), Public Health England (June 2020) [accessed 6 June 2020].



with within our own communities and the society at large. Worship, whether that means praise or lament, has an ethical dimension to it. This leads us to the next aspect of lament, which is truth-telling.

*Truth-telling.* Above I argued, supported by Brueggemann, that truth-telling is at the heart of the prayer of lament. What is the truth we tell in our prayers? Again, the ancient prayers of lament that have shaped our traditions for millennia will prove informative. Brueggemann notes that the prayers of lament presuppose a community that has learned to both praise and lament. It is a community that has travelled with their God as long as they can remember. It is a community that knows itself to be in a covenantal relationship with a God who is just but also slow to anger and abounds in loving-kindness. And so, this is a community that laments the current situation because it remembers its peaceful past and imagines a future when all will be well.<sup>13</sup> For the lamenter, the truth is that the present circumstances cannot be right, if looked at in the context of faith. In Brueggemann's words, 'The ground of prayer is the conviction that this present condition is not bearable, is not right, and cannot be permanent.'<sup>14</sup> Truth-telling means acknowledging the present and name it for what it is, in contrast to the truth of the faithful covenantal relationship of the past and the future.

The Christian community continues in this tradition of prayer. As a matter of fact, remembering is central to the liturgy. Indeed, the whole of the liturgy can be called an act of remembrance.<sup>15</sup> This is most obvious in the Eucharist, one of the central rites or sacraments of the Church, which we do following Jesus's words 'as often as you break the bread and drink

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<sup>13</sup> Brueggemann, 'Necessary Conditions', pp. 34–36, 42–45.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>15</sup> For an extensive discussion of remembrance in the context of liturgy and suffering, see A. L. van Ommen, *Suffering in Worship: Anglican Liturgy in Relation to Stories of Suffering People* (London: Routledge, 2017), chapters 7 and 8. For liturgy as an act of remembrance, see A. L. van Ommen, 'Remembering for Healing: Liturgical Communities of Reconciliation Provide Space for Trauma', in *Trauma and Lived Religion: Transcending the Ordinary*, ed. by R. Ruard Ganzevoort and Srdjan Sremac, Palgrave Studies in Lived Religion and Societal Challenges (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 205; Dirk G. Lange, *Trauma Recalled: Liturgy, Disruption, and Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), p. 6; Bruce T. Morrill, *Anamnesis as Dangerous Memory: Political and Liturgical Theology in Dialogue* (Collegeville, Minn: Pueblo Books, 2000); Don E. Saliers, *Worship as Theology: Foretaste of Glory Divine* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), chapter 1.

the wine, do this in remembrance of me' (cf. I Corinthians 11. 24–25). The community of believers, gathered in worship, remembers the mighty acts of God, especially creation, exodus, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and in doing so it remembers the promised future when all tears will be wiped from our eyes and death and sickness will be no more (Revelation 21. 4). The Eucharist places the life, death and resurrection of Jesus in the centre. As said before, liturgy has an ethical dimension, since it remembers and celebrates Jesus, who said 'Come, follow me.' In liturgy, we are confronted with the One who habitually sought out the 'poor,' i.e. those who were socially, economically and religiously excluded. It follows that when we pray to God through Jesus in the liturgy and when we eat and drink his Body and Blood, we do so, remembering the excluded in our society. Thus we pray, eat and drink with, for and on behalf of those whom our society has forgotten and excluded.<sup>16</sup> When the Christian community stands in the long tradition of praying their suffering and brokenness, it cries out not just on its own behalf, but also urges God to 'secure justice for the poor and uphold the cause of the needy' (Psalm 140. 12).

The prayer of lament tells the truth about the current situation, but that truth-telling also becomes a mirror that asks us whether we have told the whole truth. When we are in need, it is right to cry out to God. When doing so, we find ourselves in the good company of Abraham, Hannah, Jeremiah and a host of witnesses that have gone before us (Hebrews 12. 1). At the same time the genre of lament compels us — followers of Jesus — to befriend those in need and cry out on their behalf too. Samuel Balentine, writing on prayer in the Hebrew bible, 'urge[s] the church to side with victims, with the blind and the crippled, the weak and the vulnerable, with all those who by divine decree must be welcome in the house of prayer.' He continues: 'The church does this best when it joins with them in the practice of lamentation, for then the church is most effectively engaged in the ministry of keeping the God of compassion and justice in this world.'<sup>17</sup> This is what lament does: it boldly urges God to be present in this world and not to hide. It boldly urges God to be faithful to the covenant and to act according to his loving kindness, to work justice for those who are vulnerable and excluded. The truth is that we cannot do this without God. The truth in COVID-19 times is that many of those who are vulnerable are even more vulnerable than before. The truth is that the pandemic affects us

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<sup>16</sup> Monika K. Hellwig, *The Eucharist and the Hunger of the World* (New York and Paramus: Paulist Press, 1976).

<sup>17</sup> Samuel E. Balentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible: The Drama of Divine-Human Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 286.

all, but that it is not an equalizer. Let us call out to God — yet not alone but with and on behalf of all those who are affected disproportionately.

Remembering Jesus means learning to see the world anew, not through the eyes of common conventions but inspired by the Holy Spirit. Truth with Jesus looks quite different from what one might expect. It is a world — a ‘reign’ or ‘kingdom’ — in which the poor, the mourners, the meek, those who hunger and thirst are blessed (Matthew 5. 3–6); in which God brings down rulers from their thrones and lifts up humble people, in which God fills hungry people but sends rich people away empty (Luke 1. 52–53); in which a cross becomes power, and in which God chooses ‘the foolish things of the world to shame the wise’ and ‘the weak things of the world to shame the strong’ (I Corinthians 1. 18, 27). The liturgy invites us to ponder the world through these notions of the kingdom, it transports us into this new world, and inspires us to live this upside-down kingdom in our daily lives.<sup>18</sup> It requires that we ask the question, what we are praying for? Telling the truth in prayer is one thing (and sometimes it is enough just to cry out our hearts before God), but we also need to think about what we pray for, i.e. what we petition.

The current pandemic confronts us with some of the weaknesses of our society with its economic and political systems. Do we petition God to bring the world back to ‘normal’? Should we long for just going back to what we were used to? All kinds of thoughts circulate on social media and elsewhere about whether the world will be changed because of COVID-19. Some speak of a ‘before and after the pandemic.’ Some things will perhaps change permanently. However, it is quite likely that not much will change at all in the grand scheme of things. We will worship our same idols of economy and health; it is telling that the ‘experts’ that make up national panels that guide the politics of the nations are mainly made up by the virologists and economists — the high priests of the just-mentioned idols. The prophets called out the people of God for injustice and for idol worship. Sure, health and economics are not bad, but the church needs to know whom it worships. The church needs to know that the One it claims to worship is the God of justice, who, through prophets and through Jesus Christ, called out society and religious leaders for setting wrong priorities. Prayers of lament typically include that turning point, where the psalmists confess their trust in God and somehow know that their prayers have been heard. It is a point in the Psalm after which the psalmists see their situation through a new set of eyes. The prayer of lament leads us deeper into our relationship with God and ultimately teaches us to pray ‘Your kingdom

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<sup>18</sup> Armand Léon van Ommen, ‘Worship with Care: The Pastoral Dimension of Liturgy’, *Scottish Episcopal Institute Journal*, 3.4 (2019), 108–23.

come, Your will be done.’ Praying for God’s kingdom to come is to pray for God to turn this world upside down where it is less than revealing God’s reign, and therefore to pray for those who are made (even more) vulnerable because of the pandemic. It also means that we look beyond our own local situation. COVID-19 did not make the locusts in East Africa go away. It did not solve the refugee crisis at the European or Venezuelan borders, on the contrary, it made them worse and revealed painfully the dire living conditions in refugee camps. Let us pray for ourselves, and lament when needed, but let us not forget to pray for others too and even more so than before.

### *Conclusion*

In times of crisis, people turn to prayer. Christian communities can — and must<sup>19</sup> — turn to the rich tradition of lament. As with all liturgy, the prayers of lament are ways of expressing ourselves before the God we worship whilst they simultaneously reveal what we believe about God, ourselves, and the situation in which we find ourselves and this world. In this article we have briefly seen some of the aspects of the genre of lament which shaped Israel’s beliefs, and which continue to shape our beliefs. Lament has its appropriate place within a relationship of trust between two partners. This trust, in a loving relationship, is the ground for prayers that complain and that sometimes even accuse the other partner for being unfaithful. It is the belief that God acts faithfully for the good of creation and God’s beloved people that warrants, and indeed necessitates, the prayer of lament when that good is diminished. In Christian terms, it is when the signs of the reign of God are absent that the believers cry out to God to be present again, to save, to be compassionate, and to work for justice. At the same time, the answer may well be that God asks God’s people whether they have been faithful. The prayer for justice is also a call to justice — liturgy and ethics are never separated.

COVID-19 has affected the world tremendously. In countries that imposed a total lockdown it affected virtually all people. This is indeed a time for prayer, a time to grieve our losses because of the pandemic. The prayer of lament is a prayer of truth-telling. We have to ask ourselves what the truth is that we need to pray and what the content of our petition is. What do we pray for? We do pray for ourselves, for our churches and faith communities, and the struggles we face. The justice of God makes us also pray for others: for those affected disproportionately by the crisis (which may include some of us of course); for those whose houses are not places in

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<sup>19</sup> Walter Brueggemann, ‘The Costly Loss of Lament’, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 36 (1986), 57–71.

which to 'stay safe'; for those who have lost their jobs or income; for those whose mental health is affected even more in these times. The justice of God also makes us look around in the wider world and urges us to continue praying for problems other than COVID-19, also when that is in parts of the world that we might be less connected to. So, let's continue to pray for the refugees in Venezuela, for those at the borders of Europe, and the people in East Africa who suffer from the locust plague. Needless to say, these are only a few examples, taken from items surfacing the news and media just before COVID-19 turned into a pandemic and the resulting lockdown in many countries.

In prayer we learn to see the world with new eyes. There is the mysterious assurance of being heard in the psalms of lament. There is the sudden turn to trust in God. Jesus subverted quite a few religious teachings of his days. When looking with new eyes, we learn to see who are vulnerable and who are being excluded by the systems and conveniences of our society. But looking at the world with new eyes will also reveal something else: not just the needs, but also signs of the inbreaking of God's kingdom. And so, with the traditional Morning Prayer we pray the line of the Benedictus, Zechariah's song: 'In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high breaks upon us.' With traditional Evening Prayer, we pray the line of the Magnificat, Mary's song: 'He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.' Indeed, with traditional night prayer, or Compline, we pray the line of the Nunc Dimittis, Simeon's song: 'My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of every people.' Let us lament, and see the world with new eyes.



## Theology and Ethics in a Time of Pandemic

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Now, more than ever, it behoves the Church to rethink its theology. I say that without qualification. If we do not attend with considerable theological sensitivity to our current 'crisis' — a crisis that excludes no-one, not even members of our government, or bishops, or the very wealthy — then we shall fail to understand its ethical demands and fall prey to the condition of fear and panic that, as I write, is erupting in the United States in mob violence and civil disorder. It can easily happen.

It behoves the Church to rethink its theology. I do not mean make up new theology, but to reapply theology to the present state of society, to recondition our theological doctrines and assumptions so that they may become living forces to direct our behaviour and inspire hope. To live with the anticipation that everything will simply 'return to normal' is neither realistic nor, in the end, ethical. Our hope must be more, far more, than that, a living hope that is driven by a reinvigorated theological and spiritual vision that out of all this mess things will be better, lessons learnt, and a step will have been taken, if you will, in the realization of the Kingdom of God. There are many ways to begin to rethink theology, not just a right way and a wrong way. But one of the least attractive at the moment is to start from the top and work downwards. That takes us to the kind of theology (though I would barely credit it with the name) that says that this pandemic and misery is all a punishment sent by God as a result of our wicked and heedless ways. Despite the story of Noah, I do not believe in that kind of petulant God.

So, we should start from a different place — start in our own back yard. In this instance (and it is not always the case) that is the right place to begin to rethink things and rethink our theology so that it remains living and dynamic. And if the idea of the vengeful God is, at best, unhelpful, then perhaps revisiting the word 'judgment' is not entirely so, but let's leave God out of it for the moment.

Is it that bad judgments have been made? If we can agree that the 'jumping' of a deadly virus into human bodies has been triggered by human carelessness and greed,<sup>1</sup> have we then been judged by our overwhelming

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<sup>1</sup> See [the article by Delyth M. Reid](#) in this issue (above).

preoccupations with growth economics, ecological devastation and assumptions of our own right to all good things? We laugh at Mrs. Alexander's naïve vision of the 'rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate' — but we have created our own version of that, only we have left God out of it. This pandemic is not God's or nature's judgment upon us. There is no need for such personifications. It is the judgment of our own appallingly bad judgments about the way things work.

What is, in a strange way, comforting about where we are is that it involves all of *us*. There are no exceptions. Prime ministers can end up in intensive care just like the rest of us, and no wealth or privilege can buy us exemption. We can see the reaction when someone assumes that they can override the common condition. But it is not enough that there should be howls of anger against Dominic Cummings (and his concomitant exposure of a terrifyingly weak and incompetent government). We can all tell stories of the hardships that lockdown has brought upon us in terms of loss, family separation and so on. But what are we learning as a society and as a community? In that learning we may begin to rediscover a living theology and a new ethic of hope. It is not enough just to express anger.

With our church buildings closed we are learning new ways of 'being together' employing the wonders of modern technology. We are learning, I hope, something about the nature of community. There are, I believe, both negative and positive results from such a reconsideration. The idea of 'community' lies at the very heart of the Church (and you can understand this word as you wish — the local church, the Scottish Episcopal Church, the world-wide Church). While I appreciate the opportunities to 'meet' via the internet for prayer, or 'virtual' drinks parties, or class teaching, we should not pretend that this is gathering together in the full human sense. Properly to 'celebrate' means undertaking a journey, perhaps at some cost, to be with our fellows in community in mind, body and spirit so that we might together pray, eat, drink, perhaps hold hands or embrace. In another paper I shall have more to say about the nature of sacraments online. Just suffice it to say here that when a church 'takes' communion to those unable to attend Holy Communion in church, it is not packaged up and sent by a DLT courier van. Someone goes *in person* as a representative of the community, the people of God in that place.

But I would not wish it to be thought that I do not deeply appreciate the opportunities that Zoom or Skype have given to us. It has been a profound joy to see members of my family, or to pray with members of local congregations. Yet I am always conscious that these events have not dislodged me from my own space, my own study or sitting room, and the idea of 'space' is important. At the touch of a button I can withdraw into my



own privacy again, and into a space that is certainly not ‘sacred space’ but is emphatically *mine*. So, what ethically are we learning from all of this?

I suspect that it is a foolish daydream to imagine that everything will be back to ‘normal’ in due course, once we have all been immunized and ‘made safe’. It will be different for all of us and in many and various ways it will be far from easy. There will be need for a great deal of care, selflessness and compassion that often hurts. And so, as we make do and mend, as best we can, I hope that we are learning something about the nature of the real community that is the Church.

It is in the nature of institutions, it seems, to default to an attitude of self-defence when under threat. The Church has always been very prone to this: only look at the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches when faced with the scandal of sexual abuse by clergy. The institution rushes to a position of self-defence rather than focussing on the real human issues. The same has been true of the National Health Service in the present crisis. It is not that doctors, nurses and many others have not shown quite extraordinary devotion and self-sacrifice in their care of patients and relatives, but the emphasis on the protection of the NHS as an institution has actually distracted a clearly incompetent government from the real task of protecting the lives and well-being of the people of the community. The centralized institution of government has floundered in pathetically weak arguments, while, in spite of that, at the micro-level many people have got on with the true job of caring and healing.

If the Church is now to move forward in hope then it may be that this is an opportunity to turn away from the institution and rethink the theology that identifies the true nature of the *plebs sancta Dei* – the holy common people of God. Perhaps we now have to learn to travel more lightly as a pilgrim Church, rethinking what terms like bishop, priest and ministry really mean in the context of our common calling.

In this time of isolation, fear and uncertainty, we should begin by rethinking the meaning of simple (but at the same time very far from simple) words like love, charity, community, hope and so on. One of the greatest and most beautiful passages in the New Testament is St Paul’s great ‘hymn to love’ in I Corinthians 13. Perhaps we might start here, where everything is cleared away to make room for this one great word — in Greek it is *agape*, held together with faith and hope. What are the characteristics of *agape*? Patience, kindness, the absence of envy and arrogance and rudeness. Enduring all things, *agape* does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. Last year the Doctrine Committee of

the SEC wrote a whole book on the subject of truth,<sup>2</sup> but we barely scratched the surface of its meaning. We have a long way to go and a lot to think about.

While we all have a little more time, perhaps we can begin with trying to learn something of these 'simple' things. And if the Church, as an institution, emerges diminished from this pandemic, then this will matter, in the end, not at all. Indeed, as a pilgrim Church we shall learn to travel, like the disciples of Jesus as they were sent out by their Master on their mission, more lightly and gladly, our hopes raised and not suppressed, our vision a little clearer. I hope so, for we shall have 'done' our theology a little better, perhaps without even being aware of it.

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<sup>2</sup> *Truth and the Church in a Secular Age*, ed. by David Jasper and Jenny Wright (London: SCM Press, 2019).

*Media vita in morte sumus —*  
In the midst of life we are in death:  
A Lutheran Perspective on Human Finitude and the  
Corona Crisis

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Crisis reveals character — the current global health crisis seems to emphasize this saying. One might be reluctant to apply this statement directly to individuals and their personal crises, taking into account that the enormous pressure that could be hidden in the phenomenon of 'crisis' might well mean that a person's first instincts are acted out contrary to character, misled by the need to at least do something, disoriented by anxiety, or mistaken in the first, intuitive grasp of what matters most now. Crisis in a society, however, certainly reveals a lot about the character of society: which narrative can be used effectively to create or evoke agreement about necessary, although perhaps uncomfortable, measures to react to the challenges of the crisis? Which common ground can be referred to for creating a communal spirit in overcoming the difficulties of the crisis? Which notions of the common good and of essential features and core values of human life need to be protected, cannot be suspended from society's agenda, and play a role in finding appropriate responses to the crisis? On display are the weaknesses and strengths of a particular society: we recognize the different capacities and difficulties of national health systems in European countries in coping with the broad and fast spread of the virus. Alongside these superficial phenomena the very core of society shows up in this crisis: convictions, attitudes, values — offering a clear picture of what is apparently a common understanding of what it means to be human in the particular society we are part of. The sudden clarity of society's images of a well lived life, dimensions of life's quality, that usually is much more subtle and difficult to discover, invites our engagement: do we like what we get to see — are these actually the images that orient our own understanding of human well-being or flourishing?

From my Lutheran viewpoint — and I assume from the perspectives of many other religious traditions similarly — the perfectly clear, almost too obvious picture that is presented in our responses to the threat of a global health crisis reveals various problematical aspects of these underlying anthropological convictions. Since these aspects will play an

important role in the self-understanding of societies after the crisis has come to an end, this is an indicator of an urgent need of some thought and discussion about our society's way forward into an era 'after corona'. It seems that in a time of crisis the dialogical imperative in pluralistic societies<sup>1</sup> proves to be exactly this: an imperative — we cannot decide on appropriate measures in response to the threat of the virus in order to 'save lives' without discussing what kind of 'life' we envisage. What do we mean when we talk about preserving life? Biological life, i.e. the 'body-machine' working without major disturbances? Or something else? Discussing the images of being human that are tacitly presupposed in the political decisions, seems to be even more important since, at the moment, such discussions are restricted in different ways: Firstly and in general, panic and fear of an unknown and invisible 'enemy' whose 'strategy of attack' seems to be unpredictable and beyond our defence strategies are impediments to a calm and reflective atmosphere for open discussion. Instead, panic and fear create an atmosphere which tends to silence people who urge discussion and critical thinking about the implications of governmental measures, by knockout arguments of a lack of solidarity with those most vulnerable to COVID-19. Secondly, the specific restrictions under lockdown have closed the spaces that normally function as 'think tanks' within society: public gatherings, the institutions of higher education, religious practice with its orienting function for people's *ethos*, scientific conferences, etc. Whilst in the meantime most of these spaces have reopened 'remotely' via online platforms, these are relatively new forums, unusual ways of engaging, that do not necessarily provide the familiar welcoming atmosphere for discussing urgent questions about the common good and human well-being in our society. Being part of a think tank on an online platform requires different skills to those previously acquired in personal interaction. Thirdly, since we are still in the midst of the crisis and the extensive restrictions in our everyday life have changed our lives quite significantly, the processes of adjusting to the new situation affect our capacity of reflection: we are lacking distance from what we observe. Critical reflection seems unfitting considering the urgency of virus containment. Such an elementary, broad question as: what indeed does it mean to be human? appears to have to wait for more reflective, quieter times. Many questions are silenced by pointing to the emergency and to the temporary character of the measures in place. Nevertheless, there is a need of ongoing societal discussion about how our understanding of being

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Christoph Schwöbel, 'Talking over the Fence. From Toleration to Dialogue', *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie*, 45 (2003), 115–30.

human informs political decisions and strategies to cope with the crisis, as the period of lockdown has severe existential implications for many people. Furthermore, it is very likely that the measures (though probably in a relaxed form) will remain in force for quite some time and will shape our relations and our image of being human.<sup>2</sup> In such discussions, the churches alongside other religious communities play an important role, as institutions within society with a long tradition of interpreting the knowledge implied in myths, beliefs and dogma. They do not only have to offer their own particular perspective on being human to these discussions, but could also share the skills and experience of negotiating appropriate ways of putting conviction into practice, or, in more theological terms, exploring the relationship between dogmatics and ethics — be it as individuals, or in community.

The following observations try to highlight various — by no means comprehensive — aspects of the current situation that raise (in my perception rather worrying) questions regarding their anthropological foundations and implications. The second part tries to engage with Christian anthropology (from a German Lutheran perspective) as a critical conversation partner for the implicit anthropology that is acted out in our response to the current global health crisis. It will focus on a Lutheran perspective on human finitude, mortality and death and its fundamental implications for theological anthropology in this time of crisis. In a very brief last part, we will engage with the question of what kind of orientation can be gained from our outline of a Lutheran concept of death and human finitude for Church's engagement in the crisis and in the future.

### *Being human under restriction*

There is a certain paradox in the way we respond to the threat of the spread of the virus, and the unpredictable course of the disease in those infected. We are learning that distancing, enabling oneself and others to isolate, turns out to be the most effective way of 'loving your neighbour' in the current circumstances. Instead of turning to somebody, of offering help, of being 'there', we are told to stay away (or in a slightly more polite way: stay at home). This indeed makes some sense if we understand one person as vulnerable to COVID-19 and the other one as the — possibly dangerous — virus carrier or transmitter. At the same time, this logic is in stark contrast, if not in contradiction to, the conviction that being human is to be understood as being in relation, one of the fundamental anthropological

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<sup>2</sup> About the 'nasty habit' of temporary measures to outlast emergencies, see Yuval Noah Harari, ['The World after Coronavirus'](#), *Financial Times*, 20 March 2020 [accessed 22 May 2020].

insights not only of the Christian faith but also of other religions and philosophies. We encounter a general discrepancy between life under lockdown and the widespread anthropological insight, that humans not only flourish in and through the relational character of life but simply cannot exist except in relation,<sup>3</sup> strikingly put in John Donne's poem 'No man is an island'. Establishing 'islands' — households — as the safehouses of the nation means living in inhuman conditions. It is, in fact, questionable whether this negation of the human condition helps to protect or preserve life.

It is this paradoxical contradiction to fundamental anthropological insight that encourages us to look a little closer at the narrative that is part of the common response to the crisis. What is the image of being human that guides the governmental measures in response to the challenge of the virus spread? First and foremost, human persons are currently understood *as* virus-risks and *at* risk from the virus. Led by 'the science' (which turns out to be epidemiology and virology in particular), governments' perspectives on being human are shaped by the mechanics of virus spread and containment. Under the severe threat to people's physical health (including the danger of an overwhelmed and under-resourced National Health Service which has not been prepared for pandemics, of which experts had warned for at least a decade), governments take action focused on one very particular dimension: the physical health as related to a specific virus-caused illness. These actions include not only the suspension of most fundamental human rights for an indefinite period of time, be it the freedom of assembly, the freedom of movement, the freedom of religious observance, or children's rights to school education — restrictions that should be considered very carefully, if we do not want to see the foundations of society's freedom and the democratic achievements of the twentieth century be put at risk. They also reduce the well-being of human persons to a single dimension, viz. a very specific aspect of physical health: being free from a virus-caused disease. These measures do not take into account the probable death toll caused by people's nervousness and reluctance to consult a physician with symptoms other than COVID-19, nor the postponement of essential procedures and the resulting backlog, nor the harsh impact on people's mental health, whether on account of confinement to the home, or of the economic costs to families and

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Christoph Schwöbel, 'Human Being as Relational Being. Twelve Theses for a Christian Anthropology', in *Persons: Divine and Human: King's College Essays in Theological Anthropology*, ed. by C. Schwöbel and C. E. Gunton (Edinburgh: 1991), pp. 141–65.

businesses. The logic of the restrictions to protect people's lives lacks a wider perspective on human well-being and flourishing, which cannot be restricted to one specific aspect of health, but relates to human rights, freedom, and dignity. The longer such a one-dimensional perception of what it means to be human continues to guide political decision-making, the more problematic it appears — and the more victims will be affected seriously by a restrictive perspective on human flourishing. This narrow perspective is apparently not bound to the very first and admittedly rushed decisions to combat the virus. Rather, we get used to such an oversimplifying understanding of being human, considering physical health as its highest good or most important value. It seems significant to me in this context that there was little discussion of the advice to wear face masks. The discussion centred on the 'scientific' question whether masks indeed lower the infection risk or rather — quite the opposite — encourage an unjustified notion of feeling safe that leads to carelessness in social distancing. Should we not also discuss what it means for our communication to hide our face from our conversation partner? Again, it says a lot about the 'common sense' of our times, that we did discuss this extensively (however, with different results) with regard to the *niqab* worn by (a minority of) Muslim women, who regard covering their face as a religiously appropriate behaviour in public. Once it has come to our own well-being in its very core, our physical health instead of the religious customs of the other, yesterday's arguments count as much as yesterday's newspapers. Should we not have in mind how much facial expression adds to verbal communication? Should we not take notice of the fact that face masks can exclude people from conversation — people with hearing impairment, foreigners still in the process of improving their English, mentally disabled people who understand facial expressions without understanding the words? And how do we imagine therapeutic counselling work conducted 'behind masks'? Clearly, face masks — like the person behind the mask — are not simply a matter of safety from virus transmission, but a multifaceted issue.

Closely related to the absolute priority with which one dimension of human flourishing — safety from a specific disease and an uncontrolled spread of the virus — has functioned as the guideline for appropriate measures considered by governments, is the narrative of the 'most vulnerable' whom society and each citizen within society has to protect. 'Most vulnerable' according to this narrative are older people as well as people with underlying health conditions (as it turned out on the bumpy road of — sadly — getting to know the virus better: a fairly imprecise description as some people with 'no underlying health conditions' were more seriously affected by the virus than others who had been considered

at high risk when contracting the virus). There was little acknowledgement that urging the whole nation to stay at home in itself created many different groups of vulnerable people — be it victims of domestic abuse and violence, people depending on school meals in order to feed their children, homeless people (where should they stay at home?), people on the waiting lists for surgery, children with underprivileged educational backgrounds, people for whom closing their businesses was no temporary measure but simply their economic destruction, people with dementia or with mental disabilities, who could no longer be visited by their family and unable to understand what was going on, separated families with young children who could no longer see one of their parents, people with mental health issues, singles, families with children with severe disabilities left alone without their usual care provision, the dying who had to suffer a lonely and undignified death, and their relatives suffering badly from being unable to support of them, children in general because for their healthy development contact with and engaging with peers is vital, women whose role in the new routines of isolated families turns out to be especially demanding... one could continue this list endlessly. Could it be that the smallest social unit that is seen as the foundation of society, a household, usually a family, is simply not always the safe and secure place ('my home is my castle') we declare it to be? Could it be that even 'intact' nuclear families cannot supply each and everything that the different members of the family — no matter what age — need in order to flourish? If so, these smallest units of society rely for their healthy functioning on self-critical self-limitation: the nuclear family is not self-sufficient. The current requirement of isolation by household contradicts this insight and overlooks its very problematic implications. Thus, the revival of the idea of intact nuclear units, sufficient in themselves — one is reminded of the image of family life in the 1960s — in the current crisis increases vulnerability in many ways.

It is certainly right to appreciate that everybody is at risk of being damaged by the implications of living under lockdown. Should we be right that living in lockdown is a contradiction to what it means to be human and to flourish as a human being, then it simply cannot be easy for anybody to cope with the restrictions. However, it is wrong to assume that everybody is affected in the same way or to the same extent. The corona crisis is not the great equalizer so that under lockdown all animals are equal. Still — and quite the opposite — some animals are more equal than others (or better: some suffer more severely from being locked up at home and isolated from their various relations to the outside world). The narrative of 'being in this together' whereby we wave goodbye to all non-virtual social platforms and force everybody into isolation seems misleading (to



reinforce people's acceptance of what they have to bear at the moment?) and is in danger of overlooking those who are at high risk. A clear grasp of the manifold faces of the 'most vulnerable' is a necessary step to calculate what measures can be considered appropriate and reasonable.<sup>4</sup> Can we really leave the task of identifying the most vulnerable to virology or epidemiology, and their perspective on the quality of life?

Finally, there is more evidence that in the current crisis the common perception of what it means to be human is guided primarily by a certain understanding of human well-being in terms of health.<sup>5</sup> This evidence was acted out weekly on Thursday evenings at 8pm, when people gathered on their doorsteps clapping for the carers, particularly for 'the NHS'. This

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<sup>4</sup> It is reassuring that the Scottish governmental document ['Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): framework for decision making — Scotland's route map through and out of the crisis'](#) (21 May 2020) notes this: 'As we move forward over the coming months we will recognise that the impact of the virus has not been the same for everyone, although everyone has been affected' [accessed 29 May 2020].

<sup>5</sup> The current view of health as the highest good is related to the broad and unspecific definition of health by the [World Health Organization](#) as 'a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity' [accessed 25 May 2020]. This underlines the importance of health in a broader sense including mental health, insights of psychosomatic medical science and the interdependence between mental and bodily well-being. However, this definition lacks any discriminatory power: every aspect of human well-being is part of the all-encompassing concept of health. This lack makes ranking of health as a good in relation to other goods of human well-being impossible. Given the fact that most of us risk our health quite willingly for the greater value of our freedom, of enjoyment (of tobacco for example), or of donating a living organ, ranking health as one good in relation to other goods of our well-being is essential for our (daily) life and should be integrated in a concept of health. Currently, the panic of the virus prevents us considering that hitherto a risk for our health was no argument to restrict human rights. We are in the process of discovering, what it means, when the concept of health turns into a theory of everything, and when, in addition, health in this broad sense is declared to be a fundamental right, so that every aspect of human life can be described as a matter and in the language of health. Such an approach is in danger of medicalizing every aspect of human well-being — or of subordinating every aspect of human well-being under physical health. (See Neil Messer, 'Toward a Theological Understanding of Health and Disease', *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 31,1 (2011), 161–78.)

weekly gathering ‘reinforce[s] a sense of collective identity, deal[s] with evil and suffering, reaffirm[s] hope’.<sup>6</sup> It seems clear that people’s relation to the NHS in this crisis bears some marks of religious engagement: a worship time is implemented, that gathers young and old together — within the rules of social distancing, of course, but nevertheless the one timeslot weekly, where at least some kind of togetherness, communion, can be achieved. There is a certain commitment to appear at these occasions — people leave their (online) meetings for the few minutes of clapping, schools ask their pupils for contributions to remote-clapping events, neighbourhood WhatsApp groups record apologies from those who, for one reason or another, cannot appear at their doorstep today. The rainbow — once a Jewish and Christian symbol for God’s covenant with God’s people — has become attached to this quasi-religious movement as a symbol and an identity marker for all those who share the values of solidarity and pay respect to those *sacrificing* their lives at the front lines. Is it indeed health (and the ‘system’ that enables access to healing and healthiness) we are ready to worship?<sup>7</sup> And are we willing to pay the price for what this could mean for our society — especially during this crisis? You can get a glimpse of the flip side of the coin — stigmatization of COVID-19 patients — when your gardener or window cleaner tries to hide their

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<sup>6</sup> In [‘The NHS. Our National Religion’](#) [accessed 24 May 2020], Linda Woodhead also argues that this ‘national religion’ did not suddenly come to life in the crisis. Rather, the crisis accelerated and reinforced a process that had begun with the welfare ideal during and after World War II. She points out that the rise of this civil, secular religion that ‘took the historic churches’ model of caring for people “from cradle to grave” was not at least based on Christian ideals and supported by Christian politicians and church leaders.

<sup>7</sup> It is interesting that the founder of the ‘clap for carers’-ritual announced the final clap for carers for the tenth week today (28 May 2020) — trying to avoid that the ritual functioned as a substitute for political ‘solidarity’ in terms of pay rise for the nurses and carers, etc. It might well be that overstressing the role of doctors, nurses and carers as ‘life savers’, the heroes of our society, is not at all helpful for those clapped for putting expectations on them, which they — even with all their might — will not be able to fulfil. (Cf. Yuval Noah Harari, [‘Will Coronavirus Change Our Attitudes to Death? Quite the Opposite’](#), *The Guardian*, 20 April 2020 [accessed 28 May 2020]. According to Harari we will recognize the scientists in the labs as our ‘superheroes’ researching a possible vaccine — the solution to the death threats of the virus that does not imply putting an end to humanity’s postmodern dreams of unending life.

medical history with COVID-19 in order not to lose customers, frightened of virus spread. The flip side of the coin can also be seen when denunciation of rule breaking appears a civic duty, for the greater good. Where are we heading if the ‘culprits’ for possible second waves of infection, the sinners of our days, will be tracked down by surveillance technology?

So far, we have described some aspects of the situation of lockdown as a means to cope with the current health crisis in order to highlight the tacit understanding of what it means to be human. Elucidating the underlying anthropology as the orienting knowledge in this crisis will prove important for the time when we move from the emergency phase of virus containment in which everything — the lockdown of entire nations! — seems possible because a) it is urgent and b) it is only temporary. By now, it is quite clear that the world after corona will not look the same. Only in discovering the presuppositions underlying crisis management (possibly only indicators for the prevalent, but somehow silent anthropology of the last twenty to thirty years, or even longer), in questioning this guiding knowledge and its assumptions and implications, and in offering an alternative approach to ‘more normality’, can society prevent itself from staggering in arbitrary directions and being led by one-sided and therefore inadequate views on human (well-)being. As the Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari wrote in the *Financial Times* on March 20:

Humankind is now facing a global crisis. Perhaps the biggest crisis of our generation. The decisions people and governments take in the next few weeks will probably shape the world for years to come. They will shape not just our healthcare systems but also our economy, politics and culture. We must act quickly and decisively. We should also take into account the long-term consequences of our actions. When choosing between alternatives, we should ask ourselves not only how to overcome the immediate threat, but also what kind of world we will inhabit once the storm passes. Yes, the storm will pass, humankind will survive, most of us will still be alive — but we will inhabit a different world.<sup>8</sup>

The one-sidedness of anthropological orientations in contemporary society is certainly not a development as sudden as the emergence of COVID-19 and its viral cause. Our perspectives on health and sickness,

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<sup>8</sup> Yuval Noah Harari, [‘The World After Coronavirus’](#), *Financial Times*, 20 March 2020 [accessed 28 May 2020].

including their quasi-religious dimensions, are aspects of the broader topic of death, mortality and human finitude, aspects of embodied human life (or, in more religious terms: creatureliness). Before we draw attention to Lutheran theology on this topic, let us briefly consider our contemporary position in its development. This will prove helpful for getting a clearer grasp of the differences and relations to the Christian perspective, developed later on.

*Twenty-first century's attitudes towards death*

Already in his 2016 book *Homo Deus*, Harari provides a striking picture of tomorrow's society and its attitude towards death.<sup>9</sup> He illustrates that the focus on death as a mainly biological term, defined by the end of certain natural processes and mechanics in the human body, and the speedy progress of technical development in the medical sciences have established an understanding of death as the enemy of humanity, to be fought and conquered. Since twentieth century medical science proved astonishingly successful in decelerating ageing processes, the long-term vision of possible renewal of all parts of the body, including ideas of brain 'updates' or rejuvenating processes by outsourcing parts to external hard drives, no longer fed only science fiction authors' dreams but became part of the dreams and visions for the future of humankind that indeed shape present reality in some people's objectives. The motor for this development was the understanding of the human body as a machine with different parts connected by the body's mechanics, rather than animated, empowered to live by a vital force located for example in breath. The metaphor of the body machine started its career in René Descartes's philosophy, defining body and mind in opposite terms (i.e. the extended non-thinking body and the unextended thinking mind),<sup>10</sup> and became effectively established by

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<sup>9</sup> See Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (London: Penguin Village, 2016), pp. 24–34.

<sup>10</sup> See René Descartes, [\*Meditations on First Philosophy\*](#), trans. by John Veitch (1901) [accessed 28 May 2020]: 'To commence this examination accordingly, I here remark, in the first place, that there is a vast difference between mind and body, in respect that body, from its nature, is always divisible, and that mind is entirely indivisible. For in truth, when I consider the mind, that is, when I consider myself in so far only as I am a thinking thing, I can distinguish in myself no parts, but I very clearly discern that I am somewhat absolutely one and entire; and although the whole mind seems to be united to the whole body, yet, when a foot, an arm, or any other part is cut off, I am conscious that nothing has been taken from my mind; nor can the faculties of willing, perceiving, conceiving, etc., properly be

Julian Offrey de la Mettrie's work *L'homme machine* (*Man a machine*) in 1747 and throughout enlightenment's materialist philosophy. It proved, of course, extremely useful in the attempt to bring to light the 'mechanics' of some bodily functions, dividing the body in ever smaller parts for analysis and more and more precise descriptions of bodily processes, rather than explaining it by a hidden, invisible, transcendent and non-divisible force that would not bear further explanation or closer analysis. Heart-lung machines, providing blood circulation and oxygenation when the heart has stopped or even is removed, are the most impressive examples of the functionality of the image of the body as machine. Once we think, act, and hope according to the image of body machines, illness appears as the failure of one part of the body that can be fixed or exchanged. Although for the time being we still struggle with the replacement of certain parts of the body — partly, because the surgery itself has severe effects on other parts of the body, partly because construction and design of an artificial replacement for the non-functional parts proves difficult — the long term perspective and goal of modern medicine is the enhancement of the procedures that guarantee an overall step-by-step replacement of all worn out parts of our bodies. The 'war against death' — a war against the technical problems implied in the body mechanics — will not lead to immortality. Death will still be possible, and (some) people will still die. However, a-mortality, the overall successful prevention of death, appears, so it seems, as an increasingly realistic objective for scientific research and medical technologies.<sup>11</sup> Whether this is desirable is an open question, but the answers that people might give while getting closer to the practicability of such a preservation of their lives, are already shaped by the flourishing market for eternal youth and the economization of health and death.<sup>12</sup> The fact that 'died of old age' with the signature of a GP is no longer considered to be a sufficient explanation on a death certificate affirms the assumption that we are already participating in the process of beating death, the last

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called its parts, for it is the same mind that is exercised all entire in willing, in perceiving, and in conceiving, etc. But quite the opposite holds in corporeal or extended things; for I cannot imagine any one of them how small so ever it may be, which I cannot easily sunder in thought, and which, therefore, I do not know to be divisible. This would be sufficient to teach me that the mind or soul of man is entirely different from the body, if I had not already been apprised of it on other grounds.' (*Meditation VI*, §19).

<sup>11</sup> See Harari, *Homo Deus*, pp. 24–34.

<sup>12</sup> See Joel James Shuman, 'The Last Gift: The Elderly, the Church and the Gift of a Good Death', in *Growing Old in Christ*, ed. by Stanley Hauerwas and others (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 151–66 (pp. 157–59).

enemy. Within the framework of modern medicine a single-minded desire of preventing patients from dying does not necessarily provide the solution to health problems, as can be seen in the ethical debates that have arisen around the concept of 'brain death' as the criterion for deciding to stop the heart-lung machine. There are indications — within medical sciences and beyond it — that the body is not simply the sum of its parts. The organic complexity of bodies cannot entirely be understood in analogy to the machine metaphor. The mechanism of cause and effect that functions as the explanatory model within such an understanding of the body is not only responsible for many of the successes of medical science in the twentieth century but at the same time for a lot of its errors and shortcomings. It falls short by assuming that each part of the body (if we just analyse (detach) it precisely enough) has precise boundaries and particular functions ascribed to it. Perhaps the complexity of bodily processes and the manifold ways of reciprocal influence of different body parts is better described in the paradigm of communication, or information processing. Are there concepts to avoid the narrowness of the body-machine image with its logic of cause and effect?

It is worth noticing that the biomedicalization of death that has taken place due to the success of medical science in the twentieth century has not only medical implications for the perception of death but affects our attitude to death as a whole. In alliance with a society which is single-mindedly oriented towards achievement and for which death (the definite end of a person's capability to achieve something), is the ultimate worst case scenario to be avoided at all costs, the biomedical perspective on death has promoted the marginalization of death: it is not within the midst of society that we encounter death. Death is effectively pushed to the margins of society. Death happens in quarantine: we do not die in the midst of our families. We die in hospitals, care homes, homes for the elderly, cared for by professionals. Coping with death we follow the logic: exceptional circumstances demand exceptional measures. And likewise, death is not encountered any longer in our everyday lives. Our children cannot glimpse through the fence, watching our neighbour's mother-in-law sitting on a bench in the sun, old and wrinkled, breathing only with difficulty, apparently on the brink of death. They do not notice people dying while not being heavily affected by grief and sorrow. They only encounter death — if at all — in the sterility of death in institutions of (medical) care, and they encounter only the deaths of people they loved most. Forming a perception of death that is not shaped by the trauma of loss, the somewhat strange atmosphere of care institutions and the unfamiliarity of ultimate farewell is almost impossible. This situation and the one-dimensional perspective on death as something to be dealt with medically and by



medical staff rather than by relatives or friends has a severe impact on those dying (or expecting to die soon) and — in their apparent uselessness in this situation — their families and friends. It was this insight that was the motivation for the hospice movement, initiated by Dame Cicely Saunders's opening of St Christopher's Hospice in South London in 1967 — a strong movement with a successful history in the UK that is considered to be one of the reasons for the equally strong development of highly regarded palliative care in the UK.<sup>13</sup> However, it seems that in the context of COVID-19 with its aggressive and rapid spread, these insights were easy to forget. Not only those dying from COVID-19, but also many others with diseases not related to the coronavirus but deemed to be 'most vulnerable' and thus in self-isolation, are left to die alone. It seems that the biomedicalization, professionalization and marginalization of death have not been overcome, and could be rekindled easily in challenging times of a pandemic. If all efforts to avoid death prove unsuccessful, death, once again, is the one journey a person has to undertake alone and unaccompanied. Could it be that our unfamiliarity with death and dying, and our ignorance of situations of blissful and comforting ways to live to the end of life's course, contribute to our lack of awareness that a society can by no means leave their dying ones solely in the care of those who because of their profession have to be concerned about and focused on the preservation of life rather than accompanying the process of dying in dignity and peace?<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See [‘Quality of Death Index 2015. Ranking palliative care across the world’, \*The Economist Intelligence Unit\*, \*The Economist\*, 6 October 2015](#) [accessed 27 May 2020].

<sup>14</sup> This question is not simply concerned with dying persons and it is by no means to be understood as criticism of medical staff in the current situation. Quite the contrary! The question is equally concerned with the medical staff who — because family, friends, and sometimes even hospital chaplains are no longer admitted to hospital wards — have to (and do!) fulfil an extremely wide range of roles and tasks at the patients' bedside which must result in a severe overload in a situation of dealing with the medical aspects of COVID-19 which is in any case overwhelming. The additional task of caring for the dying is imposed on them by the strict regulations (and of course, society's new notion of key and non-key workers) despite their lack of professional training for this kind of counselling. For an impression of hospital chaplaincy work in times of the Corona crisis cf. Bryan Mealer, [“‘You’re not alone. I am with you’: the chaplains tending to those dying from Covid-19’](#), 6 May 2020. [accessed 27 May 2020].

*Justification by faith alone*

Martin Luther was not unfamiliar with death nor was he unconcerned about appropriate terminal care and preparation for dying. Death was a commanding presence in his days — not only did the plague make people fear for their own and their relatives' lives, but pregnancy and childbirth, cold and flu, less medical knowledge and care, less nutritious diets and, of course, less comfortable circumstances of life as well as less prevention and protection from natural calamities, forced people to conduct their lives in awareness of their mortality and of being constantly exposed to death, dying and the uncertainty of life.

No later than 1519, only two years after the controversy about indulgences, the starting-point of Luther's more public teaching, he wrote his 'Sermon on Preparing to Die',<sup>15</sup> a short pamphlet that can be considered as the beginning of a 'modification of Catholic thought'<sup>16</sup> which resulted in 'Lutheran liturgies for ministering to the sick and dying and for burying the dead',<sup>17</sup> in the newly introduced 'genre' of funeral sermons, in a rich variety of funeral hymns,<sup>18</sup> and in ecclesiastical ordinances — a profound shift in understanding death in its meaning for theological anthropology and thus in Lutheran attitudes towards death and dying. Instead of a historical account of Luther's teaching and the subsequent Lutheran tradition on death in relation and in contrast to the medieval Church's doctrines and practices,<sup>19</sup> we will turn to the hermeneutical key for this shift — assuming that its explanatory strength also proves useful for contemporary theological anthropology: the doctrine of justification by faith alone as the inner structure of the relationship of God with humans, which defines the framework for Lutheran anthropology in general and understanding death and human finitude in particular. Being human, according to Luther, is being justified by faith in God's justifying work.<sup>20</sup> It is God's relation to the human person, God's justifying act towards the human person and the human response to this relation, established by God, in faith, that constitutes human being. In describing the structure of justification, Article

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<sup>15</sup> *D. Martin Luthers Werke: kritische Gesamtausgabe*, [Weimarer Ausgabe](#), (hereafter WA) 2: 685–97.

<sup>16</sup> Susan Karant-Nunn, '[Martin Luther on Death and Dying](#)', *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* [accessed 11 June 2020].

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> See WA 35: 304–07.

<sup>19</sup> For a concise overview including a bibliography for further reading, see Karant-Nunn, 'Luther on Death and Dying'.

<sup>20</sup> Martin Luther, *Disputatio de homine* (1536), WA 39/I:176.



4 of the Augsburg Confession<sup>21</sup> spells out the relationship of God and humankind, precisely: God being God and humans being human, there is both relation and difference, disclosed in faith in justification.<sup>22</sup> Thus, justification is not to be understood as a special topic within the doctrine of salvation, one amongst other doctrines or faith articles. Justification is by no means to be understood as an accidental ‘emergency’ measure implemented by God in response to human sin. Instead, it is the actualization of God’s grace in salvation history as a means of fulfilling God’s eternal will to be in communion with creation. Therefore, the article on justification has a paradigmatic function for the whole of Christian doctrine.<sup>23</sup> In a nutshell, it contains the doctrine of God as well as

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<sup>21</sup> Article IV: Of Justification, ‘Also they teach that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favour, and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake, who, by His death, has made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in His sight.’ Romans 3 and 4 ([Book of Concord](#)) [accessed 28 May 2020].

<sup>22</sup> In this sense, Luther can describe the subject matter of theology as the relationship between humans, accused of sin and therefore lost, and the justifying God, the saviour of the human sinner: ‘Nam Theologiae proprium subiectum est homo peccati reus ac perditus et Deus iustificans ac salvator’, WA 40/II, 328.

<sup>23</sup> For this thesis, see. Wilfried Härle and Eilert Herms, *Rechtfertigung. Das Wirklichkeitsverständnis des christlichen Glaubens* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1980), p. 99: ‘Die Aussage, daß der Mensch gerechtfertigt werde ohne des Gesetzes Werke allein durch den Glauben an Gottes rechtfertigendes Werk, erweist sich demzufolge als anthropologische Aussage mit *ontologischem* Geltungsanspruch. Die paulinisch-lutherische Definition: “Hominem iustificari fide” hat also tatsächlich den Charakter einer *Definition* menschlicher Personalität.’ (Therefore, the statement that the human person is justified without the works of the law, by faith in God’s justifying work alone, is to be understood as an anthropological statement with the claim of ontological validity. The Pauline-Lutheran definition: ‘Hominem iustificari fide’ is indeed to be understood as a *definition* of human personality.) See also Oswald Bayer, ‘The Doctrine of Justification and Ontology’, trans. by Christine Helmer, *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie*, 43/1 (2001). For further references to the hermeneutical role of the article on justification for theology (at least for Reformation theology), see, Eberhard Jüngel, ‘Justification’, *Religion Past*

anthropology; it summarizes the whole of the doctrine of salvation; it provides the key to the logic of God's work in creation in describing God's unconditioned work of grace — *creatio ex nihilo* — and summarizes the Christian hope of unbroken community of God and God's creatures in the plenitude of God's life in the *eschaton*. Luther is convinced that the doctrine of justification expresses the core of the Gospel. As such, it is the centre of theology and the gateway to theological reasoning. No theological *locus* can be properly elucidated without reference to the logic of God justifying humans through Christ, and humans responding to the gift of justice in the Spirit, by receiving it in faith. What, then, are the implications for theological anthropology and for our approach to an understanding of the meaning of death and human finitude?

The article on justification describes justification as God's act: God imputes faith in the salvation brought in Christ's death for righteousness — in this act he freely grants righteousness not on the basis of humans' own strength, merits, or works, but out of unconditional grace. Thus, the unjust sinner is by God's action changed into a justified person. Sins are forgiven, full communion with God, eternal life, is granted. This communion is the salvation of human existence, the fulfilment of human destiny.

Very basically, belief in the justification of the sinner emphasizes that human being is being in relation — human life is actualized within the framework of a set of relationships, namely the relation with God, relations with the world (other persons and the non-personal world) and the relation to ourselves. The whole set of relations is rooted in God's action, not in the actions of the human person. Whenever the human person acts, whenever she relates actively, she already finds herself in a situation of being related to something or someone — and of course to herself as a possible agent. Human agents rely on the givenness of the framework of relations. Thus, human life is to be understood as a gift. As human agency is related to the given world, uses its materials, relies on the body as an instrument for action etc., human freedom is created, limited freedom. Whilst God in constituting the relational network as the giver of life creates *ex nihilo*, human acts are shaped by relative, finite freedom: they conduct their lives in response to their relatedness to God, the world and themselves. In their actions and their attitudes, they act in accordance with the gift-character of life and its relational framework, or they act in contradiction of the constitution of life for humankind (not by humankind). The article on justification refers to an existence in accordance with this set

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*and Present* (Translation of the German 'Rechtfertigung. IV. Dogmatisch', *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 4, vol. 7 [2004], pp. 111–17 [p. 116]).

of relations as justice.<sup>24</sup> Ignoring or contradicting the constitution of the relational setting is sin. As it is God's creative action that is the foundation of the set of relations, justice is actualized where the human person acknowledges God as the founder or giver of the relational network, the creator. This, of course, implies not only acknowledging God's creative power, but also the world around, and the person herself as a gift, rooted in God's action, not one's own. Since neither we ourselves nor the world around us are the result of our own work, they categorically cannot be under our own control. When Luther defines being human as '*iustificari fide*'<sup>25</sup> his emphasis is exactly this: human beings are beings who cannot produce their own salvation, the fullness of life, but receive it as an unconditional and undeserved gift. Being human means being the recipient of God's grace and justice and responding to it in unconditional trust.

Contradicting the constitution of life's relationality and its foundation beyond human control happens wherever God's relation as the source, cause and end of everything is exchanged for something different from God. Whether it is displaced by the relation to oneself (Luther's famous description of sin as '*incurvatio in seipsum*', being curved in on oneself, a state where the self-relation becomes the centre and the whole of the relational setting) or some aspect of the world-relation is not significant: sin happens within the relation to God as God's displacement and the contradiction to God's being the source, the cause and the end of everything there is, especially humankind. Just as the acknowledgement of God's action in constituting the relational setting implies the appropriate response in acknowledging and respecting the *raison d'être* of others and oneself, a damaged or broken relation to God affects the entire relational network — so much so, that it is impossible for the sinner (because of the misconception of themselves) to recognize their sin and its effects in harmful distance from God as the source of life, self-betrayal and alienation from the world.

The corruption of the entire relational setting can only be recognized and understood if and when the true character of God's relation to humankind (as the creative and salvific foundation and destiny of being human) is revealed, illuminating the contrast between what it means to be human, namely *hominem iustificari fide*, and the current sinful 'state' of life. This eye-opener — or since we talk about relations: heart-opener —

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<sup>24</sup> For a deeper exploration of the concept of justice in Reformation Theology cf. Christoph Schwöbel, 'Justice and Freedom: The Continuing Promise of the Reformation', *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie*, 59/4 (2017), 595–614.

<sup>25</sup> Martin Luther, *Disputatio de homine* (1536), WA 39/I:176.

cannot be provided by the human sinner or any worldly ‘instrument’ (not even by the law) but only by God Godself, showing the gratuitous, creative relationship to humankind in a loving, and thus convincing and irresistible fashion.

Exactly this happens — according to the Lutheran understanding of justification — in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, in his life, death and resurrection as it is apprehended in faith through the Spirit. It happens — in strict correspondence of content and form in the rescue of the sinner — without any cooperation or achievement on the part of the sinner.

Luther’s insight into the fundamental meaning of justification for the whole of the Christian world view grew out of his engagement with Scripture, particularly with Paul’s understanding of God’s justice and the justification of the sinner in his letter to the Romans. Discovering that God’s justice is to be understood as God’s faithfulness to God’s people actively creating justice for those who are unjust and incapable of gaining justice on their own — a painful experience of Luther’s own during his time as a novice in the monastery — removed an understanding of justice that enforces the appropriate assessment of one’s achievements and good works according to God’s will as disclosed in the law. Justification, Luther was convinced, was not to be understood as an execution of law but as illumination of the promise of the Gospel.<sup>26</sup>

The sinner, existing by God’s justifying grace, by being liberated from the dislocation of sin, becomes ‘again’ the recipient of God’s grace and thus is being relocated in the right relationship to God. Even the human response to this is not a human work — as if humans have to complete the task, God has graciously laid out for them, by giving the right response. The proper response is faith as trust in God doing everything so that humans are liberated from all efforts of independence. Faith in God’s justifying grace in Christ leaves everything to God and demands nothing from human beings. God’s justifying grace consists in letting the creature be — in all the relationships in which God places God’s creatures. Faith in God’s grace trusts that being human is meant to be received, not deserved or achieved:

I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my limbs, my reason, and all my senses, and still preserves them; in addition thereto, clothing and shoes, meat and drink, house and homestead, wife and children, fields, cattle, and all my goods;

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Christoph Schwöbel, ‘Promise and Trust: Lutheran Identity in a Multicultural Society’, in *Justification in a Post-Christian Society*, ed. by C. H. Grenholm and G. Gunner (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014), pp. 15–35.

that He provides me richly and daily with all that I need to support this body and life, protects me from all danger, and guards me and preserves me from all evil<sup>27</sup>; and all this out of pure, fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me; for all which I owe it to Him to thank, praise, serve, and obey Him. This is most certainly true.<sup>28</sup>

The understanding of the human incapacity for justification and the emphasis on the Triune God as the only agent in salvation history in such a radical sense defines the role of human activity as a consequence of faith. The insight into the truth of God's faithfulness to his creatures, into the human inability to correspond to this faithfulness with the same kind of faithfulness, the insight into the actuality of atonement in Christ and the fact that nothing needs to be done by the sinners themselves, changes the logic of living a life according to God's will. Instead of the logic of 'fulfilling the law *in order to* earn treasures in heaven' faith's logic follows the pattern of 'fulfilling the law *because of*...'. The believer is set free to act for the sake of one's neighbour and for the gratuitous praise of God without ulterior motives of self-salvation, since it is — in any case — neither possible nor necessary to accumulate good works that could contribute to one's own justification. Such good works do not come from the attempt to fulfil the law, but they flow from the gift character of God's justification: the gift of undeserved justice creates the believer's desire to receive this gift appropriately and to respond to it with a life in accordance with it. Faith without the attempt to live according to the truth that is revealed in it, seems to be a contradiction in itself. Believers cannot return the gift of God's grace. They cannot reciprocate God's unconditional love in equal measures, but they can hand it on, communicate it to their neighbour, to all their fellow creatures.

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<sup>27</sup> It is striking how Luther ties together the notion of life's givenness, the relational character of life, and the finitude/mortality of life in the concept of the body. It is indeed human embodiment that is the signature of human existence: the body is given to us, it is the means to relate to others and to be related to, and it is by our bodily existence that we are limited in space (here and not there) and in time (bound to bodily processes of blossoming and withering). Rejecting the bodily dimension of human life on a large scale in transferring it into the virtual as demanded by the COVID-19 measures cannot be a long-term solution and has to be reviewed carefully and on a regular basis even if implemented only temporarily.

<sup>28</sup> Martin Luther, 'The Creed, 1<sup>st</sup> article: Creation', [\*Small Catechism\*](#) [accessed 11 June 2020].

The radical character of justification in Christ through the Spirit was emphasized in the four *particulae exclusivae*, the exclusive particles of Reformation Theology, taking the good news seriously, that it has been God's initiative to do in Christ on humanity's behalf what humans are not capable of doing. Human persons are justified not by their actions, good works, or merits, but by faith alone (*sola fide*). There is no presupposition on the side of the human person that contributes to God's initiative to declare humans just and thus make them righteous (*sola gratia* — salvation is God's act of grace alone). This initiative is perfectly realized in Jesus Christ and through him alone — nothing has to be done in order to complete the process of justification on the human side (*solus Christus*). Faith, as the only means of justification, has to be understood as a creative act — again! — of God through the Spirit. Becoming a believer is not the work of the religious person.<sup>29</sup> It is the work of the Holy Spirit who enables humans to understand the story of Jesus of Nazareth, his life, his death and his resurrection, as his salvific work for God's people — as it is witnessed in the biblical writings (*sola scriptura*). Faith in Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ is actualized if and when the Holy Spirit illuminates the Gospel as true and in this way grants trust in God's good will for God's creatures and the creation in the believers' hearts and minds.

Since faith is dependent on the Spirit's illumination (as life is dependent on God's creative action), and it is therefore not under human control, it is exposed to doubt and temptation. In the situation of trials and tribulations, when the Gospel of justification is not illuminated for the believer by the Holy Spirit, humans are not able to trust in the promise of the Gospel and 'fall back' into the old logic of the law, focusing on their own achievements, alienated from God's life-giving and redeeming presence — as sinners. According to the new, faith-enlightened, insight into God's justifying grace, the believers live according to the logic of the Gospel — as justified. This tension in the believers' existence, based on the fact that faith is not under human control, Luther describes as the tension of being '*simul iustus et peccator*'. It characterizes our human existence. It is in this tension

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<sup>29</sup> WA 39 I:90,12 and 98,24. Twice in his *Disputation on Justification* (1536) Luther emphasizes that faith is not to be understood as a work. Apparently, Luther is keen not to undermine his strong emphasis on Jesus Christ's work of justification on behalf of the then justified sinner, without the sinner's cooperation. Faith in justification cannot be achieved by human persons. Faith, as is life, is God's gift — bridging the gap between God and the sinner is not a movement of the sinner towards God but God's movement towards the sinner: in the incarnation, the life, the death and the resurrection of God's son Jesus Christ.

that the finitude that characterizes human being in general and that finds its fundamental actualization in the death of the human being as the end of human active relationships, has a twofold face.<sup>30</sup>

*Media vita in morte sumus — media morte vita habemus*

For the believer, the experience that in the midst of life we are in death confirms the basic insight of faith in justification, namely that humans are dependent on God's creative justice to restore and sustain their lives. With death, human activity and capability come to an end. This ending of all human activity in death is, in the perspective of faith in justification, life's inevitable turnout: faith in justification acknowledges the gift character of life and — as we have seen — exactly the implication of this givenness of life as the creaturely finitude. Creaturely freedom is finite freedom. All creaturely capacity to act relies on the givenness of the set of relations in which human beings find themselves. This insight implies that 'death' does not simply refer to the ending of life in time but, indeed, to the fundamental understanding of human capacity in relation to the creativity that characterizes God's being. As such the 'biological' ending of life in time, death, characterizes every moment of life 'before' death. Human finitude can be described as the inevitability of death, casting a cloud over every moment in life: creatures cannot sustain their own lives; they are exposed to death's life-threatening power. *Media vita in morte sumus*. In the midst of life — at all stations of the journey of life — human beings encounter this journey that leads to their end.

Already in carefully describing the situation of the inevitability of death in the existence of creatures, we become aware of a basic insight of faith in justification: there is a tension between describing death as the 'natural' implication of creatureliness and its character as the opposite of life, that makes the experience of death and mortality a painful one. On the one hand, death appears to be nothing but the implication of the very fact that human beings are creatures: as creatures they simply rely on the creator's creative action — and this reliance, or dependence is, so to speak, the 'natural' situation that creatures find themselves in. (*Media vita in morte sumus* – that's it.) On the other hand, death has to be described in its character as a challenge to life and in life, at least as a disturbance, if not contradiction, or even life's ultimate negation. The natural diagnosis '*Media vita in morte sumus*' can only be made in a tone of lament or protest,

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<sup>30</sup> For a Lutheran approach to the concept of death, see Eberhard Jüngel, *Death: The Riddle and the Mystery* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1975), esp. pp. 126–36.

perhaps fear, revealing the unsettling impression that goes along with encountering death — even in thinking. ‘*Media vita in morte sumus* – where do we find help?!’

Faith in justification points the one who asks this desperate question to Christ. This is not only an answer to the question for help — in pointing to Christ it enlightens the true situation of the one who asks for help: facing death, the creatures find themselves helpless and alone. Viewed only by themselves they are forsaken. By being encouraged to look at Christ,<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> In his *Sermon on Preparing to Die*, Luther describes strikingly how this turn to Christ prevents the believer from being drawn into the despair of death and its power to challenge the sinner to forget God’s grace and fall back to the old logic of law and punishment: ‘We should familiarize ourselves with death during our lifetime, inviting death into our presence when it is still at a distance and not on the move. At the time of dying, however, this is hazardous and useless, for then death looms large of its own accord. In that hour we must put the thought of death out of mind and refuse to see it, as we shall hear. The power and might of death are rooted in the fearfulness of our nature and in our untimely and undue viewing and contemplating of it. [...] You must not look at sin in sinners, or in your conscience, or in those who abide in sin to the end and are damned. If you do, you will surely follow them and also be overcome. You must turn your thoughts away from that and look at sin only within the picture of grace. Engrave that picture in yourself with all your power and keep it before your eyes. The picture of grace is nothing else but that of Christ on the cross and of all his dear saints.’ Luther, Martin. *Ein Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben*, WA 2:685–97, [English translation](#) [accessed 29 May 2020]. For this turn to Christ in Luther’s thought cf. also Luther’s translation of the medieval hymn *Media vita in morte sumus* (‘Mitten wir im Leben sind mit dem Tod umfängen. Wer ist, der uns Hilfe bringt, dass wir *Gnad* erlangen? Das bist du, Herr, alleine. Uns reuet unsre Missetat, die dich Herr, erzürnet hat. Heiliger Herre Gott, heiliger starker Gott, heiliger barmherziger Heiland, du ewiger Gott: lass uns nicht versinken in des bittern Todes Not. Kyrieleison.’) In comparison with the Latin text one recognizes that Luther has added ‘*Gnad*’ in the centre of the first verse (the original can be translated as follows: In the midst of life we are in death of whom may we seek for succour, but of thee, O Lord, who for our sins art justly displeased?). Luther adds 2 further verses of his own. The centre of the whole hymn now reads: ‘Das tust Du, Herr, alleine.’ (This you alone have done.), the centre of the third verse: ‘Zu Dir, Herr Christ, alleine.’ (To you, Lord Christ, alone). This way, in the midst of death (that surrounds all



creatures gain the right perspective — on the help that is provided, and on the previous mistake in looking at their own situation in isolation from the entire set of relations they discover (by being referred to Christ) as their life's relational setting.

What, then, is the help in Christ? What do we see, if we — who in approaching the deadliness of our being are lost in despair — follow the insight of faith in justification and look at Christ?

Firstly, we are directed to look at Jesus Christ who died and was raised again. The Gospel of Christ's death and resurrection grants the certainty of faith that God, indeed, responds to death by creating anew. The human Jesus Christ who died on the cross, lives again. The resurrected Christ is the crucified Jesus. This continuity, that is crucial for the message of the Gospel, is ensured in Christ's bodily resurrection: God saves God's human creature in its humanity which implies its finitude which finally must lead to death. Therefore, God saves God's human creature through death. Faith in justification sees in Jesus Christ's death and resurrection for the first time God creating someone anew from the old material. 'But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died' (I Corinthians 15. 20).

Secondly, faith in justification discovers (by the inspiration of God's Spirit) that his death and his resurrection, his entire life, indeed, was a life lived *for us*, a death died *for us* and a new life created and opened up *for us*. Jesus Christ's cross and resurrection are directed towards us. Faith discovers this direction of Jesus's entire being as a being for us in his whole life: his teaching and actions aim at us when he lets us experience God's unconditional love in his words and his deeds. Nothing in his life happens for his own sake. His entire life points us to God, our creator, so that we gain full life — there is no other mission in Christ's life, but disclosing God's justice for us. As a result of this being for us, Jesus died for us, revealing that even death is not able to separate us from God's love (see Romans 8. 38) and so, his resurrection becomes our hope.

This then, as we have already seen, implies both: the insight that we, indeed, are helpless in sustaining our own lives, in the very same way in which we are helpless in attaining justice, and that the attempt at saving ourselves is an implication of the sinful contradiction to the relationality of our life. We are unable to sustain our lives because this is not in the capacity of us creatures. Whenever we attempt to do so, we contradict the relation which, truly, grants our life — the relation to God. It is the sinners' attempt to live out of their own power that closes up the sinners' life from

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our existence) we are directed towards Christ, focused on him. See WA 35:126–32.

its grounding in being related to God. This attempt, obviously, cannot be successful. It falls back into the old logic of the law and cannot but understand death as an event of God's wrath, punishment for sin. It is not surprising that in the experience of death (and indeed, in all other forms of desperate suffering) with its ultimacy, its pain, and the fear of the unknown that is involved in it, this logic seems very convincing. In the midst of life, we encounter death, whenever we turn ourselves away from God's presence and focus on ourselves and our own achievements. This perception of death, indeed, leads to despair.<sup>32</sup>

However, at the same time (*simul*), this simply reinforces the believers' dependence on faith in justification by grace alone, in facing death. In this faith we do not only experience the self-contradiction in viewing our life in isolation from its dependence on God's creativity, and our salvation in isolation from its dependence on God's grace. We also discover ourselves as sinners. We experience all our isolation overcome in Christ's work, our justification. If this insight is granted by the Holy Spirit, we can consider death as a reconciled creature, accepting our limited power in our engagement with death: instead of insisting on helping ourselves (which would be the instinct of the sinner), we know our incapacity and God's promise (as the ones who are justified) and turn (or better: are turned) to God in Christ through the Spirit. Such reconciled creatureliness is seen to be lived out in Jesus of Nazareth on the cross: when challenged by those who pass by his cross to save himself and come down from the cross (Matthew 27. 40), Jesus ignores their mocking and rejects the temptation. Instead, he confesses his despair and helplessness in the face of death by praying the words of Psalm 22, addressing God and his apparent absence in lament, trusting that it is only God who could offer help. Faith in justification by grace alone reconciles the believers with their dependence on God and the finitude of their power. It underlines that human being is meant to be receiving what God in God's endless love gives. Death as the point in life at which we have nothing at all left to give, is the particular place to be directed away from ourselves towards God. This turn — away from what we can do or have to do, to God's promise to give us justice, life in the fullness of reconciled relations — is the turn from

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<sup>32</sup> Luther confronts this risk of being submerged in despair about one's sin with the advice to seek reconciliation with those, whom we have sinned against, and with the admission of sins, followed by the Eucharist. The assurance of God's grace and justice, achieved by Christ for us, plays an important role in his pastoral care at the bedside of dying people, see WA 2:685–97.

experience ‘in the midst of life we are in death’ to the awareness, that we are called by faith to find *life in the midst of death*.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, it is important to note that this turn, that has to be granted by God again and again, is not completely described when it is described as the creatures’ acceptance of their finitude, so that they could die a peaceful death. Faith in justification in Christ grants even more than this because it offers trust in God’s faithfulness to God’s will to be in communion with God’s creatures, trust that finds its ground in the death and resurrection of Christ. This trust enables creatures to be reconciled with their own powerlessness and utter dependence on God’s creative and saving action, not only in acceptance of what they cannot change, but in welcoming this dependence on God as their benefit: the gateway to an existence in Christ, *extra nos*, not shaped by the limitations of creaturely life but by participation in God’s life. This trust enables the believer fully to taste life in the midst of finitude, vanity and death, trusting God’s promise to overcome death with life: what creatures receive in justifying faith is much more than the life they had lived so far — it is the promise of the life that God creates anew using the material of this old world. Man, in this life, is God’s pure material for the life in its future form. Just as the whole of creation, which now is subject to vanity, is for God the material of its future glorious form.<sup>34</sup> In the coming life, creatureliness will be liberated from the painful limitations of life which we experience in this present life as implications of the fallen creation — it will liberate God’s human creatures to be *creatures* in *full* communion with their creator. Therefore, believers trust to discover traces of this plenitude of life, in our life’s direction — not towards death, but through death to life: trusting that God’s story with us does not finish with death’s last word but continues to be told by God.

### *Seeking life in times of crisis*

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have seen an enormous effort of humankind to push death to the edge of life, viewing it as life’s worst case and nurturing the idea of humanity’s greatest and everlasting achievement of overcoming the last enemy by the magic tool box of modern high tech medicine with its various ways of human enhancement, establishing quasi-religious structures around the concept of ‘health’. For a few months now, we have been caught off guard by a new, and thus unknown, disease, still

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<sup>33</sup> See WA 35:130.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Quare homo huius vitae es pura materia Dei ad futurae formae suae vitam. Sicut et tota creatura, nunc subiecta vanitati, materia Deo est ad gloriosam futuram suam formam.’ (Theses 35 and 36 of Luther’s *Disputatio de homine*, WA 39/1:177).

unpredictable in its course, effects and vulnerabilities and, last but not least, with its frightening death toll in many of the affected countries.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, the measures which governments have implemented to contain the virus cause hardships of very different kinds — each and every one a witness to the truth that being human is not identical with being healthy but refers to a much richer relational network which people cannot be isolated from without experiencing life as diminished, severely limited, and exposed to death. Here we are — in the midst of death.

And here is the Church. Entrusted with the Gospel, which addresses exactly this situation: the desperate experience of the human being exposed to death, without a clue how to save lives without at the same time — and in possibly different circumstances — risking the lives of others. Entrusted with the Gospel, which does not end here in the midst of death, but has a different perspective to offer: that death is overcome — overcome not by human means of enhancing life, but by God's promise to bring to new life to what in the present life has come to its end.

It would be, I assume, an absolutely fatal mistake — and self-misunderstanding of the Church — at this very moment in history, not to keep, first and foremost, to its primary tasks: it is the mission of the Church as the community of believers, who find themselves, their entire existence as believers, dependent upon the promise of the Gospel, to communicate the Gospel. It is here, in the proclamation of the Gospel, that the believers find — when and where the Spirit blows — access to the foundational relation of their lives. Communicated amongst the believers in human words and by means of human bodies (such that they are indeed witnessing the Gospel, not simply presenting a text), the word of Scripture becomes *viva vox evangelii*, the living voice of the Gospel because by means of this witness, according to the self-understanding of the Gospel (the promise within the promise), the Holy Spirit grants insight and understanding.<sup>36</sup> Without the ongoing (and therefore institutional) communication of the Gospel, faith cannot be sustained. Without witness to others, the community of saints, justified sinners in their embodied presence for one another, faith will dry out. In the celebration of worship — listening to the witness of the Gospel, receiving the embodied promise of

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<sup>35</sup> Due to differences in counting and incomparability of figures in different countries it seems to be too early to say much about the excess mortality data that would help estimate the 'real' threat of COVID-19, in comparison for example with flu waves of recent years. For first graphs of such figures, see [‘Tracking covid-19 excess deaths across countries’](#), *The Economist*, 16 April 2020 [accessed 29 May 2020].

<sup>36</sup> See [Augsburg Confession](#), Art. 5 [accessed 29 May 2020].

Christ's presence in the sacraments — believers find themselves enabled to respond to God's presence in their lives in the confession of sins, joining in singing the 'tune of their faith', in prayers of petition and thanksgiving, praise and lament (perhaps most fitting in times of crisis!). Here is the distinctive place for the assurance of the Gospel, in Word and Sacrament, here it speaks into the lives of believers, and here do believers respond to this assurance.

Without worship the Church cannot be the Church. Postponing the administration of the sacraments as the embodied means of receiving justifying grace might seem natural from the perspective of virology. The logic of faith that seeks reassurance in times of trials and longs for the visible signs of God's presence (life itself) in the midst of death must contradict such a view. Especially with regard to those who are dying, postponing the promise of the Gospel (and the failure to provide appropriate pastoral care for the dying and those who are left behind) is an impossibility.<sup>37</sup> Declaring this to be an act of love seems not to be a convincing solution.

It is, it seems, an urgent task for the Church to reflect on her being, her mission and her tasks, and on the, indeed challenging, question: what ways can be found to hold fast to her self-understanding and her mission, and to be faithful to her calling in fulfilling her tasks in the current circumstances, balancing a responsible attitude towards public health and respect for the meaning of being the Church, as the community of believers, who gather around Word and Sacrament?

Communicating this not only amongst ourselves but also in the wider society, would be a further — equally urgent — task. Could it be that we have underestimated the importance of this task for quite a while? How can we expect politicians to measure the impact of the restrictions imposed on the Church and her believers, if we don't offer an understanding of faith, its constitutive meaning for the believers' identity, and its dependence on the embodied communication amongst believers, so that it becomes evident, that faith is not a private matter but concerns everybody as the constitutive relationship (the 'ultimate concern' (Paul Tillich)), that therefore church cannot be located in the privacy of believers' lives, and church practice cannot be postponed like a picnic in the countryside until the weather has brightened up.

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<sup>37</sup> This, probably — and hopefully! — poses not only a problem for those who have to die and their families and friends, but also for ordained ministers around the world who have promised — before God and their congregation — to provide the ministry of teaching and the administration of the sacraments ([Augsburg Confession](#), Art. 5).

Perhaps such a conversation about the being of the Church as a community of faith in God's grace and justice, about its mission and its tasks and duties in society would invite other religious communities to join in, offering their perspective, gradually developing a public conversation about 'what matters most': seeking life's orientation that in these days is desperately needed.

## Finding Hope in these Limiting Times

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As individuals and societies, we quickly felt the impact of new limits as governments responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. So many things we had taken for granted and that made up the lived reality of our lives suddenly were not possible anymore. Collectively and personally we experienced a sudden and intense limiting of freedoms that forced us to make do with much less. Less movement, less social interaction, less shopping, less travel, less entertainment, less money, less fresh air, less work, less touch, less worship, less fellowship and so on and on.

Already, however, people are noticing some of the positives of this, that sometimes limits can be doorways to new things, less can be more. More bird song, more quiet, more clean air, more space, more time (for some), more money (for some), more prayer, more conversations with far flung and old friends, more making do, more God even, and so on. Accepting limits can sometimes lead to new life.

One of the writers who has explored how humans live with limits is Ernest Becker in his seminal book *The Denial of Death*, published in 1973.<sup>1</sup> The book went on to win the Pulitzer Prize in 1974, two months after Becker himself died from colon cancer. Becker was a cultural anthropologist working in various universities in the USA and latterly in British Columbia. Becker believed that individual character is essentially formed around the process of denying one's own mortality, that this denial is a necessary component of functioning in the world, and that this character-armour masks and obscures genuine self-knowledge.

An example of this is what Charles Taylor calls the 'middle condition', that is 'a kind of stabilized middle condition' where we have escaped from a sense of ennui or exile or emptiness without having reached fullness (but slowly moving towards it); 'in the best scenario, [...] 'we strive to live happily with spouse and children, while practising a vocation which we find fulfilling and also which 'constitutes an obvious contribution to human welfare to human'.<sup>2</sup> In Becker's terms this allows the person to function effectively in the world by being a productive citizen in terms appreciated

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<sup>1</sup> Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973; repr. London: Souvenir Press, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 6–7.

by our culture. This does come at a price though of denying parts of ourselves, consciously and unconsciously, and limiting our self-understanding.

In this COVID-19 season the normal pattern of our existence is disrupted and the fear, confusion, anxiety, uncertainty can throw into question some of our deep assumptions. In our example, this may mean when suddenly one's income and employment are under threat where does that leave the narrative arc of a secure and successful middle-class existence?

Becker calls these narratives 'heroic systems' which help frame 'man's need to justify himself as an object of primary value in the universe, to stand out and be a hero, make the biggest contribution to world life'.<sup>3</sup> Becker was writing out of the context of late 1960s West Coast USA and may seem a little dated in our context where the celebrity has eclipsed the hero. The essential truth though still holds, that our lives are given validation and purpose by the stories and values of our family, faith and culture so that we sense our lives are not simply pointless and that our actions matter.

### *The role of limiting narratives*

A fairly lengthy quotation can take us into the flow of Becker's thinking:

Man [sic] cuts out for himself a manageable world [...] he comes to exist in the imagined infallibility of (this) world around him [...] He doesn't have to have fears when he is solidly mired and his life mapped out. All he has to do is to plunge ahead [...] in the strange power of living in the moment and ignoring and forgetting.<sup>4</sup>

Although it may appear that Becker is critical of human behaviour here, he is actually deeply sympathetic of our attempts to make sense of life and navigate a way through it. What he is calling for, as we will discover, is greater self-awareness so that we can be as emotionally and spiritually healthy as we can be. There is a thickness of description here (and throughout his book) that tries to reflect the ambiguity and complexity of lived human experience.

We don't tend to be afraid when life seems certain and the course set, although Becker's use of the word 'mired' does raise the question as to what price we are paying for this security. His use of William James's

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<sup>3</sup> Becker, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Becker, p. 23.



phrase ‘the strange power of living in the moment’ captures something of the momentum of our pre-COVID life and indeed of most of the 120 years or so since James first coined the phrase in the 1901 Gifford Lectures. We throw ourselves into our work and our social lives and make great assumptions about the fixedness and, ‘imagined infallibility of the world around us’. I don’t think anyone would have believed that the world economic system would more or less grind to a halt in the space of a week. That is a failure of an imagined infallibility even Becker couldn’t have foreseen. He goes on to say a few pages later that:

Man is reluctant to move out into the overwhelmingness of his world. The sense of value and support that nature gives each animal by instinct man has to invent and create out of himself the limitations of perception and the equanimity to live on this planet. The great boon of repression is that it makes it possible to live decisively in an overwhelmingly miraculous and incomprehensible world, a world so full of beauty, majesty and terror that if animals perceived it all they would be paralyzed to act.<sup>5</sup>

This further illustrates how cultures create what, as we have seen, Becker calls heroic systems which keep us secure in our self-esteem by allowing us to believe we are participating in something of lasting worth. In this sense we have been living with limits ever since the dawn of humankind, without them we would be unable to, as Becker writes, ‘live decisively’. What animals have by instinct, that sense of place and purpose and function, man has to create for himself from his own stories and values. He makes for himself as it were a clearing in the jungle of the universe where he can live with a created purpose and meaning and what Becker tellingly calls ‘creative self-restriction’.<sup>6</sup>

This last phrase, creative self-restriction, is redolent with significance for our time as it implies that we don’t mind limits so long as we have some say in creating them and can live with them. Often though our ‘reality’ is so close to us that we can’t see it for the construction it is and take it as a given, a true representation of what the world is. This has the added bonus of giving us a clear place within that world and a supporting narrative for our values and decisions. I’m reminded of the story of the old fish who swam past two young fish and asked them ‘Hi, how’s the water?’ To which they

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<sup>5</sup> Becker, pp. 50 & 52.

<sup>6</sup> Becker, p. 178.

replied, looking at each other ‘What water?’ All this is as true for the Church as anyone else.

*Becoming aware*

Becker did not have a problem per se with this human activity of limiting narratives as a strategy for managing life, but he was concerned that we are so unaware of it happening. What we call personality and character, the most instinctual and non-reflexive part of ourselves is itself an armour that helps us pretend that the world is manageable. We hope and believe that the things we create are of lasting worth and meaning and, that we and what we produce count. The key question is: how conscious are we of what we are doing to earn this feeling of heroism?

If everyone honestly admitted their urge to be a hero it would be a devastating release of truth. It would make man demand that culture gives them their due — a primary sense of human value as unique contributors to human life. How would our modern societies contrive to satisfy such an honest demand without being shaken to their foundations?<sup>7</sup>

The sudden changes in the lives of many in recent months will have called into question the stability of this trade-off between individuals and their societies. Good, hard working citizens have done all that was expected of them and through no fault of their own, are suddenly without work or placed into great uncertainty. With so much continuing to be profoundly uncertain many of us find that the world is not as manageable as we thought it was. We may not see ourselves in the terms of heroics that Becker uses, but we can identify with the sense of our culture providing us with different avenues to pursue lives of meaning and hopefully some significance. This is embedded in our relations with one another and a consensus of some sort that acknowledges shared values and principles. Increasingly in the coming months as the economic fallout continues to affect more and more people our sense of validation may come increasingly under pressure.

This is particularly so for many young people who, growing up in the shadow of the 2008 financial crash were cautious of the model being offered by their parents’ generation who had come of age in very different circumstances. One of the concerns in the months and years ahead is the widening of the economic gap between generations, and the load of debt on those who still have most of their lives ahead of them. The younger people

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<sup>7</sup> Becker, pp. 4–5.

are deeply impacted now and to a greater extent in the future by the economic fall out of the current crisis. Older generations are often in a more secure financial position and they are sufficiently embedded in their cultural narrative and heroic value system to weather the coming storm. The challenge for the Church (made up largely of older people) was laid out by Becker almost half a century ago, born out of the tensions and conflict of late 1960s west coast America.

The crisis of modern society is that the youth no longer feel heroic in the plan for action that their culture has set up. They don't believe it is empirically true to the problems of their lives and times. We are living a crisis of heroism that reaches into every aspect of our social lives. If the church insists on its own special heroics it might find that in crucial ways it must work against the culture, recruit youth to be anti-heroes to the ways of life of the society they live in. This is the dilemma of religion in our time.<sup>8</sup>

I find these words prophetic, challenging and also inspiring. We lament the absence of many of this age group from our churches. The current pandemic has thrown into question so much of what was taken as given in 'the plan of action that our culture has set up' and we as a church need to own our legacy of shoring parts of that up. Perhaps we can partner with them in trying to build a fairer and more honest and equitable civic contract between individuals and society. The Church needs to recover the liberating and emancipating power of a narrative of Kingdom values that can make sense of the need for such changes.

The calls for greater appreciation for those with lower incomes who are doing vital jobs for maintaining our society also reflects this questioning of a value system that is in need of serious re-ordering. What might a new set of limits look like on income, on taxation, child support, renting and mortgages etc. These are very practical ways that a system of behaviour and rewards can be reworked.

### *Individual flourishing and collective well-being?*

Developing such narratives and building a consensus around these is a task that has to look hard at reality for what it is, operating with a hermeneutic of suspicion towards our own settled views. By their very nature such strategies of 'reality-management' keep us within safe limits and away from that which can unsettle and throw us off balance.

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<sup>8</sup> Becker, pp. 6–7.

Normal man bites off what he can chew of life and no more. Men are built like creatures, to take in the piece of ground in front of their nose. But as soon as man lifts his nose from the ground and starts sniffing at eternal problems like life and death, the meaning of a rose or a star cluster, he is in trouble.<sup>9</sup>

Becker borrows from Otto Rank here to explore the tension within people created by the desire to be part of something bigger but also to stand out and be an individual. He uses the concept of Agape to describe on the one hand the 'natural melding of created life in the Creation, the self-expansion in a larger beyond' (including wider society).<sup>10</sup> Over against this is Eros which is the urge for life, for exciting experience, for the development of self-power, 'the uniqueness of the individual creature, the impulse to stick out of nature and shine'.<sup>11</sup>

We face a dilemma. If we give in to Agape too much, we risk failing to develop ourselves, by sacrificing too much for the common good. If we expand Eros too much, we may cut ourselves off from a natural dependency on a larger creation and lose a sense of gratitude and appreciation for the grace of so much of life. How a person solves this natural yearning for self-expansion and significance within a connectedness to others determines the quality of their life. People are looking for a certain degree of sharply defined individuality, a definite point of reference for the practice of goodness and all within a certain secure level of safety and control. The challenge now is to do this with a greater awareness of those in our society who have had their lives severely set back by the COVID-19 crisis. How can we pursue our own flourishing (Eros) within the limits of our shared humanity (Agape)?

### *A narrative of sacrifice*

We know there is more to life than the immediate day to day, the 'ground in front of us', but we opt for a narrative that leaves us feeling secure and safe. There is no doubt that religions, despite the fact that they are supposed be about the great beyond, play a decisive role in taming the wildness and uncertainty of 'the jungle'. This allows us to convince ourselves that we are dealing with cosmic questions and even God, when in fact we are just finding a way to cope with the tensions of our creatureliness.

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<sup>9</sup> Becker, p. 178.

<sup>10</sup> Becker, p. 152.

<sup>11</sup> Becker, p. 153.

Our current crisis has not only brought to the surface these cultural narratives we live by that make the universe manageable, but also revealed their fragility. This may actually be a place for a new beginning, that the reality of our lost-ness is a condition for growth:

This is the simple truth — that to live is to feel oneself lost — he who accepts it has already begun to find himself, to be on firm ground. These are the only genuine ideas; the idea of the shipwrecked. All the rest is posturing, farce. He who does not feel himself lost is without remission, that is to say, he never finds himself, never comes up against his own reality.<sup>12</sup>

COVID-19 has brought us to a place of great uncertainty about the way ahead, we have come up against the limits of our current paradigms and looking forward we are indeed lost, if not quite entirely shipwrecked. Instinctively we resist this, but the Bible again and again portrays characters facing the limits of very uncertain futures, even death itself and discovering that God is very present at that moment. Starting from this place we may recover something of the radical and dynamic nature of the early years of the Christian faith.

In a classical world which worshipped strength and beauty, the teachings and writings of the Apostle Paul burst onto the scene with a scandalous and shocking power:

That Christ — whose participation in the divine sovereignty he seems never to have doubted — had become human and suffered death on the ultimate instrument of torture, was precisely the measure of Paul's understanding of God: that He was love. The world stood transformed as a result.<sup>13</sup>

Paul kept returning to the offensive nature of the Cross because the more he doubled down on its centrality the more he undermined the dominant cultural narratives of the day. Jesus was not just another teacher of wisdom, or a person who had demonstrated a strong ethical example. In him the divine had experienced the limits of suffering, shame and death. In him God 'takes [our] very creatureliness, [our] insignificance and makes it into a condition of hope'.<sup>14</sup> The belief in such a demonstration of God's love was to ultimately turn the classical world upside down. 'Behold those Christians,

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<sup>12</sup> Becker, p. 89.

<sup>13</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion* (London: Little, Brown, 2019), p. 69.

<sup>14</sup> Becker, p. 204.

how they love one another.’ This had immense social implications in the early centuries AD.

The fabric of things was rent, a new order of time had come into existence, and all that had previously served to separate people was now as a consequence, dissolved. ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.’<sup>15</sup>

*All in this together*

We have heard much in recent days of how ‘we are all in this together’ and certainly there was initially a sense of that, that this new disease was no respecter of persons. As time has gone on though we do realize how income and living conditions do actually make a big difference, and this is just within western democracies. Globally the differences become a chasm. The tensions between our generations and the long-term financial impact on our younger people present the Church with a challenge to return to this ethos of the early church. What does it mean to be one in Christ Jesus in a post COVID-19 society? What might the radical power of the narrative of the crucified God who embraced the limit of suffering human existence and death release into our communities if we can challenge the dominant narratives of strength and beauty today?

We return to Becker again, who recognized the power of this narrative:

This is the most remarkable achievement in the Christian world picture: that it could take slaves, cripples, imbeciles, the simple and the mighty and make them all secure heroes, simply by taking a step back from the world into another dimension of things, the dimension called heaven. Or we might better say Christianity took creature consciousness — the thing man most wanted to deny — and make it the very condition for his cosmic heroism.<sup>16</sup>

Becker was not a Christian, but as a cultural anthropologist was able to recognize the personal and social power of accepting our limitations in a redeeming narrative that enabled us yet to face a universe as it truly is. The fact that the Church over the years has domesticated this story and allowed

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<sup>15</sup> Holland, p. 69.

<sup>16</sup> Becker, p. 160.

it to serve the interests of power in society does not remove the potency and potential of a rediscovery of its relevance for today.

To some extent we already see this in action. One could argue that the world has chosen to protect the elderly and the weak in health by locking down our economies and societies. The strong and the healthy and the young have paid the price for protecting those in greater danger. Tom Holland in his recent book *Dominion*, repeatedly returns to this same theme of weakness and strength and whilst recognizing that the church has often not lived up to its calling makes this observation in the closing lines of the book:

Yet the standards by which [the church] stand condemned are themselves Christian; nor even if churches across the West continue to empty, does it seem likely that these standards will change. 'God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong'. This is the myth that we in the West still persist on clinging to. Christendom in that sense remains Christendom still.<sup>17</sup>

By paying such a high economic and social price for protecting those who are more vulnerable we demonstrate that the deep narrative of sacrifice still runs deep in our society, that the weak do need to be cared for by the strong. The limit of our own pursuit of happiness and security is embedded in our social relations with others and the widespread acceptance of this lockdown reveals something very encouraging about our common humanity.

### *Concluding thoughts*

Living with limits is an essential part of being human as we have seen. These limiting narratives are given by our culture and upbringing in a form of shared values (or Charles Taylor's Social Imaginary) and to a large extent remain subliminal. They allow us to act decisively, to live with a certain level of security and have a reasonable sense of self-esteem. They help us to live with the tensions between our desire for individual flourishing and our embeddedness in a community. How we resolve this tension is a key part of living well, as Becker points out: 'If there is tragic limitation in life there is also possibility. What we call maturity is the ability to see the two in some kind of balance. Character is the restrictive shaping of possibility.'<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Holland, p. 525.

<sup>18</sup> Becker, p. 266.

The turmoil of recent weeks and months has made us more aware of these important structures and processes which remain underneath our societies and individual lives. By being brought to the surface we have a chance to examine them and assess whether they still are aiding the process of helping people to live well together in community. The Christian faith with its foundational ethic of sacrifice and new life offers a narrative framework which can help our society have conversations about mutual and creative self-restrictions so that we can move forward and leave no one behind.

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: 'Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death — even death on a cross!' (Philippians 2. 6–8, NIV).



## Coronavirus — Doing Things Differently

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When I try to think of the strongest impressions I have registered over the period of the COVID-19 pandemic so far, I think one key impression, is the sense of people doing things — or having to do them — differently. Because I have been fortunate enough to avoid having to go to hospital, my thoughts turn mostly to shop assistants marshalling customers, dressed in personal protective equipment, armed with hand sanitizers. I think of countless people sitting at their computers in their pyjamas (or at least the bottom halves)! In particular I think of my friend, home-schooling her young children who, released from normal school rules and having the advantage of good weather and a garden, turned this space into the equivalent of a leisure centre for garden wildlife with bee and hedgehog hotels and cafés for nesting birds. I will return to this more everyday context but bear with me as I briefly digress into the world of philosophy.

Over the last few weeks, I have been looking again at philosophers Gilles Deleuze, and his sometime collaborator Félix Guattari, who both lived and worked in France in the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Together or separately, they were prolific writers and hard to keep up with, even though, as both died in the 1990s, you would think the task would be essentially finite! But perhaps in tribute to the kind of work they did, the process of getting to grips with their 'oeuvre' seems to set off more

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<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze was born in France in 1925 and, as a doctoral student, attended the Sorbonne's prestigious graduate school, the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, alongside other key figures of what has been termed the 'poststructuralist' movement such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. He was appointed to his first permanent academic position in 1969 at the experimental university of Paris VIII (Vincennes). In the aftermath of the student and union demonstrations in Paris during May 1968, he met Félix Guattari (born 1930), a psychotherapist and political activist. Their best-known collaboration was the two volume, *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (see below). He suffered from a chronic respiratory condition and it is thought this contributed to his suicide in 1995 at the age of 70. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti Oedipus: Capitalism & Schizophrenia*, I (London: Continuum, Athlone Press, 1984); *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism & Schizophrenia*, II (London: Continuum, Athlone Press, 1988).

thoughts than it concludes. You could say that they were practitioners of the art of concept creation. They were not attempting to reach an ultimate ruling on what was right or true — they thought this was an illusory goal for philosophy — but seeking to illustrate something of the variety of ways in which we human beings make sense of the chaos which is the reality we live in, and can only dimly grasp with our embodied minds. So, they were interested in people doing and thinking things differently in this predicament. Deleuze spent many years writing about the work of other, earlier philosophers; not trying to put them down as outdated or wrong but acting as a curator of earlier concepts as more or less useful ideas for all of us. Some of these earlier philosophers were particularly important for him: Baruch Spinoza for example, in the seventeenth century<sup>2</sup> and Henri Bergson in the early twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> One thing Spinoza and Bergson

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<sup>2</sup> Baruch Spinoza was born into Amsterdam's Portuguese-Jewish community in 1632. He made his living in the business of grinding optical lenses — at which he appears to have been highly skilled — and shunned the fame and offer of a paid university appointment that resulted from his controversial and widely publicized writings on biblical interpretation and the nature of God. He died at the age of 44. He is sometimes described in philosophical terms as a rationalist, choosing to base his views on the exercise of reason rather than as a result of subjective factors such as emotions or, uncritically, on biblical revelation. His most significant influence was probably the French rationalist philosopher, René Descartes (See BBC Radio 4, [In Our Time](#), Spinoza [accessed 8 June 2020]; *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, [Baruch Spinoza](#) [accessed 8 June 2020]).

<sup>3</sup> Henri Bergson was born in Paris in 1859 to a French father and an English mother. He came from a Jewish background and showed exceptional brilliance at school in mathematics. However, he chose to work in the humanities and did his graduate work, like Deleuze a century later, at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris. His doctoral dissertation, later published, was on the subject of time and free will (see below). In 1900 he was appointed to the Chair of Greek and Roman Philosophy at the Collège de France in Paris. Probably his best-known work, *Creative Evolution* was published in 1907 (see below) and shows his interest in Darwin and theories of biology as well as philosophy. Although his influence waned after WWI, one mark of the esteem in which he was still held in France, was the fact that he was granted an exemption by the Vichy government from standing in line to register his Jewish identity. He refused the offer and took his place in the queue. He died in 1941. See, Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (London: Dover Publications, 2003 (originally 1907)); *Time &*

have in common, is a view that although we've been doing it for millennia in the western world, we could perhaps think differently than relying so heavily on symbols of transcendence. Of course, given that the God of the Abrahamic traditions (Judaism, Christianity & Islam) is one such symbol of transcendence (there are others, such as Platonic ideals or some iterations of the natural sciences) this raises a red flag for some Christians. Spinoza's ideas got him into trouble with his Dutch Jewish community who formally expelled him in the middle of the seventeenth century. In contrast, two hundred and fifty years later, Henri Bergson was fêted by French and European society for similar suggestions, at least until his ideas were canned by Bertrand Russell and Albert Einstein.<sup>4</sup> But Deleuze and Guattari did not simply want to copy the work of earlier philosophers — even these two — but to move into more original work taking with them, a deep appreciation of past ideas and creators of concepts, but doing things differently because, whether we welcome it or not, things around us are always changing and we need to try to be as spry and well-equipped as possible. Not surprisingly, Deleuze and Guattari remained alive to the possibilities of making sense through reference to immanent forces and processes (feeling that transcendence had monopolized the field for a long time). Deleuze in particular has been credited with inspiring a new interest in the work of Bergson, especially his understanding of time, which he called, duration. Bergson thought time could not simply be reduced to measurable, particularly spatial or linear, categories (this referencing principles of transcendent reason) without some acknowledgement of

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*Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1910 (originally 1889).

<sup>4</sup> The physicist Albert Einstein and the philosopher Bertrand Russell were two of the most notable of Bergson's critics. In a famous debate in 1922, Einstein rejected Bergson's concerns with metaphysics and reduced his notion of time (duration) to mere subjective 'psychological' time to be distinguished from real — i.e. scientific — time. Russell thought Bergson was dangerously 'anti-intellectual' — presumably for similar reasons. Their positions reveal the widespread assumption at the time, that science was an unassailable form of knowledge and understanding. However, Bergson's work is now being reviewed much more sympathetically due in no small part to Deleuze's interest in his work. See, Jimena Canales, *The Physicist and the Philosopher: Einstein, Bergson and the Debate that Changed our Understanding of Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); Leon Ter Schure, *Bergson and History: Transforming the Modern Regime of Historicity* (NY: State University of New York, 2019).

human memory and perception of things that happen (this referencing an understanding of the immanence of experience). He thought time could not be simply abstract.

Back to the present reality of chaos and trying to make sense of it. Things are different. Sometimes in small ways. In lockdown, to pick up on the Bergsonian theme of time, we may have had to decide for ourselves how we will occupy our days, rather than allowing the ebb and flow of school days or working weeks to carry us along. Perhaps the most overused word of the last five months has been 'unprecedented,' but it is true that for many of us, the changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic are just that. Of course, there are people living around us here in Scotland who have other and greater experiences of chaos, grief and disorder. For some of the refugees and asylum seekers who have settled permanently or temporarily in the UK, the pandemic may seem trivial by comparison, or at least, no worse than what happened to them before it started. But for many other people in Scotland, a relatively 'normal' life has been upended and put on hold in a way unlike anything else in our lifetimes. Whilst few of us can remember a time when school or church services were suspended for months, for some it has been much worse than that, with work or family cut off and changed catastrophically in very short order.

In these contexts, as I said, I have been struck by the ways in which people have done and had to do things differently. I do not mean to make some trite observation about how we are all wonderfully pulling together to 'get COVID-19 done' whatever the sacrifice. Nor am I trying to suggest that COVID-19 has provided us with unrivalled opportunities for doing things in a new and more productive way. I am not at all sure that we are or that it does. I am, I hope, gesturing towards something more profound and particularly at the inevitability of change and difference that this pandemic has brought to the doors or computer screens of our small SEC community in such a forceful way. Now Deleuze and Guattari do not look like obvious resources for this community any more than Spinoza and Bergson before them. Spinoza might just perhaps be described as verging on the panentheistic and Bergson possibly pantheistic at a pinch but given their approach to transcendence neither of them would qualify as remotely orthodox. And Deleuze and Guattari were perfectly content to be regarded as atheists though, in comparison with the New Atheists of the noughties (including the likes of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens), they did not choose to squabble with Christians or other people identifying themselves as 'religious'. They were instead, trying to create new concepts that could be tried out in the unpredictability and confusion of the flow of life along its many different streams. They were also sensitive to the ways

in which treasures as well as flotsam and jetsam float along these watery ways. But you will still be wondering why I have drifted along so far in this current! Well, I have suggested that the events of the pandemic have created the necessity for doing things differently. The examples I have given have focussed on smaller adjustments we've had to make. But as we begin to recognize how, perhaps, literally parochial, our responses have sometimes been, my sense is that this model of doing things differently might also usefully help us look towards something more significant. In other words, there is 'doing things differently' with a view of getting back to 'doing things the same', again and as soon as possible. And there is doing things differently with a recognition that far from being 'unprecedented' this pandemic is fundamentally a more extreme example of what happens or can happen at any time or at any place in the specificity of individual lives as well as in global or planetary terms. Deleuze and Guattari's efforts to recommend doing things differently and their visions or sketches and suggestions to this end, could be taken, as a prophetic voice in a time of crisis which is right here. In the language of the Christian New Testament too, we do not know when the angels may come to enact divine judgement (Matthew 13. 49). The New Testament is characterized of course by the parable form, which the twentieth century biblical scholar C. H. Dodd so memorably defined as 'arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought'.<sup>5</sup> Though Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, for example, is a huge and hugely complex book, rather than a parable, Dodd's definition seems appropriate here too. This is not a book of definitions or the attempt to bring the work of philosophical metaphysics to a final conclusion by closing down alternatives. It is much more the attempt to spur people on to find more fruitful and less constricting or oppressive concepts with which life could perhaps make more or better sense.

Examples, though useful, always risk oversimplification. But perhaps one example of 'doing things differently' would be to give some different thought and attention to bodies in this present reality. During lockdown, people have been advised and/or required not to come into contact, to hug or touch or breath on, friends and family — beyond a limited circle in some cases. And there has been heightened attention in the media focussed on how medical personnel and carers are at risk because they continue to be in touch — with the transmission of the virus and with their patients and service users. As a result, in the Church, we have largely stopped

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<sup>5</sup> Charles H. Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Scribners, 1961), p. 16.

consecrating or receiving (touching/ingesting) the consecrated elements with their multiple implications for bodily transfiguration. We have been advised not to sing. Doing things differently then, might be no more or less than to spend time with this thought and reflection on how intensely we are all invested in touch-connection and our capability for being affected along physical vectors and through sensual data. And how much this means to us all! Our bodies are fragile but also fundamental. They are a means of fostering bonds and orienting ourselves towards this existence in this world.

If you do not have the medical expertise or the political power to get directly involved, this present situation can definitely breed frustration and a sense of helplessness. What I have suggested in terms of doing things differently is not heroic. And my example is very modest (with the advantage that you can do it at home without risk of infection). But the principle of doing things differently might be applied much more widely. As we have to change, it makes sense not to be too regretful or anxious about it, and to recognize that doing something entirely unfamiliar and untried might work very well or better than what we've done before, in the midst of our here and now. And that 'here and now' will continue of course, long after (this) lockdown is over.

## Pre-Pandemic Ethics and Preferential Treatment of Those in Greatest Need<sup>1</sup>

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The COVID-19 pandemic reveals the widespread, pre-existing, preferential treatment of the *least* vulnerable people. Today's challenging dilemmas about who should receive what treatment, protection, and support are the direct result of decisions made long before this pandemic — decisions about which people deserve the most attention, which lives are worth the most, which bodies and capacities are most desirable. We have all participated in pre-pandemic ethics, as members of communities who did not recast dominant narratives about worthiness, as beneficiaries of or victims of discrimination, as stakeholders in and casualties of the ideological distribution of resources. And we should all be responding to the pandemic with accountability for the past and a focus on changes for the future. Christians should respond to this pandemic and prepare for future crises by prioritizing — now — those who are most vulnerable. Church communities already have the resources to narrate and demonstrate preferential treatment of those with the greatest needs.

A couple of months ago, David Clough and I co-wrote an article, outlining a Christian ethical approach to deciding who should receive ventilator treatment, in a context of scarcity.<sup>2</sup> *Triage* describes the urgent decision about how to balance a patient's medical need with the use of available life-saving medical resources in a time of scarcity. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the decision might be about which patient should receive an ICU bed, a ventilator, or kidney dialysis, when there aren't enough beds, ventilators, or dialysis machines to go around. The purpose of the article was to offer support to doctors facing ethical, as well as clinical, triage decisions. We considered policy guidelines from a number of institutions, listened to the concerns of people living with disabilities, and struggled with the conflicts between the limitations of pandemic triage and

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<sup>1</sup> This article is an argument-in-process and a response to the ongoing development of the COVID-19 pandemic and its ramifications. Details and ethical challenges may change as the pandemic continues.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Adam and David Clough, '[Christian ethics and the dilemma of triage during a pandemic](#)', *ABC Religion and Ethics*, 14 April 2020 [accessed 25 May 2020].

our understanding of Christian identity and practice. The triage options under consideration were a) to save more lives by prioritizing the patients more likely to benefit from the treatment or b) to treat patients on a first come, first served basis. In the end, we reluctantly agreed that, if a doctor has to choose which of two people should receive the one available ventilator,<sup>3</sup> it should go to the patient most likely to benefit the most from it. In the midst of this pandemic scenario, the utilitarian principle of saving more lives at the cost of some lives takes precedence over a first come, first served approach.

Most hospital policies agree. As Daniel Wikler explains, in a pandemic:

We must reject what often seems optimal in ordinary times, such as first-come, first-served, or even a lottery. These choices risk filling up ICU beds with patients unlikely to emerge alive, at the cost of the deaths of multitudes of patients who are likely to survive if given temporary care. These latter must come first, even if it means holding open an available bed on pain of death to a lower-priority patient, and being prepared to withdraw the use of a respirator from a patient unlikely to survive.<sup>4</sup>

Save more lives approaches do vary (first treatments might go to medical staff, age and quality of life measurements might be determining or contributing factors, treatment might not be removed from a patient already using it) but the premise remains the same. Lydia Dugdale affirms the save more lives approach and adds, '[i]t's not fair to distribute scarce resources in a way that minimizes lives saved.'<sup>5</sup>

Wikler's argument to save resources for those most likely to survive and Dugdale's affirmation of that argument on the terms of fairness align with arguments for the *greater good*: saving more lives is worth some deaths. When the competition for medical resources pits people who are

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<sup>3</sup> At the time of the article, ventilator use seemed the most pressing illustration of treatment scarcity. A ventilator is not the best treatment for every patient; here it stands in for any of the COVID-19 medical resources in short supply.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Wikler, '[Here are rules doctors can follow when they decide who gets care and who dies](#)', *The Washington Post*, 1 April 2020 [accessed 25 May 2020].

<sup>5</sup> Lydia Dugdale, interviewed by Olivia Goldhill, '[Ethicists agree on who gets treated first when hospitals are overwhelmed by coronavirus](#)', *Quartz*, 19 March 2020 [accessed 25 May 2020].



expected to recover well and enjoy long, high quality lives against people who already lead lives assessed to be of lesser quality, the greater good supports giving the limited lifesaving resources to those most likely to survive and enjoy higher quality lives. The greater good reasoning accepts the possibility of a post-pandemic world bereft of the people living with disabilities or pre-existing conditions and the BAME people who died of the virus. Christians should resist that acceptance: the greater good future will be neither good nor great, after segments of the population die because they were deemed less desirable and not worth saving. Social assessments of the surviving less-worthy people will fall even lower, after the vivid demonstration of which lives are and are not valuable.<sup>6</sup>

Christians claim an alternative understanding of the good that recognizes that saving some, at the cost of others, does not reflect the Christian identity as the body of Christ. Jesus's teaching and Christian discipleship do not rest on *fairness*. The Beatitudes do not support the survival of the fittest. Discipleship does not impose early death on those less likely to succeed, in order to benefit the greater good. The common good presumes *interdependence*, rather than separated individualism, and it challenges Christians to remember who they are, together:

*The common good does not consist in the simple sum of the particular goods of each subject of a social entity. Belonging to everyone and to each person, it is and remains 'common', because it is indivisible and because only together is it possible to attain it, increase it and safeguard its effectiveness, with regard also to the future. Just as the moral actions of an individual are accomplished in doing what is good, so too the actions of a society attain their full stature when they bring about the common good. The common good, in fact, can be understood as the social and community dimension of the moral good.*<sup>7</sup>

For Christians, the common good, the moral good, must hold together all lives — past, present, and future — as created by God and gathered in

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<sup>6</sup> One possible comparison might be: currently, so many Down Syndrome babies have been terminated, that few people have met any families with Down Syndrome children, and termination seems the only option worth considering.

<sup>7</sup> [\*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church\*](#) §164 (italics original), cited by Kelly Johnson, '[Pandemic and the Common Good](#)', 17 March 2020 [both accessed 25 May 2020].

Christ. Christians striving for the common good do not settle for individual goods — even individual lives — at the cost of others' suffering and death.

Christians do settle for save more lives triage in a crisis when they do not see any alternatives, but they do not need to name saving more lives as a common or greater good. In our article, when we recommend the utilitarian, save more lives triage practice, we surround that recommendation with a host of caveats, including the importance of constraining ethical exceptions in a crisis to that period of crisis only. 'Christians should be very uncomfortable with any shift from ordinary time ethics to extraordinary time ethics, when that change diminishes the importance of claims previously determined to be essential.'<sup>8</sup> For a decision to *seem* best in particular circumstances does not mean it *is* the best in all — or any — circumstances. David Chan observes:

I would say that leaving some to die without treatment is NOT ethical, but it may be necessary as there are no good options. Saying that it is ethical ignores the tragic element, and it is better that physicians feel bad about making the best of a bad situation rather than being convinced that they have done the right thing.<sup>9</sup>

Christians narrate life with 'no good options' as a life mired in sin, the state of creation that can only be remedied in and by Jesus Christ. The good news of sin is that repentance and forgiveness are possible, even for those sins in which we participate very indirectly, and even when there is no visible sign of change right now. The challenge is to face injustice by naming it, confessing complicity in it, and proclaiming the justice of Christ. In the article, we claimed that:

To prioritise treating those who can benefit from treatment quickly in such a strategy is not to judge that their lives are of more value or to claim that the lives of those who would need more resource-intensive treatment are of less value. Nonetheless, we have to recognise the inevitable indirect discrimination of this approach towards those disproportionately likely to suffer from pre-existing health conditions — such as the elderly, persons with disabilities,

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<sup>8</sup> Adam and Clough, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> David Chan as quoted in '[Ethicists agree on who gets treated first when hospitals are overwhelmed by coronavirus](#)', 19 March 2020 [accessed 25 May 2020].

and members of racial and socio-economic groups denied access to adequate housing, nutrition, and lifestyles necessary to maintain good health.<sup>10</sup>

To prioritize may not be to discriminate directly, but the effect is the same, the pre-existing discrimination that forces that prioritization is real, and the corporate culpability for the ramifications of the prioritization remains. Christians should be especially wary of accepting and affirming practices that contradict beliefs otherwise central to their identity in Christ, and they should seek ways to end those practices as soon as possible. This is why I've become convinced that the caveats to our save more lives position warrant even more attention than the moment of triage itself. The best way to counter the save more lives, greater good, approach to triage is to shift the *primary* focus of Christian ethics from triage to the everyday ethics that precede and follow on from a pandemic. Pre-pandemic ethics establish the possibilities for triage and broader social responses to upcoming crises.

Yes, of course, doctors *do* face impossible dilemmas in this pandemic. There are indeed circumstances in which ventilators, or medications, or nursing staff are limited. In those moments, doctors may have to decide that their best possible option is to try to save more lives, by designating those most likely to survive and recover as the best candidates for the available resources. Doctors need support and shared accountability for their discernment, especially because the competition for treatment does not begin at the hospital doors.

Pre-pandemic discrimination, priorities, practices, and planning establish the quantity and distribution of life-saving resources. Unclaimed ethical decisions, made long before the pandemic and determined by discrimination, create the illusion of ethical choice in pandemic triage. Pandemic triage competition is the result of decisions made by those who determined how much to invest in pandemic preparation: how much to support the NHS; how much to work on improving Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic community living and working conditions; how much to help those struggling to get by financially; how much to support food banks; how best to provide for people living with disabilities, elderly people, and carers; how much to count on schools to feed and protect children, enable their parents to work, *and* educate them at the same time. I am not here blaming a few — or many — governmental leaders. Instead I

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<sup>10</sup> Adam and Clough, *op. cit.*

am naming decades of a widespread, social imagination that places the highest value on whiteness, healthiness, youth, and independence. The SARS-CoV-2 virus has arrived in the midst of a society already formed by the expectation that certain people are more worthy of attention and protection than others. The disease this virus causes, COVID-19, disproportionately kills the people who have already been identified as less valuable:

Those justifying prioritization of utility don't endorse discrimination. But in reality, an ethical approach aimed at maximizing lives saved results in prioritizing certain social groups. The easy lives to save will be those of people who already enjoy social privilege. As a population, younger, white, wealthy people will be more likely to derive benefit from the ICU resources and survive because they enjoy, on average, higher baseline health status.<sup>11</sup>

In our current social structures, COVID-19 intensifies divisions and increases deprivation and disadvantage.<sup>12</sup>

Pre-pandemic preferential treatment of white, young, healthy, economically successful people determines who is most likely to survive COVID-19. In triage decisions about who should receive life-saving treatment, saving more lives will mean saving more white, young, healthy, economically successful people. This should not be a surprise to anyone, because triage ethics does not determine morality, it reflects previously established social priorities. Christians should hold each other accountable for their acceptance of and contribution to the societal brokenness revealed by the pandemic:

In particular, Christians should be maximally uncomfortable with an ethical response to pandemic conditions that increases the malign effects of selective medical treatment. The strategy of tolerating more discrimination to achieve a desired end should be abhorrent. The risks of causing — however indirectly — intensified discrimination after the peak of the pandemic

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<sup>11</sup> Angela Ballantyne, '[ICU triage: How many lives or whose lives?](#)', *Journal of Medical Ethics Blog*, 7 April 2020 [accessed 25 May 2020].

<sup>12</sup> According to Voluntary Health Scotland, 'COVID-19 has not only highlighted the pre-existing inequalities within our society but has also caused them to become further entrenched (['COVID-19: A pandemic in the age of inequality'](#), 7 May 2020), [accessed 25 May 2020].

should motivate Christians to re-examine the appeal of emergency ethics and to initiate measures to counter the damage of deprioritising resistance to discrimination.<sup>13</sup>

Discrimination precedes triage and continues through and beyond a pandemic. The COVID-19 mortality rates demonstrate that the people who suffer the most pre-pandemic discrimination are the people most likely to die of the virus. Responses to ongoing, systemic, discrimination may reduce the triage competition for medical resources.

Not only is it important to shift attention from triage to pre-pandemic ethics, Christians need to take seriously the charge to prioritize the neediest. In our current situation, it seems unreasonable to propose that triage decisions should prioritize those who are already the most fragile, those with the most pre-existing conditions, those whose jobs or living situations mean that they are the most likely to be exposed to the virus and most likely to die. Preferential treatment for those *least* likely to survive triage rationing seems absurd with the current scarcity of supplies and funding; but that scarcity is *not* necessary. While it is impossible to anticipate every health care crisis, it is definitely possible to prepare for the future with the knowledge and recommendations available. Instead, previously established social priorities justify insufficient pandemic resources. Insufficient resources lead to triage competition. Competition for life-saving treatment favours those deemed most valuable. Focusing only on the triage moment obscures the decisions made before that moment. More attention — at the planning stages — to those already in greatest need would, increase supplies and possibilities of care for more patients in the midst of crisis.

Further pandemic preparation requires an ideological shift in imagination to notice that those with pre-existing disadvantages will be disadvantaged in the midst of a pandemic, as well. SARS-CoV-2 is a new virus; COVID-19 research has only just begun. But we do know that the risk of death is greater not only for people who are older, live in care homes, or care for them, but also for hospital nurses and doctors, for people with some pre-existing conditions, for some people living with disabilities, for BAME people, for people living in poverty, and for people in a particular set of occupations. Much more research is needed to explain some of the reasons these sets of people are more likely to suffer severe effects of the virus and more likely to die. In the meantime, the contributing social

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<sup>13</sup> Adam and Clough, *op. cit.*

factors are already clear, and Christians have reasons and resources to address them.<sup>14</sup>

So far, we know that people who are able to work at home are less exposed to the virus and less likely to die from the virus. People who can drive to work and are able to practice social distancing at work, and/or have access to PPE are less exposed and less likely to die from the virus. People who live with few housemates (who also can work from home), who do not share entry-ways or lifts with other occupants of the building, who have easy access to gardens and parks for fresh air, less pollution, and Vitamin D,<sup>15</sup> are less likely to suffer and die of the virus. People who are younger and white, whose concerns about protection are welcomed and addressed, who hold positions of leadership, and who enjoy more job and financial security, are less likely to be exposed and less likely to die.

Christians know that degrees of virtue or piety do not determine which people suffer and die from illness and which people recover or escape it all together. It is *not* the case that some people escape severe cases of COVID-19 because they are more deserving of good health. The presumption that moral superiority grants good health drives the attempts to place the responsibility for suffering from COVID-19 on the suffering people themselves. The attribution of illness to diminished virtue may sound absurd, but it persists. Few people are free from the temptation to feel that they deserve the advantages they have and do not deserve the loss of those advantages. It's easy for people to imagine that those poorer than they are could improve their circumstances if they just worked harder; that less-empowered people could gain more respect if they just behaved as if they were worthy of respect; that people living with disabilities are already suited to suffering and early death:

The idea that poverty, isolation or even early death is somehow natural for disabled people is still worryingly prevalent. 'Underlying health conditions' increasingly feels like a euphemism for those society has quietly given up on. Just look at how we still don't know how many disabled people have died in care homes; their deaths are being written out of the stories we are using to make sense of this crisis.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Inés San Martín, [“Slum bishop” of Buenos Aires says pandemic exposes pre-existing injustice](#), *Cruce*, 21 May 2020 [accessed 25 May 2020].

<sup>15</sup> Robert Brown, et al., [‘Is ethnicity linked to incidence or outcomes of covid-19?’](#), 20 April 2020 [accessed 25 May 2020].

<sup>16</sup> Frances Ryan, [‘Coronavirus has made it even easier to forget about disabled people’](#), *Guardian*, 29 April 2020 [accessed 25 May 2020].

The lists of underlying or pre-existing conditions reflect prejudices as well, as if some conditions only afflict innocent victims and others only affect those who should know better. This presumption may seem to explain the suffering and death of people with pre-existing conditions,<sup>17</sup> but it is difficult to sustain that position reasonably when there are so many conditions that might increase chances of infection, severe cases, or death. Potentially harmful pre-existing conditions include obesity, diabetes, kidney disease, liver disease, asthma, respiratory disease, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, dementia, mental health disease, Down Syndrome, Parkinson disease; as well as age, gender, poverty, adverse living circumstances, *essential* jobs, BAME people, those who already need care and their carers who are already paid too little.

People living with individual and social disadvantages are undervalued and discriminated against in ways that *cause* their increased susceptibility to the virus. Pre-existing and ongoing discrimination contributes to disproportionately high rates of death. Pandemic preparation must make extra provisions for those already at a disadvantage. Christians know that the love of Christ does not dismiss the suffering and death of some because others deem them less worthy of living. Christians, formed to prioritize those with the greatest need, can shape both preparation for and responses to pandemics by demonstrating preferential treatment of those with the most needs. Counter-cultural preferential treatment now, will disrupt triage competition in crises to come.

For example, a disproportionately high number of BAME people have died from COVID-19, especially Black people and ethnic Bangladeshi and Pakistani people. No one single factor explains this. ‘The higher observed incidence and severity in minority groups may be associated with socioeconomic, cultural, or lifestyle factors, genetic predisposition, or pathophysiological differences in susceptibility or response to infection’.<sup>18</sup> BAME people are less likely to be able to work at home, more likely to need public transportation to commute to work, more likely to work in high-

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<sup>17</sup> Julia Mastroiani cites tweets such as, ‘(T)he only fatalities to the Corona Virus [*sic*] so far were old people with weakened immune systems and or people with pre-existing lung conditions...’, in [“Real People Won’t Die”: Rhetoric around who is at risk of coronavirus infection sparks debate over ageism, ableism](#), *National Post*, 3 March 2020 [accessed 25 May 2020].

<sup>18</sup> Kamlesh Khunti, et al., [‘Is ethnicity linked to incidence or outcomes of covid-19? Preliminary signals must be explored urgently’](#), *British Medical Journal*, 369: m1548, 20 April 2020 [accessed 1 June 2020].



contagion conditions, more likely to live in densely populated areas with less green space and more pollution, more likely to experience deprivation and poverty — and therefore more at risk of catching and dying from contagious diseases. BAME people who disproportionately experience these disadvantages are also less respected at work and in public spheres and less financially stable. They are less likely to be represented in pre-pandemic planning and less likely to be heard when asking for PPE or safer working conditions:

Ethnic minority communities are also more likely to be socioeconomically disadvantaged than white communities and often live in extended cohabiting families, potentially increasing the risk of virus transmission. Ethnic minorities in the UK and US have been shown to face several disadvantages, including poor housing, overcrowding, and being more likely to be employed in low paid essential jobs, all of which make social distancing more challenging.<sup>19</sup>

These factors are all well documented and were available for pandemic planning. It was no secret that hospitals employ disproportionately large numbers of BAME doctors and nurses, and that doctors and nurses face increased risk of exposure to contagions. These are facts that should warrant extra supplies for protection. And yet, PPE was not readily available when and where needed. As discussed by Shahrar Ali:

The first 11 doctors who sadly lost their lives to Covid-19, were all from BAME communities [...] ethnic minorities continue to be at the sharp end of the virus and its casualties. Whether it is pregnant nurses who feel unable to resist pressure to work in clinical settings where exposure to Covid-19 patients is made inevitable; or retired doctors who feel bound to return to duty without complaint about their working conditions; such pressures are all the more acute when it comes to how ethnic minorities are made to suffer oppression daily.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Khunti, et al., *op. cit.* See also: Royal College of Psychiatrists, [‘Impact of COVID-19 on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic \(BAME\) staff in mental healthcare settings | assessment and management of risk’](#), 13 May 2020 [accessed 25 May 2020].

<sup>20</sup> Shahrar Ali, [‘BAME life chances, Covid inequality and death’](#), *Green World*, 6 May 2020 [accessed 25 May 2020].



Pre-existing discrimination has and will continue to cause increased suffering and death in populations that the dominant ideology cares less about. All Christians should attend to the breadth of factors that lead to BAME COVID-19 deaths and recognize the radically different contexts in which people experience the pandemic. White congregations with no BAME neighbours should reach out to BAME congregations in humility, to ask if they can listen and learn. BAME congregations should feel encouraged to tell white congregations how damaging their inattentiveness and presumption is.

White Christians have not spent their entire lives coping with the particular social and physical disadvantages experienced daily by BAME people. This lack of experience helps ground White people's belief that COVID-19 is a problem to beat, battle, defeat, or conquer.<sup>21</sup> The fact that COVID-19 may not be conquerable seems difficult to accept for White people with less exposure to persistent, inescapable oppression: 'Discrimination and inequalities, whether that's through overcrowded housing, greater risk of health vulnerabilities or economic disadvantage, are a fact of life for Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) people in modern Britain.'<sup>22</sup> White people who do not appreciate these social realities are tempted to ignore both those at greater risk of death in BAME communities *and* their wisdom about the systemic causes and effects of health vulnerabilities. Christians should be working together to recognize those in greatest need of care and the reasons for those needs, and to diminish the causes and effects of disadvantage and increased vulnerability.

For another example, the COVID-19 death rate among older people is also disproportionately high: 'over-65s are 34 times more likely to die of coronavirus than working-age Britons',<sup>23</sup> as predicted by pandemic researchers. Yet, pandemic planners paid insufficient attention to the guidance to prioritize care home residents and care workers. Earlier this month, the Commissioner for Older People in Northern Ireland pointed out that:

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<sup>21</sup> Thank you to Anthony G. Reddie, who shared this insight in the discussion portion of 'The Ethical Challenges of Covid-19' a webinar sponsored by The Centre for Baptist Studies, Regent's Park College, Oxford University, 18 May 2020.

<sup>22</sup> ["Reckoning" needed on disproportionate Covid-19 deaths amongst black and Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage people](#), *Unite*, 7 May 2020 [accessed 25 May 2020].

<sup>23</sup> Niamh McIntyre, ['Pensioners 34 times more likely to die of Covid-19 than working age Brits, data shows'](#), *Guardian*, 13 May 2020 [accessed 25 May 2020].

The danger of the pandemic if it spread to care homes was evident from the outset. [...] the Commission for Older People provided advice to government in the early planning stages as did others such as Age Northern Ireland and the Independent Health and Care Providers Group. However, much of the advice provided was not actioned to the extent it should have been.<sup>24</sup>

He continued, 'We should have created a ring of steel to protect care homes from the virus with effective PPE and priority testing.'<sup>25</sup> The fact that this is not what happened across the UK in pandemic preparation demonstrates the widespread social presumption that the lives of elderly people are not as valuable as others. Ageism and ableism are already demonstrated by the low pay of care home workers and the even lower support and recognition of unpaid carers at home. Without that 'ring-of-steel protection', elders in care and their carers currently represent the highest death rates of COVID-19 in the UK; the people who needed the most protection received the least. Richard Coker opines:

Today, if you need a lens to examine any country's response to coronavirus, look to its nursing homes. To understand the [scandal of the UK's response to Covid-19](#), consider that it is the most vulnerable people who were sacrificed to an unacceptable, unarticulated strategy. Look to the hidden populations residing in nursing homes, those falling through the gaps between the NHS and the social support function of the state [...].<sup>26</sup>

Christians are responsible for responding to the pandemic by dedicating themselves to caring for people who need care (in care facilities, in their own home, with family) and their carers. A similar responsibility of care applies for those who live with disabilities; the pandemic and the

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<sup>24</sup> Eddie Lynch, Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland and Les Allamby, Chief Commissioner, [Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission](#), 6 May 2020 [accessed 25 May 2020].

<sup>25</sup> Eddie Lynch, *op. cit.*

<sup>26</sup> Richard Coker, ["Harvesting" is a terrible word – but it's what has happened in Britain's care homes](#), *Guardian*, 8 May 2020 [accessed 25 May 2020].

subsequent lockdown multiply the disadvantages and invisibility of those people with disabilities who are already struggling with daily life challenges. Christians have a call to meet Jesus in the eyes of their neighbours in need, and Christians should express this call in words and actions: all are valuable and worthy of love and support, at each stage of living and dying and in every state of health and dis/ability. To the extent that it is not possible to provide some expressions of presence and support in pandemic lockdown, Christian communities should lobby even more vigorously for additional resources for those with particular needs, before and during the pandemic:

Christian communities, who spend time and energy building supportive relationships with carers and visiting with those receiving care, know well that older people and people living with disabilities are not expendable. Pre-pandemic research highlighted the heightened dangers for them and their carers; the COVID-19 pandemic confirms those dangers and the malign effects of not preparing for them. Christians should ensure that care home residents, their carers, their families and their church supporters have a place on crisis planning committees, to share their wisdom, and to make it more difficult for the general public to ignore and neglect them in plans for future crises.

COVID-19 reveals the pre-existing conditions of discrimination that now contribute to a competition for resources and to the increased suffering and death for those who are already disadvantaged. The pandemic has identified some people as *essential* workers, a designation which marks both the benefit of their work for others, and their own disposability. Christians should re-narrate the accounts of COVID-19 to lift up those people who suffer the most from pre-pandemic injustice and from the effects of that injustice in the midst of a pandemic. The task for the Church now is to overturn the designations that intensify already established discrimination, by overturning the structures of disadvantage. It is not *necessary* for those who are disadvantaged before a pandemic to then suffer the most during a pandemic. The scarcity of supplies is not necessary, neither is the prioritization of white, young, healthy, and economically successful people. There are *always* resources for those named as the highest priorities, and Christians should be launching a persuasive campaign, in action and deed, to name who the highest priorities are. There is no clearer proclamation of the work of Christ in the world than the preferential treatment of those with the fewest advantages and those with the greatest needs. Protecting the neediest must happen *before* a crisis. It is what we need to be doing now.



# Is Saving Lives an Act of Love? A Psychotherapist's Perspective on the Roles of Psychotherapy and the Church at a Time of Existential Panic and Beyond

AVIGAIL ABARBANEL

Psychotherapist and Trainer

**David Horton:** What was that socialist tract you were spouting from the pulpit last week?

**Geraldine:** I've got a feeling it was the Sermon on the Mount.

**David Horton:** Jesus did not tell rich people to give all their money away.

**Geraldine:** I think you'll find he did actually!<sup>1</sup>

Along with the expected problems — relationship difficulties, early traumas, feelings of emptiness — we see ecological and other crises presented as sources of symptoms and cause of unhappiness in individuals. From a psychological point of view, the world is making people unwell; it follows, that, for people to feel better, the world's situation needs to change. But perhaps this is too passive: perhaps for people to feel better, they have to recognize that the human psyche is a political psyche and hence consider doing something about the state the world is in.<sup>2</sup>

I believe there is a parallel between the roles of churches and the profession of psychotherapy, which has been my profession for over two decades. Although these two domains can appear different, I argue that at heart they have the same principles and that they work for the same goal.

Modern societies, especially in the West, are governed and controlled by neoliberal ideology, which forces a particular way of life on everyone. Spiritual development and fulfilment of human potential are not at the heart of neoliberalism. In a neoliberal society spiritual growth and

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<sup>1</sup> R. Curtis and P. Mayhew-Archer, 'Community Spirit', *The Vicar of Dibley*, series 1, episode 3.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Samuels, *Politics on the Couch: Citizenship and the Internal Life* (London: Profile Books, 2001).

fulfilment of potential are reserved for the privileged few who do not have to sell their labour for a living. For the rest they are 'pursuits' or even 'hobbies' relegated to the margins of life. To grow psychologically and spiritually human beings need an environment that values human potential as the most important asset we have. Neglecting our spiritual and psychological development comes at a great cost to the human spirit and to our mental health, which often reverberates for generations.

All creatures in nature have an innate need to survive for as long as possible. Every living thing in nature including us also has an innate need to fulfil its potential and become all it can become. But as far as we know we are the only creatures on Earth who need a sense of meaning and purpose in order to feel that we are fulfilling our potential. According to Frankl — and many others — life without meaning is often felt as not worth living. Frankl's observations of his fellow inmates in concentration camps during the Nazi era made him conclude that those who were not able to find a sense of meaning (even in their suffering) were less likely to survive.<sup>3</sup> According to Yalom the 'human being seems to require meaning. To live without meaning, goals, values, or ideals seems to provoke [...] considerable distress. In severe form it may lead to the decision to end one's life.'<sup>4</sup>

As mammals who have developed on a dangerous planet the instinct to survive usually takes over when we feel under existential threat. But if survival, physical existence, longevity, not dying is all that life has to offer us, we do not do well. A sense of meaninglessness can drive us, humans, to go even against the basic instinct to survive. Although most people do not commit suicide, meaninglessness exacts a heavy toll in mental and physical health problems when people are forced to live a life that is focused only or mostly on survival.

My argument in this article is simple. Both my profession and Christianity know what humans need in order to do well spiritually and psychologically. It is clear that we cannot do well in a society that runs as nothing more than a glorified 'jungle' where might is right, survival is not guaranteed and inequality and competition are seen not only as the norm, as a force of nature that cannot be changed, but even as a sacred value. In a world where people are consumers, or 'economic units' and where most people are treated as objects in too many 'I-It' relationships<sup>5</sup> the need to

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<sup>3</sup> V. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: The classic tribute to hope from the holocaust* (London: Rider, 2004 [first published 1959]).

<sup>4</sup> I. D. Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), p. 422.

<sup>5</sup> M. Buber, *I and Thou* (1923; New York: Touchstone, 1937, 1996).

develop spiritually and to fulfil one's potential seems like an unattainable luxury.

The current response to the SARS-CoV-2 virus, especially the far-reaching and controlling lockdown measures adopted by the UK government, offers a fresh context to highlight what I see as the failures of psychotherapy and of the Church. The intense sense of crisis fomented by a mostly uncritical corporate media and an incompetent neoliberal government; the powerful narrative of 'saving lives', even as the long-term (or even short-term) impact of the lockdown are becoming increasingly apparent, highlight existing philosophical and real-life problems caused by the neoliberal framework under which we all live. The choice between surviving and thriving has been brought to sharper focus by the current crisis.

Both psychotherapy (at least from the advent of Humanistic psychology and attachment theory in the 1940s) and Christianity were built on a political and revolutionary foundation that critiques and questions human society, its institutions, the way it organizes itself and the impact these have on individuals. In response to neoliberalism both Christianity and my profession have retreated to a survivalist and inward-looking position. They have not stood up to our economic and political orthodoxy and have not called the bluff we all live under. If psychotherapy and Christianity did not succumb to a defensive, survivalist stance under neoliberal threat, if they insisted on remaining true to their authentic revolutionary purpose, they would not only serve individuals better, they could play the transformational role they were always intended to play. I argue that they can and should challenge an economic and political model that advocates a mentality of living under siege, in permanent scarcity and in perpetual competition which we know, are not supportive of growth and fulfilment of human potential nor of healthy spirituality. This article cannot do justice to the magnitude of these topics, but I hope it will still contribute to what I see as an urgent discussion of and a much-needed change in the roles that both my profession and the Church play in society.

### *A humanistic revolution in psychology*

The 1940s were a time of revolution in the mental health field. The psychologists Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers began to speak up against the prevailing orthodoxy in the psychology in which they themselves were trained. Their work led to the creation of Humanistic Psychology, a reaction against the two most dominant approaches to mental health at the time, Freud's psychoanalysis and B. F. Skinner's behaviourism. Both approaches

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were bleak and offered a deterministic view of humanity and of life. There was not much faith in 'human nature', which was seen as fundamentally flawed and untrustworthy. The approach to mental health on which Maslow and Rogers were educated was based on a medical model. This means diagnosing a problem and then applying to it what was accepted at the time to be the best 'cure' for that 'condition'.

Rogers, who worked in the mental health system, questioned the way mental health was perceived, and increasingly resisted working the way he was expected. He created a political revolution in the field of psychology and mental health, a fact he himself only came to realize in the late 1970s.

Rogers recognized that:

There is in every organism, at whatever level, an underlying flow of movement toward constructive fulfilment of its possibilities. There is a natural tendency toward complete development in man. The term that has most often been used for this is the actualizing tendency. [...] The actualizing tendency can of course be thwarted, but it cannot be destroyed without destroying the organism.<sup>6</sup>

Rogers argued that people develop symptoms and become psychologically unwell when they are prevented from or are unable to grow to their full potential or to 'self-actualize'. In fact lives can be destroyed when people are not allowed to fulfil their potential.

As Maslow put it:

I think the particular sense in which I suggest interpreting the neurosis [mental illness] as a failure of personal growth must be clear by now. It is a falling short of what one could have been, and even, one could say, of what one *should* have been [...] if one had grown and developed in an unimpeded way. Human and personal possibilities have been lost. The world has been narrowed, and so has consciousness. Capacities have been inhibited. [...] The cognitive losses, the lost pleasures, joys, and ecstasies, the loss of competence, the inability to relax, the weakening of will, the fear of responsibility — all these are diminutions of humanness.<sup>7</sup> (*Italics in original*)

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<sup>6</sup> C. R. Rogers, *Carl Rogers on Personal Power: Inner strength and its revolutionary power* (London: Constable, 1978), pp. 7–8.

<sup>7</sup> A. H. Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (New York: Viking, 1971), pp. 32–33.



Maslow's 'hierarchy of needs' would be familiar to many. Like Rogers, Maslow also observed that human beings have an innate 'desire to become more and more what one idiosyncratically is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming'.<sup>8</sup> But, he argued, if a number of basic or 'lower' needs are not met, it will be difficult if not impossible for us to meet our need to self-actualize.

From the bottom up, our basic needs are *physiological* such as enough food to sustain us, *safety needs*, such as 'security; stability; dependency; protection; freedom from fear, from anxiety and chaos; need for structure, order, law, limits; strength in the protector [... ]', *belonging and love* needs such as affectionate relationships with people and a valued and recognized place in the group or the family. We also have *esteem needs*, such as a need to have a 'firmly based...evaluation of themselves, self-respect, or self-esteem and for the esteem of others.' At the top of the hierarchy is our need to *self-actualize*.<sup>9</sup>

I believe that all the 'lower level' needs can be placed under the umbrella of physical survival. On a hostile planet filled with predators and exposed to the elements<sup>10</sup> humans survived better in groups, not alone. Feeling that we belonged and that we mattered to others was as essential to our species' survival as having enough food. We are descendants of those who did better at surviving longer because they lived long enough to have offspring. The more vulnerable we are, for example in our infancy, the more important our need to belong to a safe group will be.

Our need to grow to our potential does not disappear when we are hungry, feel unsafe, or feel that we don't matter to others. It just becomes frustrated because physical survival comes first. When our mammal (limbic) brain is triggered into threat we know that it temporarily shuts down our executive functions, which include our need for purpose.<sup>11</sup> According to Maslow, a person who is hungry or afraid will focus on meeting his or her immediate hunger need:

Anything else will be defined as unimportant. Freedom, love, community feeling, respect, philosophy may all be waived aside

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<sup>8</sup> A. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 2nd edn (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), p. 46.

<sup>9</sup> Maslow, *Motivation*, pp. 36–47.

<sup>10</sup> Y. N. Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (London: Vintage, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> We experience this in times when we feel lost, small and weak, cannot think clearly, cannot make decisions or plan or we lose empathy.

as fripperies that are useless since they fail to fill the stomach. Such a man may fairly be said to live by bread alone.<sup>12</sup>

Until the more basic needs are met and we feel that our survival is not under threat anymore, our innate need for self-actualization would appear as an unattainable and even frivolous luxury that we cannot afford.

Rogers and Maslow suggest that there is an interrelationship between individuals and their environment. They realized that given how we are, what we call 'mental health' does not simply reside within us as individuals. It is rather a direct product of our relationship with our environment. Since our psychological wellbeing depends on our ability to move towards fulfilling our potential, the environment is directly responsible for how well we are psychologically.

All the evidence that we have [...] indicates that it is reasonable to assume in practically every human being and certainly in almost every newborn baby, that there is an active will towards health, an impulse towards growth, or toward the actualization of human potentialities. But at once we are confronted with the very saddening realization that so few people make it. Only a small proportion of the human population gets to the point of identity, or of selfhood, full humanness, self-actualization, etc., even in a society like ours which is relatively one of the most fortunate on the face of the earth. This is our great paradox. We have the impulse toward full development of humanness. Then why is it that it doesn't happen more often? What blocks it?<sup>13</sup>

Although others including Freud, linked individual psychological wellbeing to the state of society<sup>14</sup> none were as influential as Rogers in changing the politics of the field of psychology and in particular, the power relationship between the therapist and the client. Rogers realized that the mental health system in which he worked dehumanized people. People with mental health problems were seen as 'malfunctioning'. They were *objects* of observation, diagnosis and treatment that proposed to 'fix' them. Treatment did not address the context in which the patient's problems developed, their overall humanity and need for purpose, but focused on the *symptoms* as the problem that had to be solved. The assumption was that if the symptoms disappeared or improved the person was 'cured'.

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<sup>12</sup> Maslow, *Motivation*, p. 37.

<sup>13</sup> Maslow, *Farther Reaches*, pp. 24–25.

<sup>14</sup> N. Totton, *Psychotherapy and Politics* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000).

Rogers began to view symptoms as information, as warning that the need to grow and develop is compromised. People cannot help but push towards development, all living things do. But in impossible conditions they inevitably end up unwell. Speaking about mental health patients he encountered in his work, Rogers said:

Life would not give up, even if it could not flourish [...] So unfavourable have been the conditions in which these people have developed that their lives often seem abnormal, twisted, scarcely human. Yet the directional tendency in them [the tendency to self-actualise and grow] is to be trusted.<sup>15</sup>

Rogers went on to develop a new approach to psychotherapy that he called 'client-centred' (or 'person-centred'). Psychotherapy according to Rogers should not focus on symptoms but rather on the whole person and his or her need to grow. It should provide the conditions for growth in the context of a meaningful human encounter between the therapist and the client who have their humanity in common. When people are offered the opportunity to grow towards their potential, their symptoms naturally improve, even disappear. According to Rogers:

This newer approach [client-centred therapy] differs from the older one in that it has a genuinely different goal. [...] It relies much more heavily on the individual drive towards growth, health and adjustment. Therapy is not a matter of doing something to the individual or of inducing him to do something about himself. It is instead a matter of freeing him for normal growth and development, of removing obstacles so that he can again move forward.<sup>16</sup>

Rogers believed that the three most important conditions for healthy growth and development are *empathy*, *unconditional positive regard* (not judging people) and *congruence*. Congruence is transparency and honesty, not pretending to be what we are not. To feel safe with others, to feel on solid ground and like we know where we stand, we need to sense that others are genuine with us and are not pretending or hiding anything. If someone is pretending to be what they are not, we would instinctively distrust them and feel unsafe in their presence. We know that the moment we feel unsafe, the survival instinct will kick in and growth will be compromised.

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<sup>15</sup> Rogers, *Personal Power*, p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

Rogers was clear that these conditions are necessary and should be offered in all human environments, not just in psychotherapy. He wrote about applying them in education, in parenting and even in political negotiations. He created 'encounter groups' and even experimented with applying his approach in negotiations between Soviet and American politicians during the Cold War. Rogers believed that all human organizations need to be based on these principles so that all human beings can be helped to fulfil their potential.

To Rogers's three relational conditions we can then add Maslow's basic conditions of survival and belonging and of feeling like we matter to others. In other words, if people did not have to worry about where their next meal would come from, whether they'd have a roof over their heads or whether their house will be blown up; if they experienced others as safe;<sup>17</sup> if everyone felt that they belonged somewhere and that they mattered, then everyone would be free to move towards self-actualization.

These ideas are reflected and embedded in a long list of other modalities or approaches to psychology and psychotherapy, which are all part of the field of humanistic and existential psychology. Each approach or theory has its own emphasis. But they all share an aversion to diagnosis and they all recognize that mental health cannot be viewed in isolation and out of the context in which we all exist.<sup>18</sup> This is a psychology that invites therapists to be and do more than just 'fix' people and then send them back into a harmful world.

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<sup>17</sup> Our impressive and fast advances in technology even since Rogers's and Maslow's era have not made us feel any safer. Perhaps even the opposite. We spend so much of our energy and ingenuity inventing more means of protecting ourselves not from predators but from one another, in the real world and now also in 'cyber space'. That alone paints a grim picture of profound insecurity, a sense that survival is not guaranteed, and we all have to look over our shoulder all the time.

<sup>18</sup> When discussing the recognition of the impact that society has on individual it's important to point out that not only humanists recognized it. Fenichel who was on the teaching staff of the Berlin Institute (Psychoanalysis) believed psychotherapy cannot shift neuroses and misery 'without changes in the organisation of society. Therapy can help to point the way in which society needs to go.' In the 1940s he created a group based on his principles but kept it from 'rocking the apple cart' to the point where it was ineffective and easily forgotten. Wilhelm Reich has to also be mentioned because of his subversive work in sexual education. He was a communist during the Nazi era, which led to his expulsion from the German Psychoanalytic Association (Totton, *Psychotherapy*, pp. 14–15).

*It's not nature, it's nurture!*

*Attachment theory.* In the same decade Rogers began to develop humanistic psychology, John Bowlby, a psychiatrist in charge of the Child Guidance Unit in the Tavistock Clinic in post-war London, began his work on *attachment theory*. Attachment theory is based on the idea that we become what we become as a result of the early relationships we are offered at the start of our life.

Working in post-war London Bowlby came across many children and young people who were separated from their primary caregivers. This was either due to parental deaths and injuries or because they were sent away from their families for their safety.<sup>19</sup> In 1947 Bowlby published a groundbreaking study, *Forty-four Juvenile Thieves: their Character and Home-Life*. In the preface Bowlby argued that:

Prolonged separation in the early years is sometimes the principal cause of the development of delinquent character can hardly be doubted. What proportion of children who have this experience suffering in this way, remains, however unknown. Nor do we know the precise factors which determine whether a child will weather such an experience or will succumb.<sup>20</sup>

Bowlby called for more studies and many followed. Repeated studies revealed that the more securely we are attached in childhood to our significant caregivers, the more resilient we will be, the more developed our sense of self will be, the safer we will feel and the more we'll be able to move towards fulfilling our potential.<sup>21</sup> In other words, how well we do, depends on the relational environment we are offered especially in our early years.

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<sup>19</sup> We do not know how many of the children who were sent away to strangers during wartime were abused in their host families. This was not considered at the time, only the separation itself. The interruption to secure attachment alone was devastating to children's development as was confirmed by many subsequent studies. But there is no doubt that abuse and mistreatment played a role as well in the development of mental health problems.

<sup>20</sup> J. Bowlby, *Forty-Four Juvenile Thieves: Their characters and home-life* (London: Baillière, Tindall & Cox, 1947).

<sup>21</sup> D. Siegel, ['The Verdict Is In: The case for attachment theory'](#), *Psychotherapy Networker*, March/April (2011) [accessed 10 May 2020].

*Interpersonal Neurobiology.* Since the early 1990s neuroscience has been increasingly applied to understand the relationship between attachment theory and brain development. This has enabled us to go beyond the original observational studies of human behaviour or interactions. Scientists can now see how attachment styles affect children's brain development and they confirm what Bowlby and his colleagues observed.

Dan Siegel's Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB) — a multidisciplinary neuroscience-informed perspective on human development and a gamechanger in my field — proves that Rogers, Maslow, Bowlby and many others were right. Individual development and our capacity to grow are indeed a key to what we think of as good mental health. They are also inseparable from and dependent on our environment, especially our relational environment. For example, according to Siegel:

This basic neuronal process may also help us to understand, for example, how highly ingrained mental states, such as those of fear and shame, may become (or fail to become) integrated with the flow of the system's complex states. Synaptic patterns can evoke relational responses from others that reinforce these neural propensities. This the 'self-fulfilling' loop that gives us a sense of being 'stuck' or 'frozen' in unfulfilling ways of living. For example, we've seen that certain suboptimal attachment experiences produce multiple, incoherent working models of attachment and engrained, inflexible states of mind. These remain unintegrated across time within specialized and potentially dysfunctional self-states.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> D. Siegel, *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are*, 3rd edn (New York: Guilford Press, 2020), pp. 344–45.

*Adverse childhood experience (ACE)*<sup>23</sup>

Just over two decades ago two American doctors, Felitti, Anda and their colleagues, all medical professionals in the field of disease prevention published a ground-breaking study on the link between childhood trauma as a result of 'adverse childhood experience' (ACE) and physical ill-health. The study, which had over 8000 participants:

Found a strong dose response relationship between the breadth of exposure to abuse or household dysfunction during childhood and multiple risk factors for several of the leading causes of death in adults. Disease conditions including ischemic heart disease, cancer, chronic lung disease, skeletal fractures, and liver disease, as well as poor self-rated health also showed a graded relationship to the breadth of childhood exposures. The findings suggest that the impact of these adverse childhood experiences on adult health status is strong and cumulative.<sup>24</sup>

Analysis of the data, and of data from other sources, made the authors suggest that their estimates about the 'long-term relationship between adverse childhood experiences and adult health are conservative.'<sup>25</sup>

Mental health professionals like myself have always known, or at least suspected, that childhood mistreatment and its resulting trauma are strongly linked not just to psychological symptoms but also to physical ill-health, including chronic conditions and premature death. The ACE study was the first time that this link was scientifically established. It was especially significant that the evidence came from the medical profession.

Although the study was reprinted a number of times in mainstream journals since its original publication, it only began to attract the attention of medical professionals, educators and policy makers in the past few years. Scotland now has an ongoing discussion about ACEs and their impact, as well as policies on care and education that are ACE-aware or trauma-

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<sup>23</sup> For an excellent and stimulating introduction to the topic of Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE), I recommend the 2018 documentary [\*Resilience\*](#) [accessed 14 May 2020]. Anyone who works in a field where the human mind is at the centre and where there is a direct encounter with human suffering in my view has to be familiar with this topic.

<sup>24</sup> V. J. Felitti, R. F. Anda, D. Nordenberg, D. F. Williamson, A. M. Spitz, V. Edwards, M. P. Koss, J. S. Marks, 'Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults', *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 14(4) (1998), 245–58 (p. 250).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 252.

informed (See for example, *The Annual Report of the Director of Public Health 2018* or NHS Health Scotland's August 2019 *Adverse childhood experiences in context*.<sup>26</sup>)

As the awareness of ACEs grows, so has the awareness of the close ties between ACEs and socioeconomic circumstances. According to Asmussen, Fischer, et al.:

ACEs do not occur in isolation. While ACEs occur across society, they are far more prevalent among those who are poor, isolated or living in deprived circumstances. These social inequalities not only increase the likelihood of ACEs, but also amplify their negative impact. This means that structural inequalities must be addressed for ACE-related policies, services and interventions to have any meaningful effect.<sup>27</sup>

Families exist in a social context. Toxic stress on families caused by economic struggles, inequality and unfavourable socio-economic circumstances has a direct impact on the conditions in which children grow up. Even with the best of intentions, traumatized or otherwise struggling parents are not always able to provide an optimal environment for children's development. A 2019 Scottish study found that 'children living in more disadvantaged circumstances were more likely to experience ACEs than their more privileged peers'.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> NHS Highland, [\*Adverse Childhood Experiences, Resilience and Trauma Informed Care: A Public Health Approach to Understanding and Responding to Adversity\*](#), The Annual Report of the Director of Public Health 2018 [accessed 3 May 2020].

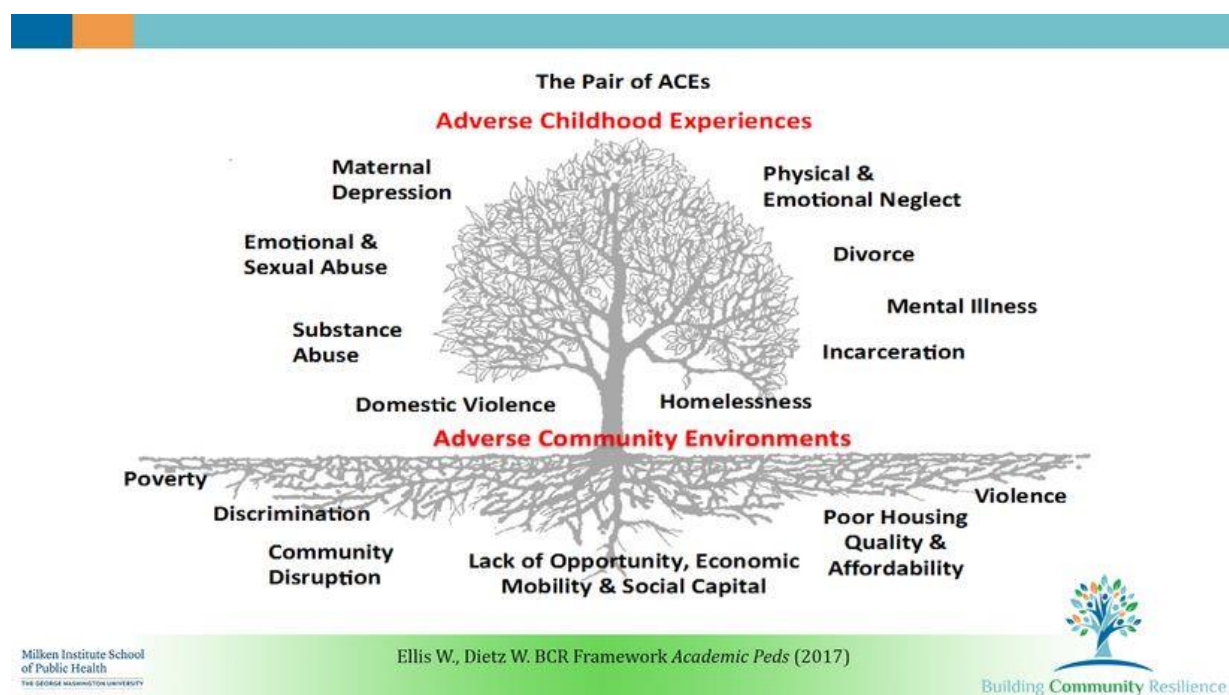
or NHS Health Scotland, [\*Adverse childhood experiences in context\*](#), August 2019 [accessed 3 May 2020].

<sup>27</sup> Kirsten Asmussen, Freyja Fischer, Elaine Drayton and Tom McBride, [\*'Adverse childhood experiences What we know, what we don't know, and what should happen next'\*](#) (London: Early Intervention Foundation, February 2020), p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> L. Marryat and J. Frank, 'Factors associated with adverse childhood experiences in Scottish children: A prospective cohort study', *British Medical Journal, Paediatrics Open*, 3 (2019), p. 6.



The graphic below by Ellis and Deitz demonstrates how factors like violence, poverty, discrimination, community disruption, lack of opportunity and poor housing contribute to ACEs.<sup>29</sup>



So, what do we know about our species survival and development from humanistic psychology, attachment theory, ACE research and Interpersonal Neurobiology? There is enough knowledge from a number of disciplines, from clinical experience and from life experience to establish the following:

- 1) In order for our species to *survive*, that is stay alive and continue to exist, all we need is food, water and sufficient physical protection from physical harm which in our species is provided by groups.
- 2) Our species has survived well and has become the dominant species on the planet at 7.7 billion and growing, which means most humans, or at least a sufficient number of humans know how to help our young stay alive for long enough to enable the physical continuation of our species.
- 3) Physical survival is not enough for human beings. Everything in nature has an innate need to develop to its potential. For humans this includes living in a meaningful and purposeful way.

<sup>29</sup> W. Ellis and W. Deitz, '[A New Framework for Addressing Adverse Childhood and Community Experiences: The Building Community Resilience Model](#)', *Academic Pediatrics*, 17 (2017), pp. 86–93.

- 4) No one does well psychologically if all they are allowed to do is survive.
- 5) Psychological (and therefore also physical) symptoms are an indication that the person is not growing and not moving towards fulfilment of their potential.
- 6) Thriving and fulfilling potential requires much more than the conditions for physical survival. To grow and move towards fulfilling our potential we need secure attachment provided by mature and capable caregivers in the context of a growth-promoting socio-economic environment.
- 7) Growth-promoting socio-economic conditions should provide safety as a baseline, a safe and inspiring education to help us explore our identity, values, abilities and interests, our purpose and the way we can engage in meaningful and purposeful work and activities.
- 8) This should not be available only to a few but to everyone.

### *Psychotherapy and neoliberalism*

Neoliberalism as a theory and a political and economic movement was a reaction to attempts to create a fairer distribution of wealth and a social safety net after the end of the Second World War. According to Harvey 'neoliberalization was from the very beginning a project to achieve the restoration of class power.'<sup>30</sup>

Essentially those who thought they deserved to be richer managed to amass enough power to re-arrange the world according to their needs and their vision. The top 1 per cent of income earners in Britain have doubled their share of the national income from 6.5 per cent to 13 per cent since 1982. And when we look further afield we see extraordinary concentrations of wealth and power emerging all over the place.<sup>31</sup>

Neoliberalism has managed to destroy the credibility of all other economic and political alternatives. It has come to be seen, even by those affected most negatively by it, as inevitable, a force of nature, how things just are and always will be. Neoliberalism believes in minimal government intervention in society.<sup>32</sup> Public is bad, private is good. Public ownership of

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<sup>30</sup> D. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 16.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>32</sup> Harvey, *Brief History*.

services is seen as inefficient and an antithesis to competition, which neoliberalism sees as the basis of innovation and entrepreneurship. The era of Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the US oversaw the systematic destruction of trade unions and a gradual erosion of their achievements. This was an era of widespread privatization of essential services that previously were in public ownership. Along with these we have seen a destruction of the social safety net. All of these are still ongoing.

Neoliberalism is a right-wing ideology that argues that it doesn't matter where you come from or what happened to you, 'if you've got what it takes, you can succeed'. In other words, despite what science and experience tell us every day, neoliberalism stubbornly (and self-servingly) holds on to the idea that nurture plays no part in our development. It's all nature. Success in the neoliberal universe has nothing to do with spiritual growth or with fulfilment of potential. Success is measured by how much money you have. If you have a lot you are successful. Poverty is a mark of failure of character. Correspondingly, if people have mental health problems, it means there is something innately 'defective' in them, that they are weak and don't have the spirit to participate in life. If they don't do well it's because of something in them, not anything else.

According to Harvey:

Informal employment has soared worldwide [...] and almost all global indicators on health levels, life expectancy, infant mortality and the like show losses rather than gains in well-being since the 1960s. [...] If conditions among the lower classes deteriorated, this was because *they failed, usually for personal and cultural reasons, to enhance their own human capital* (through dedication to education, the acquisition of a Protestant work ethic, submission to work discipline and flexibility and the like). Particular problems arose, in short, because of lack of competitive strength or because of personal, cultural, and political failings. In a Darwinian neoliberal world, the argument went, only the fittest should and do survive.<sup>33</sup> [My italics].

Neoliberalism is a form of social Darwinism that creates and perpetuates a world based on survival of those it considers worthy of survival. There is no interest in creating a socio-economic structure that benefits everyone's growth and development because in the neoliberalist reality not everyone deserves to survive, let alone self-actualize.

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<sup>33</sup> Harvey, *Brief History*, pp. 156–57.

In their 1993 dialogue-based book *We've Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy and the World's Getting Worse*, James Hillman, a psychotherapist says to journalist Michael Ventura:

There is another thing therapy does that I think is vicious. It internalizes emotions. [...] I'm outraged after having driven to my analysis on the freeway, the fucking trucks almost ran me off the road. I'm terrified, I'm in my little car, and I get to my therapist's and I'm shaking. My therapist says, 'We've gotta talk about this.'

So, we begin to talk about it. And we discover that my father was a son-of-a-bitch brute and this whole truck thing reminds me of him. Or we discover that I've always felt frail and vulnerable, there've always been bigger guys with bigger dicks, so this car that I'm in is a typical example of my thin skin and my frailty and vulnerability. Or we talk about my power drive, that I really wish to be a truck driver. We convert my fear into anxiety — an inner state. We convert the present into the past, into a discussion of my father and my childhood. And we convert my outrage — at the pollution or the chaos or whatever my outrage is about — into rage and hostility. Again, an internal condition, whereas it starts in outrage, an emotion. Emotions are mainly social. The word comes from the Latin *ex movere*, to move out. Emotions connect to the world. Therapy introverts the emotions, calls fear 'anxiety'. You take it back, and you work on it inside yourself. You don't work psychologically on what that outrage is telling you about potholes, about trucks, about Florida strawberries in Vermont in March, about burning up oil, about energy policies, nuclear waste, that homeless woman over there with the sores on her feet — the whole thing. [...] This is not to deny that you need to go inside — but we have to see what we're doing when we do that. By going inside we're maintaining the Cartesian view that the world out there is dead matter and the world inside is living.<sup>34</sup>

According to Hillman, psychotherapy tells us that the world outside of us doesn't matter. It is something we just have to accept as a given, like a force of nature. If something goes wrong for us we have to change our inside. The outside is unchangeable. Herein lies what I see as my profession's betrayal,

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<sup>34</sup> J. Hillman and M. Ventura, *We've Had A Hundred Years of Psychotherapy and the World's Getting Worse* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), pp. 11–12.

that Hillman rightly labels ‘vicious’. Psychotherapy effectively suggests it can help people without doing anything about the causes of their problems. Moreover, by convincing people that all their problems reside inside them, by paying no attention to the outside, my profession has not only sold out to neoliberal ideology, it effectively preaches it to clients.

If you speak to members of my profession, you are likely to receive different answers to the question of what therapy is supposed to be and do. Many therapists would tell you that their job is to help people ‘feel better’ or ‘cope better’. For example, my professional association, the British Association of Psychotherapy & Counselling (BACP) has been lobbying the government during the recent virus crisis to make it easy for the public ‘to find the help they need in one place’.<sup>35</sup> But what does the BACP mean by ‘help’? In the same article we read that counselling ‘has a critical role to play in helping people come to terms with changing work and family circumstances, financial insecurity, isolation, bereavement and uncertainty’.<sup>36</sup> Psychotherapy is not there to help people rebel against bad conditions that are harming them, nor is it offering them an ally in their struggle. Instead, psychotherapy is helping people to ‘come to terms’ with things as they are or in other words, to ‘cope’.

What kind of mental health services can people hope for in a neoliberal society? The mental health services people can expect in this country are based entirely on the traditional pre-Rogers medical model. The language used by NICE (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence), the body that prescribes ‘best practice’ in medicine, is the old language of diagnosis, the very thing against which Carl Rogers argued and worked. Treatment means addressing symptoms with medication or with therapies like CBT (Cognitive Behaviour Therapy) which by its own definition has always been intended for ‘symptom reduction’.

The NICE (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence) mental health page says, ‘The following guidance is based on the best available evidence.’<sup>37</sup> But is it really? What about all the other evidence we have that when people’s growth and development are thwarted, they are not going to do well psychologically? The neoliberal politics of funding and research design in mental health ‘heavily favors CBT and excludes most traditional therapies that rely on an intimate (unscripted) therapist-patient

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<sup>35</sup> ‘Working on your behalf’, *Therapy Today*, May 2020, p. 9.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> NICE, [‘Common mental health problems: identification and pathways to care’](#), Clinical guideline [CG123], 25 May 2011 [accessed 1 June 2020].

relationship forged in genuineness.’<sup>38</sup> A symptom-management approach is useful to a neoliberal economics that does not wish to look at the social and political injustices it causes and how they affect people. A symptoms management approach supports the idea of ‘getting on with it’, of coping and not expecting too much out of life except to earn enough money to survive.

Most clients who come to see me at my practice and who decide to pay privately for therapy have previously tried to get help through the NHS. The reason they come to see me is because they feel they were let down by the medical/mental health system. They say they do not want to just cope or manage symptoms; they want to live a more meaningful life. They want to feel fully alive. Even if people’s symptoms did get marginally better because of previous treatment, they tend to return because the reason for the symptoms was never addressed. Most people are capable of developing to their full potential. Symptoms management should only be offered to the minority who are genuinely not able to grow. To offer only symptoms management to everyone is a deep betrayal of our very humanity.

Those of us who work from a humanistic/existential perspective have been increasingly working in the margins. The rest collude with the neoliberal economic and political system we live in. Psychotherapy students who are educated on humanistic principles these days are rarely told about the political implications of the approach to psychology that they are learning. They are taught to help clients become more self-actualized but still with no regard to the state of the world we live in. No one suggests to these students that, while they are learning to help individuals, they also have to be activists for change in society.

Even person-centred therapists these days implicitly suggest to clients that it is possible to grow and fulfil their potential *individually*, in isolation from everything else and regardless of how the world is. This is straight out of the neoliberal rule book. Then when therapy does not work, people feel that it is their personal failure.

### *Profession of psychotherapy and the state of the world*

There are some interesting examples of some forms of activism in my field.

*Psychotherapy and Politics International* is a journal published by Wiley, a commercial publisher. Most of the content, much of which is produced in universities and with public funding, is behind a paywall, which means that it is only available to those who have access to scholarly

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<sup>38</sup> I. D. Yalom, *The Gift of Therapy: Reflections on being a therapist* (London: Pitakus, 2001), p. 223.

libraries and databases, or those who can afford to pay the high access fees. Professional journals are of course important platforms for professionals to discuss and increase knowledge. But internal discussion and learning do not automatically translate to action in the world. The most positive thing you can say about the existence of such a journal is that at least it encourages mental health professionals who can access it to think about the relevance of political and social issues to their work.

In the UK we have the UK Palestine Mental Health Network where mental health professionals can get directly involved in advocacy for the Palestinian people. As a long-term activist for Palestinian human rights, I am involved with this network. But Israeli settler-colonialism and its devastating impact on Palestinian mental health is only one of many cases of injustice and suffering in a big world. While the UK Palestine Mental Health Network offers a positive model of mental health professionals engaging with a political issue that impacts on the mental health of people, it still exists in the margins.

In 1995 Andrew Samuels and Judy Ryde founded Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility (PCSR).<sup>39</sup> PCSR is an association of professionals intended as a forum to discuss social and political issues and to mobilize action by psychotherapists in areas where there is social or political injustice. From its early days PCSR has been too plagued with internal discord to be effective. It has also failed in its goal to energize psychotherapists to become involved in political and social issues. Most therapists are not familiar with PCSR and its membership remains small.

Dr Andrew Samuels, the co-founder of PCSR, is a rare voice in my profession who has been writing about the interface between psychotherapy and politics for at least two decades now. In the quote at the start of this article Samuels suggests that psychotherapy should acknowledge that the world is making people unwell and that if it were to be truly effective it would lead clients to become agents for change in the world. Samuels himself has been doing his best to comment on political and social issues where possible.

### *Love one another*

I have a relationship with Christianity that began after I moved to Australia from Israel in 1991. I was born and raised in Israel in a 'secular' environment, which meant that my family did not follow Jewish religion. I

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<sup>39</sup> J. Ryde, 'PCSR: A Personal Reflection on its History', *Transformations — The Journal for Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility*, (Winter 2010/, pp. 5–6.

attended the secular state school system from age six.<sup>40</sup> When I left Israel I was a young married woman suffering from the limiting impact of childhood trauma caused by having been abused by my parents in a number of ways starting in early childhood (I score 6 on the ACE test). In addition to the abuse and trauma I suffered in my family, I was educated and brought up in a chronically anxious society with a siege mentality,<sup>41</sup> a trauma-based belief system and its predictable emphasis on physical survival.<sup>42</sup>

Growing up with a trauma-based belief system is traumatizing in itself and trauma leads to a life focused on survival.<sup>43</sup> To a traumatized person growth needs are frustrated. They can seem like an unattainable luxury because all you feel you can do is survive from day to day. But psychological trauma can also leave you with a crisis of spirituality. If you are brought up religious and are abused by your caregivers or others you expect to trust and are reliant upon for your survival, you can end up wondering why God had abandoned you. If you grow up secular and suffer the same kind of abuse, you can grow up bereft and lost spiritually. You

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<sup>40</sup> Israel has a parallel religious Zionist state school system alongside the secular system. It is usually attended by children growing up in more religious or traditional families. It is parents' choice which school system their children should attend.

<sup>41</sup> D. Bar-Tal and D. Antebi 'Siege Mentality in Israel', *Ongoing Production on Social Representation — Productions Vives sur les Représentations Sociales*. 1(1) (1992), 49–67.

<sup>42</sup> Ever since I can remember we were told that we were surrounded by 'seven enemy states' that wanted us dead just because we were Jews. We were taught that unless we dedicated our existence, work, talents, indeed our lives to ensuring the survival of our Jewish state, we all faced an imminent threat of being 'thrown into the sea'. (This phrase will be familiar to generations of Israeli Jews.) We were taught about the holocaust and European antisemitism from the start of our schooling. From our first year at school we were regularly exposed to images and heart-wrenching stories of Jewish persecution, especially of suffering and death of children our age. The message was personalized. We were told in no uncertain terms that had we lived then; this would have been us. The same content and message were also ever-present in society outside of school.

<sup>43</sup> A. Abarbanel, *Trauma and Its Impact, What you need to Know*, 2nd edn (Independently published: Amazon, 2019).



have nothing. Not even a god to be angry with. I was in the latter category.<sup>44</sup>

Not long after arriving in Australia I happened to stumble upon a church choir at a small Anglican parish in a northern suburb of Sydney. I was conflicted about being associated with anything Christian or even just entering into a church building. Not hearing anyone preach against Jews (such was my prejudice and expectation from my background) I was gradually reassured it was safe for me to be there. When I began to attend services with the choir<sup>45</sup> I naively went with the rest of the choir to receive Communion. Everyone was doing it, so I followed. John Henderson, the Rector, didn't flinch and just offered me Communion every Sunday together with the rest of the choir. I remember months later asking him why he allowed me to receive Communion when I was not yet a Church member or a Christian. His response was, 'Because this is the Lord's table not mine and I have no right to reject anyone from His table'...

This was the first time I encountered the idea that God loved everyone. I learned that like everyone else not only did I have a right to have a relationship with God, God was interested in having a relationship with me. I was embraced by a caring and safe community that made me feel that I belonged. The idea that God loved me specifically, and that I personally mattered unconditionally, was transformative. In September 1993 I was baptized and confirmed into the Australian Anglican Church.

My journey through Christianity has given me many years to reflect on the Christian message. I believe that the story of Jesus's death on the Cross and his resurrection is not about abolishing death as we know it. Rather it is about helping humanity face our innate fear of death, so that we do not allow it to determine how we live. Jesus understood that our fear of dying can lead us to try to control our reality, to give us some sense of certainty. We create organizations, institutions, social classes, rules and

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<sup>44</sup> A. Abarbanel, 'Differentiating from Israel', *Australia New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy (ANZJFT)*, 24(1) (2003), 41–46. (Contact author for a reprint); A. Abarbanel, 'From 'secular' to 'sacred', from despair to hope: a therapist's spiritual journey', *Thresholds*, Summer 2012 (2012), 14–19. (Access is available on request from author on Academia.edu)

<sup>45</sup> I joined the choir when it was on a break from singing in services after Christmas. I was only able to start attending services with the choir after listening in on sermons during the choir break, while sitting outside the church building. Attending services felt terrifying. After hearing a few sermons, I was reassured that the church was not antisemitic and didn't preach death to the Jews. Such was my deep suspicion of Christianity coming from the Israeli education system...

laws to give us a sense of safety, structure and things to do. Jesus taught that human made structures are an illusion. There is something greater that gives us purpose and meaning and the ultimate safety we are so desperately seeking. Jesus encouraged his Disciples to leave everything and just follow him, to trust that their needs would be met without relying on their work, on earning a living or having a roof over their heads. He challenged them to trust and have faith in something they could not see or touch and in one another, instead of holding on to their familiar social structures or to objects.

Jesus even challenged laws that the Hebrews believed were given to them by God, such as dietary laws and observance of the Sabbath. Should grain be collected from the fields on the Sabbath? Does it really matter what we put into our mouths? Jesus argued that in fact what really matters is how people treat one another. Compassion and feeding hungry people are more important than observing the Sabbath, and what we say to one another, what comes out of our mouths, is more important than what we put into it.

The parable of the good Samaritan is an example of how Jesus challenges social divisions and prejudice. When a man is attacked by robbers — clearly violent highway robbery existed at the time — it was not his friends who helped him. His friends, members of his group or class, walked past him and didn't get involved. It was a Samaritan — a member of a deeply despised group in Jewish culture at the time — who went out of his way to look after the victim. Jesus's parable teaches that a person's character is more important than their social status. Moreover, we cannot assume anything about people's character from their group or social class. People's character becomes evident in the way they behave towards others.

Jesus welcomed women who were at the bottom of the pecking order in Jewish society. Women's menstrual blood is considered 'unclean' in Jewish religion, and there are severe restrictions on men interacting with women when they are bleeding. But when the bleeding woman touches Jesus's clothes against the rules, they both knew well, and in front of other people, he turns to her and heals her instead of pushing her away.

Jesus tells us that the way to reach connectedness with what is greater than ourselves is to follow his example of loving unconditionally, without our divisions of gender, social class or any human concept of worthiness or a pecking order. In other words, love should be at the very centre of our existence. But loving one another isn't about feeling warm and fuzzy. Love is something we do and something we choose. It is expressed through our actions and our choices. I think that the definition of love according to M. Scott Peck echoes what Jesus might have had in mind,

Love is the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth [...] When we love someone our love becomes demonstrable or real only through our exertion — through the fact that for that someone (or for ourself) we take an extra step or walk an extra mile. Love is not effortless. To the contrary, love is effortful. [...] Love is as love does. Love is an act of will — namely, both an intention and an action. Will also implies choice. We do not have to love. We choose to love.<sup>46</sup>

It does not take a degree in theology to recognize that Jesus was a troublemaker who questioned the way society was organized in his time. I do not believe Jesus came to provide a little bit of comfort or distraction for people so they can somehow cope better in a bad world. I think he called for social and political change in a world that was and still is making people suffer. He hoped that we would learn to organize society around spirituality and love.

Fowler argued that spiritual and psychological development are deeply connected and are in fact on the same trajectory.<sup>47</sup> The more developed we are psychologically the more spiritual we become. As we develop psychologically, we move away from our need for a rigid and prescriptive faith. Jesus was not religious, he was spiritual. He taught a spiritual not a religious way to live.

In order to lead to a more spiritual existence we need to be psychologically well and in order to be well, we need a society that enables us to grow to our potential. The Church Jesus established was supposed to be the vehicle for changing the world, not another flawed and human institution or structure that can get easily lost in its own need to survive.

Both humanistic psychotherapy and Christianity are in their very essence about love. If love, compassion, empathy, gentleness, equality were at the centre of everything we do and how we organize the world, we would be more fulfilled and therefore healthier individually and collectively. There is plenty of research now to back this up. I find it insulting that we need to cite research to argue what we all know. Do we really need scientific research to prove that love is good for us? Do we really need so much research to prove that living in fear holds us back from

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<sup>46</sup> M. S. Peck, *The Road Less Travelled: A new psychology of love, traditional values and spiritual growth*. (1978; London: Rider, 2008), pp. 69–71.

<sup>47</sup> J. W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper, 1981).

developing to our potential? But if people do not want to listen to prophets from thousands of years ago or to psychologists from the 1940s, the science is now here as well.

What would Jesus have thought of neoliberalism? I believe we can make a fairly accurate guess at what Jesus would say about neoliberalism if he were here to comment. Christians believe that Jesus *is* here, present in the world and that his teachings continue to speak for him. So, in effect he is commenting right now, and his message is as revolutionary now as it was in his time.

### *The lockdown*

It was not hard to predict that a comprehensive lockdown of society and stopping most human activities and interactions would be cruel and potentially even deadly to those who are among the most powerless and vulnerable among us. From the start it was obvious that locking people up at home for months, preventing people from getting out and meeting others, closing businesses and places of work, prioritizing the virus over everything was going to exact a heavy toll. Evidence is beginning to emerge about the damage of the lockdown, but it is difficult to find thoughtful, critical voices in mainstream media. Most of the available comments, even by prominent professionals and scientists are published via alternative media or are hidden in medical or professional journals that while publicly available are less likely to be accessed by a panicked and information-overloaded public. The public consensus on the lockdown has felt blinkered, short-sighted, oppressive and worrying.

The lockdown has brought to the surface deep, persistent and often invisible socioeconomic inequalities and it is affecting people disproportionately. Douglas et al. offer a long list of groups that are more likely to be at risk from the lockdown and isolation. They include older people, children and young people, women, people from South Asian background, people with mental health problems, those with addictions or who are in recovery, people with disabilities, people with reduced communication, homeless people, prisoners, undocumented migrants, workers in insecure employment, people on low income and people in institutions.<sup>48</sup>

I am working with female clients who are the main carers of a family member with a disability caused by stroke or dementia, who have not been

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<sup>48</sup> M. Douglas, S. V. Katikireddi, M. Taulbut, M. McKee, G. McCartney, [‘Mitigating the wider health effects of covid-19 pandemic response’](#), *British Medical Journal*, 369 (27 April 2020) [accessed 15 May 2020].

able to get out of the house and get any respite since the lockdown began. The most that disabled people can expect under lockdown, at least in Highland Council territory (where I live), is ten minutes of personal care in the morning and ten in the evening. Because the entire care system is in private ownership where employees are poorly paid and employment contracts can be fragile, even this minimal care is not always available.

Any activities that have offered disabled or frail elderly people little pleasures or some quality of life have now ceased. People have been trapped within four walls for their own 'safety' and to prevent their death. Those in better socioeconomic circumstances might have a more comfortable physical environment at home but there are many who live in poverty and in unpleasant physical conditions who are not that fortunate. Primary carers who look after elderly, disabled or chronically ill people such as post-stroke patients are stuck at home and are unable to get respite (I have clients in the latter position). Not everyone, especially among the more elderly population, has access to computers to relieve the isolation.

Children from families where home schooling isn't an option are now potentially set back months in their education. They will emerge out of lockdown behind children who are more fortunate. This will not only contribute to the obvious academic challenges but also to the emotional stress, low self-esteem and other psychological problems that afflict children who are left behind.

Because this virus has been prioritized, people cannot get treatment for ongoing illnesses, including cancer. New diagnoses are delayed, potentially causing premature deaths because of the delay in treatment. It's not unreasonable to expect that the NHS we are helping to 'save' will be inundated with demand at the end of the lockdown, due to the bottleneck that is now being generated.

Two recent European studies 'show that socially isolated people are nearly 50 percent more likely to die from any cause, and that older isolated people, especially those in residential nursing homes, are at much higher risk for the new coronavirus.'<sup>49</sup>

Dr Malcolm Kendrick, a GP on the frontline in NHS England who specializes in working with elderly in care homes, has continually challenged the policy of lockdown in his personal blog. He reports irregularities in death certification practices, which are clearly intended to inflate the number of deaths from the virus and questions the degree to which the statistics can be trusted. Kendrick writes:

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<sup>49</sup> B. P. Dunleavy, '[Social isolation increases risk for COVID-19, other health problems, studies say](#)', *United Press International*, 21 May 2020 [accessed 3 Jun 2020].

Was every person in a care home now to be diagnosed as dying of COVID? Well, that was certainly the advice given in several parts of the UK.

I do know that other doctors put down COVID on anyone who died from early March onwards. I didn't. What can be made of the statistics created from data like these? And does it matter?

It matters greatly for two main reasons. First, if we vastly overestimate deaths from COVID, we will greatly underestimate the harm caused by the lockdown.<sup>50</sup>

According to Griffin who cites ONS data 'Only a third of the excess deaths seen in the community in England and Wales can be explained by covid-19.' He writes:

David Spiegelhalter, chair of the Winton Centre for Risk and Evidence Communication at the University of Cambridge, said that covid-19 did not explain the high number of deaths taking place in the community.

At a briefing hosted by the Science Media Centre on 12 May he explained that, over the past five weeks, care homes and other community settings had had to deal with a 'staggering burden' of 30 000 more deaths than would normally be expected, as patients were moved out of hospitals that were anticipating high demand for beds.

Of those 30 000, only 10 000 have had covid-19 specified on the death certificate. While Spiegelhalter acknowledged that some of these 'excess deaths' might be the result of underdiagnosis, 'the huge number of unexplained extra deaths in homes and care homes is extraordinary. When we look back [...] this rise in non-covid extra deaths outside the hospital is something I hope will be given really severe attention.'

He added that many of these deaths would be among people 'who may well have lived longer if they had managed to get to hospital.'<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> M. Kendrick '[COVID deaths – how accurate are the statistics?](#)' *Dr Malcolm Kendrick (Blog)*, 31 May 2020 [accessed 3 Jun 2020].

This suggests that the policy that was supposed to 'save lives' has in fact contributed to more excess deaths than can be explained by the virus.

Sunetra Gupta, Professor of Theoretical Epidemiology at the University of Oxford, considers the lockdown an 'overreaction'. She said,

I think it is very dangerous to talk about lockdown without recognising the enormous costs that it has on other vulnerable sectors in the population.

Lockdown is a luxury, and it's a luxury that the middle classes are enjoying and higher income countries are enjoying at the expense of the poor, the vulnerable and less developed countries. It's a very serious crisis.<sup>52</sup>

Europol's executive director, Catherine de Bolle said at the end of March this year, 'we have huge figures of people abusing child material online'. She argued that the lockdown has created the 'perfect storm' for paedophiles, an ideal environment.<sup>53</sup>

According to a report on Sky News 'Paedophile hunting groups have seen a five-fold increase in the number of sex offenders trying to make contact with children online since the lockdown.'<sup>54</sup> These references concern online sexual abuse, but online sexual abuse relies on real life abuse as a commodity. What I have not seen criticized or mentioned widely, is the fact that the lockdown has trapped children with paedophiles and other abusers at home, with schools and other outsiders unable to notice anything and help the children. The government has kept schools open for children who are known to social services, but many victims of sexual abuse are not known to child services. Many abuse victims come from families that can appear to the outside world to be perfectly functional and might not be poor or deprived from a socioeconomic perspective. Sexual abuse of children is widespread, and it leads to severe psychological trauma, which can destroy lives. Trauma is the lead cause of addictions and

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<sup>51</sup> S. Griffin, '[Covid-19: "Staggering number" of extra deaths in community is not explained by covid-19](#)', *British Medical Journal*, 369, 13 May 2020 [accessed 3 June 2020].

<sup>52</sup> F. Sayers, '[Sunetra Gupta: Covid-19 is on the way out](#)', *UnHerd*, 21 May 2020 [accessed 3 Jun 2020]

<sup>53</sup> J. Grierson, 'Coronavirus lockdown raises risk of online child abuse, charity says', *The Guardian*, 1 April 2020.

<sup>54</sup> Mark White, *Sky News*, 3 June 2020.

suicide. Many women are trapped in domestic abuse, and we know that the incidents of domestic abuse have grown dramatically under lockdown.

Many third sector counselling services that provide counselling for free to people with low income will not survive the lockdown. They depend on fickle sources of funding such as donations and these are drying up. It is likely we will emerge from the lockdown with a mental health crisis and not enough services to help. We do not have official numbers of suicides as a result of the lockdown but in my work I have heard of a few suicides mostly by men in their thirties who have been suffering from trauma and the mental health problems associated with it, and who have been driven to suicide because of isolation.

Online AA and other 12-step group meetings are not for everyone. There are many who feel that they have lost their only source of support and could lapse back into addiction as a result. Some people do not have access to VC, or even if they do, they might not have privacy where they live to take part in meetings. One of my supervisees, who is the head of a third sector counselling service in a remote area in the Highlands & Islands, reports that many of the clients who use the service have had to stop their counselling during lockdown because of lack of access to reliable broadband, or lack of privacy.

Our government is already warning about the economic recession to come. A Conservative neoliberal government is likely to go back to austerity to try to recoup the money spent on paid furlough for millions of workers, the support offered to the self-employed and the significant increase in Universal Credit payments. Unemployment will no doubt increase at the end of the lockdown due to the closure of so many businesses, so it is likely we will face recession and inflation, which, as to be expected in a neoliberal economy, will continue to affect society unequally.

And of course, there is an even a wider perspective reaching far beyond our own society. According to Eisenstein:

Whether the final global death toll is 50,000 or 500,000 or 5 million, let's look at some other numbers to get some perspective. My point is NOT that COVID isn't so bad and we shouldn't do anything. Bear with me. Last year, according to the FAO [the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation], five million children worldwide died of hunger (among 162 million who are stunted and 51 million who are wasted). That is 200 times more people than have died so far from COVID-19, yet no government has declared a state of emergency or asked that we radically alter our way of life to save them. Nor do we see a comparable



level of alarm and action around suicide — the mere tip of an iceberg of despair and depression — which kills over a million people a year globally and 50,000 in the USA. Or drug overdoses, which kill 70,000 in the USA, the autoimmunity epidemic, which affects 23.5 million (NIH figure) to 50 million (AARDA), or obesity, which afflicts well over 100 million. Why, for that matter, are we not in a frenzy about averting nuclear armageddon or ecological collapse, but, to the contrary, pursue choices that magnify those very dangers?

Please, the point here is not that we haven't changed our ways to stop children from starving, so we shouldn't change them for COVID either. It is the contrary: If we can change so radically for COVID-19, we can do it for these other conditions too. Let us ask why are we able to unify our collective will to stem this virus, but not to address other grave threats to humanity. Why, until now, has society been so frozen in its existing trajectory?<sup>55</sup>

In mid-April the UN warned that: 'Hundreds of thousands of children could die this year due to the global economic downturn sparked by the coronavirus pandemic and tens of millions more could fall into extreme poverty as a result of the crisis.'<sup>56</sup>

We are also finding out that poaching of already endangered animals is on the rise driven by poverty and desperation exacerbated by the economic damage from the response to the virus:

'In Africa, there has been an alarming increase in bushmeat harvest and wildlife trafficking that is directly linked to COVID-19-related lockdowns, decreased food availability and damaged economies as a result of tourism collapses,' said Matt Lewis, who leads Conservation International's work on wildlife trafficking issues in Africa.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> C. Eisenstein, '[The Coronation](#)', *Heartfulness eMagazine* (May 2020) [accessed 1 June 2020].

<sup>56</sup> M. Nichols, '[U.N. warns economic downturn could kill hundreds of thousands of children in 2020](#)', Reuters World News (16 April 2020) [accessed 1 June 2020].

<sup>57</sup> K. Price, '[Poaching, deforestation reportedly on the rise since COVID-19 lockdowns](#)', *Conservation International* (30 Apr 2020) [accessed 27 May 2020].

This review is partial and sketchy, but it is trying to paint a picture. The response to the virus didn't just highlight the ills of society but brought into focus our priorities. We clearly still place perceived physical survival over everything else and anything else. We place short-term survival, 'saving lives' over quality of life, meaning and fulfilment of potential and even the lives of so many who we either overlook and for whom we seem to have little compassion.

### *Conclusion*

The most important question society needs to ask itself now about our response to the virus is, who are we saving, who are we sacrificing, and who has a right to make that choice? What are we going to say to all those who are right now being sacrificed by the lockdown? Are we going to tell them that they were collateral damage because we were 'saving lives'?

I believe that the voices most qualified to highlight this ethical dilemma and to urge caution, a broader perspective, and thoughtfulness in policy are those of my own profession and the Church. But both have not acted on their revolutionary core before the virus and are therefore not accustomed nor structured, perhaps not even prepared, to challenge what we are doing.

Instead of making ourselves redundant by creating a world where everyone can grow to their spiritual and psychological potential, we have helped maintain things as they are by helping people cope. Instead of changing reality we have succumbed to it. We need to ask how we have come to collude with a harmful and unwell society that goes against everything we all believe and know to be true. Is our role just to provide a little bit of comfort or do we perhaps have a bigger role to play that we are neglecting? And if we are neglecting it then why are we doing this and what do we need to do about it?

# The Lockdown of Faces: COVID-19, Autism and the Opportunity of New Social Constructions

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COVID-19 has had a huge impact on society in which lives were changed overnight. Our church communities, which formerly met in buildings, have had to find new ways of being church and reconsider what it means to belong. The initial changes were swift and had a great impact on many people, including those who are autistic. Where we once met face-to-face, we now have a different sort of facial contact, either no facial contact at all or online facial contact. Stephen Pattison, in his book *Saving Face*, raises an interesting discussion regarding the role of face and culture.<sup>1</sup> Faces play an important role in building relationships and the creation of social constructions. These social constructions have an impact on how a community functions; how the community perceives itself and the world around it; what is seen and what is not seen; who belongs and who gets excluded (either intentionally or unintentionally). Lack of face-to-face contact during lockdown has created the opportunity for former social constructions to be broken down and therefore enable the creation of new ones that will hopefully be more inclusive.

This paper will consider the impact of face, the role of face in building relationships, the subsequent social constructions that arise as a result of these relationships, and the challenge this might have for autistic and non-autistic people. Autistic people can find church communities difficult places to belong. Social constructions such as unspoken but commonly understood practices (e.g. when to stand, sit, go forward for communion) make services difficult to follow, and expected face-to-face contact (e.g. welcome, post-service coffee) and physical interactions (e.g. sharing the Peace) might be sensory painful and mentally tiring. The expectation is for the autistic person to conform to the social constructions of the church

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Pattison, *Saving Face: Enfacement, Shame, Theology*, Explorations in Practical, Pastoral, and Empirical Theology (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), p. 89.

community rather than the church community seeking to find out how best to meet the needs of the members of the body who find it difficult to belong.

Reading and understanding facial expressions is part of how we belong to a community and build relationships. However, this can be difficult, especially for autistic people. This paper draws on Denise's personal experience as a parent of an autistic child and the many other experiences both Denise and Léon have with autism, and the lived experience of the autistic community as is publicly available through (social) media. After a brief introduction to autism, the paper first considers the role of facial interactions in the formation of social cultural constructions, and some of the challenges that may be experienced by autistic people with face. This includes the question how neurotypicals (the preferred terminology by some in the autistic community for someone who is not autistic) contribute to the difficulties of building relationships through face by withdrawing from the relationship with an autistic person because neurotypicals may find autistic faces difficult to read. Note that we deliberately change around the common way of stating the problem of facial interaction by questioning the way neurotypicals understand autistic faces. The paper then turns to look at how the role of facial interaction has changed in light of COVID-19 and the movement away from face-to-face contact to online facial contact and the impact this has had on not only the autistic community but potentially also on what it means to belong.

It is too early to draw substantive conclusions: however, lockdown has forced churches to rethink worship to provide ways where all have an opportunity to belong, regardless of age and ability. What was once formerly thought impossible, is starting to become possible and the growth of the whole Body of Christ relies on churches changing their social constructions in order to create a community of true belonging. What we offer in this paper are some early reflections on how the pandemic caused by COVID-19 might positively contribute to changing some of our cultural and social assumptions in order for all people in the Christian community to belong, by focusing on facial interaction and autism.

### *What is autism?*

The National Autistic Society defines autism as 'a lifelong, developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with and relates to other people, and how they experience the world around them'.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Autistica, an organization devoted to autism research, states:

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<sup>2</sup> [National Autistic Society](#) [accessed 27 May 2020].

Autism changes the way people communicate and experience the world around them. Autism is a spectrum of developmental conditions, including Asperger's Syndrome. Every autistic person is different. Some are able to learn, live and work independently but many have learning differences or co-occurring health conditions that require specialist support.<sup>3</sup>

A few things are important to note in these statements. First, and particularly relevant to our purposes, autism affects communication. Second, autism affects the experience of the world around the person (note the identical wording in both statements). Thirdly, autism manifests itself differently from person to person — a fact often indicated by the word 'spectrum'.

Defining autism is difficult and diagnosis relies on a medical model being applied.<sup>4</sup> Information from the individual's development and behaviour are applied to diagnostic criteria, currently ICD-11 (International Classification of Diseases published by the World Health Organization) or DSM-5 (Diagnosis and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders published by the American Psychiatric Association). According to DSM-5, almost literally followed by ICD-11, the two following clusters of characteristics have to be present and have been present throughout a person's lifetime:

1. 'Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts': This may show in behaviours such as poor eye contact, poor use of gestures, a struggle with non-verbal communication or lack of intuition or empathy.
2. 'Restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities': Individuals will have obsessive interests e.g. railways, and can display islets of ability in particular areas, for example, such as mathematics.

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<sup>3</sup> [Autiscia](#) [accessed 27 May 2020].

<sup>4</sup> The understanding of autism is further complicated by the radical changes in definition over the course of the history of the concept. See for an informative historical overview, Bonnie Evans, *The Metamorphosis of Autism: A History of Child Development in Britain*, Social Histories of Medicine (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).

Some would argue that sensory processing difficulties should play a bigger role in the understanding of autism, making this almost a cluster in itself.<sup>5</sup> Autistic people process sensory information differently which can cause them to become over-sensitive to things such as touch, smell and sound. Equally they may have an under sensitivity and may show a lack of personal space due to difficulties in measuring proximity to others. For this reason, they may bump into people and furniture, or hold on to others tightly in order to feel the sensation of pressure.<sup>6</sup>

The medical model still dominates perceptions of autistic people particularly in terms of getting support either at work or, for children, at school. It is only when reading of autistic lived experience, or living with it ourselves as autistic people or family members and friends of autistic people, that it becomes apparent that the characteristics of autism are much less defined than the medical model would indicate. It is therefore important that as church communities we hear the lived experience of autistic people and not make assumptions based on what we think autism is or how autistic people perceive and interact with the world.

This article is going to consider one such nuance, which is the ability to read and interpret facial expressions. Faces are important for the building of relationships yet scientific evidence is inconclusive as to the extent to which autistic people can interpret facial emotional expressions.<sup>7</sup> In situations where autistic people can read facial expressions, it may be that they have learned a method of reading faces or it could be that autistic people decode faces differently to neurotypicals. There may be miscommunications between what is being seen on the face of another and what is being heard (the sound of the voice of the other not matching the facial expression, e.g. your face says happy but your voice sounds angry) but by no account should it be a sweeping statement that autistic people are unable to read faces. What is key is that faces are important for the building of relationships and in turn creation of social constructions of the church community. How we interpret each other's facial expressions is a major factor in ensuring all belong to the church community.

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<sup>5</sup> For example, Olga Bogdashina, *Sensory Perceptual Issues in Autism and Asperger Syndrome: Different Sensory Experiences — Different Perceptual Worlds* (London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> See more at [National Autistic Society](https://www.autism.org.uk) [accessed 27 May 2020].

<sup>7</sup> Madeline B. Harms, Alex Martin, and Gregory L. Wallace, 'Facial Emotion Recognition in Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Review of Behavioral and Neuroimaging Studies', *Neuropsychology Review* 20, no. 3 (1 September 2010), 290–322, doi:10.1007/s11065-010-9138-6.



*The role of face in building community*

Our face is the one part of us we never see fully (only as a partial reflection; we cannot ever fully see the whole of our face) and yet it gives away so much of ourselves in communication. It functions as our identity; it gives away information about us such as age, culture, health; it tells others something about how we are feeling or revealing how we are truly feeling beneath the surface. What our face says and what we are verbally communicating may not match. Relationships within community can be made and broken through facial communication or lack of, as we will explore further in this section. As church communities we are used to regularly meeting face-to-face. Faces are part of how we communicate, how we understand our own and each other's identity, and therefore also how we shape our identity as a faith community, as the Body of Christ.

One of the difficulties some autistic people (and their families) have within church communities is feeling they don't belong.<sup>8</sup> John Swinton argues that there are significant differences between making a simple provision to include someone in our service and creating a culture which enables that person to belong.<sup>9</sup> Even if churches intentionally make adaptations to their building or liturgy, Swinton's argument should be taken into account, as it demonstrates that much more is needed than just making some adaptations. Grant Macaskill in his book *Autism and the Church* highlights that the church community needs to recognize that autistic members of the body are seen and valued as equal members of the body and 'received with joy and thanksgiving.'<sup>10</sup> Such a reception of autistic members is the starting point in which the community can then begin to corporately accommodate the needs of others. It is an important impetus for moving from inclusion to belonging. Church culture and the impact of face in creating social constructions play an important role in determining whether an autistic person feels they belong to that church community.

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<sup>8</sup> Andrew L. Whitehead, 'Religion and Disability: Variation in Religious Service Attendance Rates for Children with Chronic Health Conditions', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 57 no. 2 (1 June 2018), 377–95, doi:10.1111/jssr.12521; Bob Smietana, '[Few Churches Are Autism Friendly](#)', *Facts and Trends*, 20 July 2018 [accessed 27 May 2020]. We have heard many stories and anecdotes making this point over and over again.

<sup>9</sup> John Swinton, 'From Inclusion to Belonging: A Practical Theology of Community, Disability and Humanness', *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health*, 16 no. 2 (2012), 172–90.

<sup>10</sup> Grant Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019), p. 95.

Social constructions arise around the visual. Pattison observes: 'Belonging to a community means looking at the world (and not looking at it) in particular ways.'<sup>11</sup> He uses the example of a bird watcher who notices the life of birds in much more intricate detail than other people may completely miss. Autistic senses are tuned differently to those of neurotypicals. It could therefore be said that autistic people see and hear things that neurotypical people cannot, or in different ways. However, it is only when we listen to these experiences that we come to know of what the different eye can see. Do our social constructions of church encompass the viewpoints of the autistic community?

As stated, the face, and being able to read facial expression, has an important role in building relationships. Being able to read and understand facial expression is one way of how we build and form relationships. The building of human relationships works on a feedback loop of facial expression. 'Seeing the expressions of others, and being seen by them, provides a road to empathy and understanding.'<sup>12</sup> To be part of the social world is to be able to read the facial expression of the other in order to maintain a relationship with them. To be unable to read another's facial expression can lead to social difficulties. Pattison notes that those 'whose faces register limited or no emotions [...] become non-persons as other people cease to communicate with them.'<sup>13</sup> In respect of autistic people, of whom it is said that they are unable to read faces, or whose faces are sometimes difficult to read, does this mean they inadvertently become non-persons in our church communities?<sup>14</sup>

This is an important question, but it should be noted that there is some discrepancy around whether autistic people can read facial expressions. A review carried out by Harms et al. concluded that autistic people do decode facial expression but differently to neurotypicals.<sup>15</sup> However, although they found there were some difficulties for some autistic people, for others, there was not. It is still not clear why some autistic people find it easier to read faces than others, however, it is believed that compensatory mechanisms or feature-based learning may be factors that assist autistic people when reading faces.

At the same time, neurotypicals also need to be able to read and interpret the facial expressions of the autistic person. The facial

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<sup>11</sup> Pattison, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Uta Frith, *Autism: Explaining the Enigma*, 2nd edn (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), p. 203.

<sup>15</sup> Harms, Martin, and Wallace, *op. cit.*



expressions of an autistic person can sometimes be difficult to read. Brewer et al. found that neurotypicals had difficulty interpreting the mental and emotional states of autistic people.<sup>16</sup> What is interesting is that cultural social constructions place the onus on the autistic person to fit in, to conform. Thus, if the autistic person's facial expression is difficult to read and subsequently others withdraw from that relationship, then it is the fault of the autistic person. However, what if we look at this from a different perspective? What if, instead of declaring that autistic faces are difficult to read and subsequently withdrawing from the relationship, we instead attempt to use a different method of communication or find out the preferred method of communication, thus enabling the relationship to continue? That way, the balance of the communication is placed equally between the neurotypical person and the autistic person to work at the communication together in order to ensure the continuance of that relationship.

Sometimes though, the culture of the community overrides what the face of the autistic person is displaying. An example of this, and the other aspects of face and relationship building discussed in this section, is the practice of the sharing of the Peace at church. For Denise, it seems obvious to her when her son does not want to share the Peace, usually because he is showing avoidant behaviours such as looking down, hiding behind another adult or sometimes even sitting on the floor. His face and body language clearly say, I do not want to share the Peace. However, others seem insistent in wanting to share the Peace with the reason that they do not want him to feel left out. When Léon discussed a similar situation with a church member, he was flatly told that autistic people just had to adjust to 'the way we do things here.' Our social cultural constructions of what is expected at that point in the service override what may or may not be expressed on Denise's son's face. Pattison would argue that this is placing him into a position of shame. Through non-participation he is placed outside the culture, however the community, not wanting him to be excluded, place him in a difficult position. Does he conform in order to fit the cultural expectation at that moment, which results in anxiety, or does he not participate in the cultural expectation of the moment and place himself outside of the culture into a position of shame and thus, anxiety?

Ann Memmott, in a consultation document she wrote with Oxford Diocese in the Church of England, notes these problematic behaviours of church communities as well. She comments: '[Autistic] body language can

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<sup>16</sup> Rebecca Brewer and others, 'Can Neurotypical Individuals Read Autistic Facial Expressions? Atypical Production of Emotional Facial Expressions in Autism Spectrum Disorders', *Autism Research*, 9 no. 2 (2016), 262–71.

be different to [neurotypicals], and we may not make eye contact. Sharing fellowship via a wave, or just sitting down in quiet prayer during the Peace should be allowed, without people mistaking it for rudeness.’<sup>17</sup> There is no easy answer to know the best way to deal with situations like this. On the one hand, the autistic experience and aversion of ‘sharing the Peace’ should be respected. On the other hand, this moment in the liturgy is rich in social and theological meaning. Here we do not aim to answer the question, but to highlight one particular example of how communities of faith can misread and override the face of autistic fellow worshippers.

One of the ways in which autistic people adapt to the neurotypical environment is through masking. Masking is a feature that is quite common to autistic people. ‘Masking and acting involve taking on the face of another which then necessarily obscures the ‘real’ face beneath.’<sup>18</sup> For some autistic people masking is a way of coping with living in a ‘neurotypical world’. The medical profession in recent years has recognized that masking is particularly common for autistic girls which has then resulted in difficulties with diagnosis.<sup>19</sup> Masks do however allow a person to be present whilst at the same time being absent, a means of a person to take a rest from themselves and their everyday identity.<sup>20</sup> In order to be accepted into the culture of the church community, masking is a tool that enables a person to effectively fit in. However, masking is not ideal if we are to create social constructions that enable all members of the Body of Christ to be valued and included. The culture of the church community should be a place where autistic people do not need to mask. Our church communities should be a safe and welcoming place for all to belong.

This section has considered some of the ways in which the role of face plays an important part in building social cultural constructions. Being aware how faces can be read and misread, both on the part of autistic and non-autistic members of the church, is an important step towards building a more inclusive community, where everyone belongs. However, in this time of COVID-19, face-to-face communication is not allowed and therefore social constructions involving facial expression have had to change due to either no face-to-face contact or movement to online gatherings. The next section discusses some aspects of this change.

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<sup>17</sup> Ann Memmott, [\*Welcoming and Including Autistic People in Our Churches and Communities\*](#) (Oxford: Diocese of Oxford, 2019), 8.

<sup>18</sup> Pattison, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

<sup>19</sup> Tony Attwood, *The Complete Guide to Asperger’s Syndrome*, kindle edition (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2007), p. 46, location 1072.

<sup>20</sup> Pattison, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

*The changing face of faces in times of lockdown*

Social constructions of church community have had to change in light of the lockdown. The way we interact as church communities has had to change and this therefore has had an impact on face-to-face interactions. We have been able to anonymize ourselves, take control of our faces but also rethink our preconceptions of face, particularly in respect of wearing face masks. During COVID-19 the relationship with face has changed. In some ways our face has become anonymous because we may have no means to share our face with others, either due to shielding or because we have no means to be online with other people. At the same time, for those of us who have the means to meet people online, we have gained some control of our face. We can choose where to show our face and where not to. We can choose to tune in to an online service anonymously, for example, a YouTube service, or we can choose to present our faces online, such as Zoom or other online meeting platforms. Furthermore, in group meetings we can also control whose faces we choose to see, or not see, all of which is unknown to other members of the group. With twenty or thirty faces spread across a screen it is impossible to have face-to-face contact with everyone on a personal level. This raises interesting questions of who we choose to see or not, including the limitations imposed on us by the software developers. Even more power is given to the organizer of the meeting, who, with some programmes, can literally 'mute' participants. All of this creates new sets of social and cultural expectations in this different, digital context.

Interestingly, thinking about face, whilst we can say that face-to-face meetings are not possible in times of lockdown, when meeting digitally it is only the face that we see, rather than other parts of the body. Digital communication is disembodied in the sense that it is not physical and immediate. Again, there is an element of control: we decide where to look on our screen, and to zoom in or out if the software allows. We also control, to a certain extent, how to present ourselves: how close we sit to the camera, where to put our laptops or webcam, and in some cases we can change the background, presenting ourselves sitting on a Hawaiian beach (digital communication does have some advantages!). Of course, that level of control only goes so far, because the other can click us into the margins of the screen with just a mouse click — and therefore, importantly for our discussion, also to the margins of the group. And yet, all of that is mediated in a way that physical face-to-face meetings are not. We already noted the limitations (and opportunities) set by the software companies. Our level of control is only the level of control insofar made possible by the software developers, or indeed, the package we buy from them. Moreover, the (dis)embodied communication is mediated by screens and bandwidth. A poor internet connection can present faces dimly, or not allow the face to

appear because of no video connection, or it can make us 'freeze'. Faces, therefore, are seen very differently in these days of virtual communication than when meeting in person.

It is unknown whether these new forms of online services are of benefit to the autistic community or whether they are more difficult. We have heard from some autistic churchgoers that there is less sensory input and that therefore the potential for sensory overload is reduced. However, there is also a sense of missing physical participation, missing church community and being with other people.

Denise has noted at home that her son has engaged more in services. Her services are pre-recorded and uploaded to YouTube. Her son has physical objects to pick up and hold throughout the service as a sign of physical participation. Candles are lit and her son rings a bell at the times when a bell would have been rung in the church service. The format of the service follows what was familiar prior to lockdown. Being able to worship in a safe and familiar space has enabled him to engage more but he says he misses seeing church people. There is something about face and relationships that is important to most people. Faces mean something to us.

Faces can take on different meanings, which is closely related to how faces are perceived. Pattison notes that in Western society facially attractive people have an advantage compared to those deemed unattractive.<sup>21</sup> Equally, faces can be dehumanized. Pattison uses the example of Osama bin Laden's face 'becoming an icon of evil and terror, not the face of a human being'.<sup>22</sup> In light of COVID-19 what we previously thought about faces may have had to change, particularly in the use of face masks or coverings when out in public. The change in perception for many may be easy and may therefore not change much in the meaning given to faces. However, for autistic people the change of perception of face mask wearing may not be so easy. FaithMummy recently posted on Facebook this extract expressed by her autistic daughter in relation to the use of facemasks:

Masks make me think of surgeons and scary operations and robbers and those are not good things to think about. Those are scary, bad things that none of us like. Masks make me afraid of people! I can't tell if people are happy, sad, or angry at

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

me or how they are feeling. I avoid angry people but I can't do that when they wear a mask as I can't know if they are angry.<sup>23</sup>

What is interesting is the relevance to facial expression that is important to her, so she knows how people are feeling.<sup>24</sup> Masks cover the facial expression which causes great anxiety. One of the questions we need to ask as church communities is how do we manage these changes of perception when our churches reopen and especially if facemasks are a requirement of worshipping together?

We are still in the midst of COVID-19 and trying to understand how face is understood in light of no face-to-face physical interaction. We haven't heard yet from the autistic community as to how the transfer from meeting in person to meeting online has helped or impacted their feeling of belonging in church community. However, what is coming to light is that church community will not look the same as it did before, at least not at first when the churches reopen – the boundaries will need to be renegotiated and the social constructions will need to be changed. The lockdown brings with it challenges in communication. These challenges may well teach neurotypicals to understand better the challenges that autistic people often face in face-to-face communication, for whom such challenges are part of daily life. One change in the change of social constructions for which the current lockdown may be a catalyst, is in cultural assumptions about on who the onus is to adapt. People shouldn't need to wear masks (metaphorically; we are not talking about the requirement of face masks here) in order to fit in. Wearing masks prevents us from seeing the real faces of people, and therefore, the real faces that make up the Body of Christ. Wearing masks prevents us from seeing the fulness of the Body of Christ in all its diversity.

### *Renegotiation of the boundaries*

For many years when the question of making church more inclusive was raised, the response had been 'yes we know but we can't create a church to suit every particular need'. The forced movement out of our church buildings has shown that we can, if we choose, create church community that does suit many needs. The nuances of every individual need are difficult to meet but as church communities we can take significant leaps

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<sup>23</sup> FaithMummy, '[Facebook Post: When Masks Are Everywhere](#)', Facebook, 17 May 2020 [accessed 27 May 2020].

<sup>24</sup> Facial expression is also most important for other groups in society. For example, people who use sign language depend partly on facial expression, as that is part and parcel of their language.

forward to making our communities much more inclusive. Breaking down and significantly changing our former social constructions will be the beginning of this change.

One of the positive outcomes of lockdown and the closure of church buildings is that it has forced church leadership to think about how to conduct worship outside of the safety of its walls. We now realize that what was formerly supposedly impossible is, with a little time and effort, actually very possible. The following extract from Revd Tim Goode sums up this point perfectly:

But why did it take a pandemic for me to respond to my rattled cage and seek to bring the worship of the local parish church to those who are unable to be physically present and in doing so to actively create opportunities and spaces for all to serve and to minister, regardless of age and ability?<sup>25</sup>

The dynamics of church culture have changed during COVID-19. The inability to meet face-to-face has given and will continue to give the Church the opportunity to reflect on what it means to belong. Our former social constructions can be broken down and be rebuilt with ones that are much more inclusive so that when we meet once more face-to-face, we communicate with one another as equal members in the Body of Christ. When we return to our buildings, there will need to be a renegotiation of the boundaries. No longer will it be acceptable to say, 'we cannot change to incorporate the needs of others' but rather we need to say, 'how can we continue to meet the needs of all members of the Body of Christ?'

The next step for churches and in particular church leaders is to resist the urge to return to the previous 'normal'. COVID-19 has enabled ground to be broken in terms of re-evaluating former social constructions in order to find new ways of meeting the needs of the Body of Christ. During lockdown, we asked the question 'how do we serve the needs of the community outside the church building?' When we return to the buildings, we must ask this question, 'is what we are doing meeting the needs of all members our community?' If the answer is no, then the next question is 'what do we change in order to meet these needs?' In some ways, going into lockdown was easy. Coming out of lockdown and returning to worship, both inside and outside of buildings, is going to present a much bigger challenge. However, the health of the Body of Christ relies on churches re-evaluating and changing their former social constructions, ensuring that

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<sup>25</sup> Tim Goode, ['We Can't Go Back ... to Our Old Familiar Cages!'](#), *ViaMedia.News*, 19 May 2020 [accessed 27 May 2020].

the voices of those who may not have had a voice before are now heard (or, that faces that somehow were not seen are now seen), and most importantly, in Macaskill's words, that every member is valued and received with joy and thanksgiving.





# Risk and Reward — Theological and Pastoral Questions Raised by the Coronavirus Pandemic: The Response of the Church

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Like many others, I have been out on the pavement on the Thursday evenings of lockdown applauding the NHS. I live beside a railway, and my neighbours and I can hear the people on the other side, even though we cannot see them. There is a solidarity of raucous noise in celebration of what we hold dear. It does us good to be aware of each other, even if only briefly once a week.

It reminds me of church in some ways — at least the ways that some see it. There is an old dictum always to try to finish a service with a rousing hymn, so that folk feel as if they have had a good time (whether they have or not): we *feel* good because we *share* something significant — something we'd feel pretty silly doing on our own!

Is this perhaps part of the problem that the Church currently faces? For many people, church only feels possible with others as a shared activity: joining the singing or praying — or even just reading Scripture — are not things they might ever do on their own. The enforced separation of priests and their people only confirms this impression in the wilderness of sacramental drought.

It would not be fair to imply that folk are so shallow that they need entertainment to keep them on board; but it is surely unreasonable to expect everyone who might come through our doors to have enough in their knapsack to sustain them unaided through this bewildering desert experience. I fear spiritual starvation for those who may have set out with less to draw on, less to keep them going, and less with which to reconnect when the time finally comes and we reach the 'Promised Land' of freedom to meet and assemble.

This dry dearth is felt, not only by our people, but by priests as well. Many of us define our role primarily in terms of relationship: with God and with our people, as well as the communities we serve and the institutions we engage with. Being shut away is a form of internal exile which goes hard against the grain of who and what we are.

We can take a Trinitarian view of this in terms of a triangular relationship between God, priests and people. When one part of the formula is removed, we might wonder whether we still have the same

relationship, or whether something has fundamentally changed. Worship leaders — lay and ordained — as well as those in the pews are living with deprivation and reorientation.

Some are meeting this challenge via technology, using it to maintain contact among their people — and perhaps to stimulate them to a greater sense of community for the sake of the weak and the vulnerable, as well as potentially straying sheep. We are not the only ones, for there are myriad social groupings and links to ensure that no one with the internet should ever be alone. But of course, not everyone has it: some even actively resist it, much as they did the printing press or a postal service.

Many are meeting these new circumstances with increased use of the telephone, e-mail and social media. Some are printing hard copies of magazines and putting them through doors on their permitted daily walk. It is probably fair to say that we are collectively doing whatever we can to try to keep our congregations together, both for the sake of individuals and of our church communities as we look towards a brighter future, eventually. We desperately want to be able to regroup without having to start from scratch.

To say that is to name the dark fear at the back of all our minds. This in turn forces us to ask what we are doing — corporately and individually — to ensure that we avert the worst fate we can imagine: the death of the Church.

You probably know the old joke about the man who was rescued from a desert island on which he had built not one but *two* churches during his twenty years of isolation. When asked ‘Why on earth?’ he pointed to one as the church he actually went to, and to the other as the one he *didn’t* go to. (It’s a joke that works best among the more fissile Christian denominations and is perhaps lost on less excitable Episcopalians.)

COVID-19 raises the prospect of (even more) churches that *no one* goes to. Or the memory of a lost religion, recaptured (like Christmas or clapping on the pavement) in moments of solidarity or sentiment, that makes us feel good without making any fundamental challenge upon us to change anything we do, or how we do it.

So, apart from furiously bashing our keyboards and smartphones, what can we do? What should we be doing? COVID-19 is not the first pandemic, though it is perhaps the first to affect us to this extent. The past century has seen a steady rise in global epidemics, which have been multiplying since the millennium at an alarming rate. We have no guarantee that this is the last, or that the future will be any better.

We are powerfully aware of the sacrifices made by gowned and masked NHS workers who are doing work that is often heroic and sacrificial. Many of them have already paid with their lives. By comparison,

many clergy feel inadequate and helpless: most live at a remove from any real danger of exposure.

Numerically we of the SEC are a tiny minority, far behind both the Roman Catholic Church and Church of Scotland. It can be hard to assert a presence when it feels as if no one has any idea who we really are — or why we are even there! Reaching our own folk can be hard enough without tackling the wider world. We are in danger of becoming chaplains to occasional congregations of no particular identity.

Yet surely this lies at the heart of priestly vocation. We are defined in what we *do*, not merely by what we say. A priest is called to minister Word and Sacrament, making the love of God visible to those who welcome it as well as those who don't — perhaps especially those who don't! It is distressing enough that our regular congregations are unable to access the Eucharist (in terms of actually *receiving* Communion), but those trying to arrange a wedding, or a Baptism, are probably in even greater need. We may yet have to conduct many more scaled-down funerals before COVID-19 is over.

If we are really honest, the one funeral we do not want anyone to have to arrange is our own. Heroism is all very well, but, as a friend pointed out to me, we are no use once we are dead. So, it is essential that we take every precaution to preserve ourselves from unnecessary risk.

Some have interpreted this advice as grounds to withdraw altogether. Samuel Pepys (I believe) tells of clergy, like hired hands, abandoning their London parishes before the plague rather than risk staying to minister to their flock. Put like that, it sounds like gutless cowardice, but no two situations are alike. Some — perhaps even a majority — are already at risk by reason of age or underlying health considerations. Others have 'at risk' dependents in their households, whose well-being also matters. Others (like bishops) are already an endangered species and getting one to nest in your vicinity can be extremely hard work.

Yet alongside those clergy who fled, there were others who resolutely stayed, either because they could not or would not run. They accepted the risk that they too might fall victim to the deadly virus. Some donned invincibility as a defence, asserting that God would surely protect the righteous; others devoted themselves to faithful prayer and discipline. They saw simply 'being there' as incarnational discipleship — a duty that had to be fulfilled, no matter how high the cost to themselves.

This is surely sacrificial priesthood that goes beyond the baseline of the merest minimum of risk to the person — or parson. And yes, some clergy during outbreaks of bubonic plague did indeed perish, as have NHS staff more recently in fulfilment of their duties. We have tended to see those in the medical profession (and its ancillary offshoots) as

professionally beyond reproach, and our expectations have been commensurate. Clergy, in contrast, are often regarded as bumbling, amateurish, and, at best, otherworldly. Now we are all seen as fallible and vulnerable, while we aspire to be competent and conscientious.

It is no coincidence that many hospitals and nursing organizations were founded by Christians to offer help and support to those in need. The professionalization of medicine and nursing has effectively eased the Church out of the front-line, limiting its involvement to 'spiritual' if not actually 'religious'. But that primary vocation remains, whether in leper colonies or AIDS clinics, when others flee or react with repulsion and 'distance'. When clergy are required by canonical authority to stay away from the sick and dying, this would at first sight appear a quite fundamental departure from the ethos of our vocation.

Yet there is surely sacrifice in just sticking with it and making the most of motley situations and circumstances. At the risk of sounding strident, I want to suggest that heroism is not only to be found in heightened moments of extreme drama, but also in the sheer grind of keeping things going. There is scant recognition or reward, but that does not in any way reduce its merit for those who are called to be alongside their people.

Some of us might say that they are very rarely called out to the deathbeds of their flock. Some might be blessed with vigorous, healthy, young congregations who move away long before they die. This is probably rare and improbable. We should also remember that COVID-19 is indiscriminate in whom it affects. Funeral ministry is likely to become an increasing feature for many of us — whether standing beside a plague pit in clouds of lime dust, or the slimmed-down slot of scaled-down necessity at the crematorium.

If we are rarely summoned to the bedsides of the dying, that may mean that our congregations need better teaching on the role of their priest at the time of death — a role that goes far beyond merely presiding over a funeral. Often this can be taxing and tiring, but that is what we are there for: to be taken, blessed, broken and given in proclaiming the love of God for the life of the world. Pious, I know, but true.

To diminish ministry at the time of death to the funeral only is like reducing our role in normal times to merely what we do on a Sunday morning. I wonder whether this lies behind many advertised posts being shrunk to part-time in the minds of those who calculate only the cost and not the worth. After all, 'You lot only work one day week!'

The dangers that we face do not necessarily cease with death! Sometimes that is only the beginning, as families wage open war, and clergy find themselves in the crossfire. That however is something that our

training should equip us to face, whereas COVID-19 has taken us all by surprise.

It may be tempting to opt out, but this is clearly not a priest's vocation. We may hear those wonderful words in Ephesians 6 about donning the whole armour of God as relevant only to *spiritual* warfare: with COVID-19 we face *practical* dangers as well and should be appropriately garbed to quench all the flaming darts of danger. It would be a dereliction of priestly duty to refuse to go to one who is dying — or in distress of any sort (if a telephone conversation will not suffice).

It goes without saying that we seek and take medical advice: it would be foolish indeed to sail in, armed only with invincible faith. We do what needs to be done — and go. We do not hang around or get in the way: our ministry is enhanced by being clear and definite, rather than vague, hesitant or apologetic. If this means running risks, then that is what we have to do — including the risk of being wrong: I would sooner go through the tremendous palaver of gowning and masking than not bother. This is quite simply no less than what I would wish to receive ... so I have to be willing to do the same for others.

One day our doors will reopen, and we hope that that there will be people to come through them. Some sort of normality will emerge, and we will seek to generate momentum. What we are judged to offer as priests *after* lockdown will depend in no small measure on the quality of what we have offered *during* lockdown. If we have acted merely as curators of a dead religion, we should not be surprised or disappointed if others see it as nice for those who like that sort of thing, but not really relevant in a modern world. If we have been silent during lockdown, why should anyone listen afterwards? If we have failed to act in lockdown (however limited that may have been), what is there worth doing as the Church when it is lifted?

By closing our churches and forcing clergy online or onto paper, a cloak of invisibility has been cast over us. For many, this merely confirms our irrelevance. By withdrawing from the public square (for so it might appear), we seem to confirm that we have nothing worth saying or doing. This is not going to make any converts and may even give a last little push to those on the edge. I fear that the task ahead of us may be infinitely larger than any of us really realizes.

Whatever dangers we face, during or after COVID-19, the community of faith will regroup in obedience to its baptismal vocation. Some will respond to this with greater or lesser eagerness or ability. Shepherds will need to use their utmost priestly skills in establishing and maintaining flock identity, keeping the ninety-nine together (if only!) while searching for the one. Of course, 'lost' can mean not just those who stray, but also

those choose to wander off and not come back, so becoming 'lost' to the flock.

I do not feel called to life as a solitary: I guess that few of us do. So, I don't want to be the last man standing, for I rely on my sisters and brothers in Christ to make priestly vocation work in all its manifold risk and reward.



## Coronavirus, Healing and Walk into Mystery

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When faced with a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, there seems little sense to speak of God healing, or bringing new life. It is difficult to speak of healing when so many people are not being healed and when so many people have lost someone special. Our church has already lost a member to the virus. And yet, if I am someone with a particular ministry of healing then I should have something to say about the crisis that has been happening and should face the sense that God is not healing or is not appearing to heal.

The first temptation for some is to try to decide what God is really doing. There has been a great deal said on social media about how God is in some way trying to catch the attention of the world so that we all might hear what he says. For some the crisis is challenging us about our use of the resources of the world. For others, this crisis is an attempt by God to persuade everyone to return to him again. Is God really trying to tell us to stop abusing the earth's resources? Is God really wanting us to hear the Gospel? Is this really God preparing the world for returning to him? Well it might be so. God does have things to say about the environment, and personal salvation, but can we really say that God would allow thousands of deaths just in order to attract our attention? Even using one death to get our attention would make God a monster, and even allowing one death to attract our attention would inflict a huge crack in our sense that God is infinitely loving.

The second temptation is to try to let God off the hook by trying to explain healing in different ways. Some say that death is a kind of healing in its own way. Some might say that God will heal but just not yet. Others might say that God is healing in his own way, doing something different from what we want. There is perhaps an element of truth in all of these, but equally something which feels totally wrong about all of them. These things might sound true, but it feels as though we are making excuses for God when God fails to act. It feels as though we are ducking the issue, for how could a truly loving God allow suffering? And the question of God and suffering is the great unanswerable theological debate that has echoed from the beginning of time. Dealing with suffering should not, I suggest, simply end up trying to make excuses for the way God appears to be working or not working.

So how do I, as someone concerned with and seeking to promote healing, come to terms with the coronavirus crisis? Well, before I try to make sense, I propose to travel along a couple of side roads.

First, the Church has struggled with worship at a time when we cannot gather for public worship. Many of us miss the sacrament of the Eucharist. I understand completely why we have had so many 'virtual eucharists' from so many churches. I know of fellow clergy who have felt totally humbled and inspired by the sense of receiving the bread and wine on behalf of their people. Many have rushed into doing this form of worship, though I have found this difficult to do. I have never fasted — I do not think I have the necessary self-control. However, not taking the bread and wine, not sharing in the Eucharist, for me, is a form of fasting through a time of national and local crisis. In the Bible prayer and fasting are linked, and not receiving the Sacrament is part of the prayer and fasting that is mine through this difficult time. Fasting and lamentation are linked through national crisis, and not receiving the Sacrament makes that sense of lamentation somehow more real. I know that there is a theological debate here. For me personally however, seeing this as fasting makes far more sense than virtual eucharists.

And now the second side road. In the matter of theology, our feelings and experience have a much greater capacity than our intellects; and in these times, we have to use the full capacity of our whole mind and being to make sense of what is happening. This is particularly true when it is beyond our intellects to cope with what is happening. For example, let us consider the Trinity for a moment.

The doctrine of the Trinity is central to our faith. Yet it is a profound mystery. It takes a great deal of distorted thinking to make one equal three, and three equal one, and then fail to achieve it! Yet we rejoice that we have mystery at the heart of our faith. If there was no mystery, then our faith would be too small, and our God could not possibly be the infinite God. With regard to the Trinity our intellect cannot grasp it and yet our mind can and does explore it, adding to our worship, our adoration and our desire to follow God. And yet my feelings, my emotions and my experience have no problem reaching out to the doctrine of the Trinity. I experience God the Father loving me through creation. I experience Jesus Christ forgiving me, loving me and touching my life. I experience the Holy Spirit working within me, guiding me and strengthening me. And my experience tells me that as the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit work in my life, it is the one God I am dealing with. It simply *feels* like that. My intellect cannot embrace the mystery of the Trinity, my experience and feelings are capable of knowing it.

Thus, there is a sense with all great mystery and with all great things



that we cannot wholly grasp, that we come to them not by our intellect though it may help us to explore them, to lead us further into their sense of mystery and wonder. But the real tools that we have are our experience and feelings, and from these we can hold on to the God who is making a difference.

In a general sense when I talk about healing, which is something I love to do, there is always that sense that we come to a place where our intellects are simply unable to understand. But our experience and feelings can lead us to say that we are in God's hands. And I am happy to leave it there. We pray and we leave our prayer in the mystery of God. Our intellect cannot explain, or else it will try to let God off the hook or try in some way to make excuses for God. Our intellects might, indeed, take us to a place where we can say that the notion of healing is irrelevant, because God cannot change the laws of nature. In dealing with God, and in healing, we have to go beyond that to the infinite mystery that is God. And our experience and feelings can carry us to that place even when the intellect fails.

The day after I was asked to write this article, the following quotation appeared on Facebook, though I do not know its origin. It is the sort of quotation which needs reading a few times:

It is no part of the Christian vocation, then, to be able to explain what's happening and why. In fact, it is part of the Christian vocation not to be able to explain — and to lament instead. As the Spirit laments within us, so we become, even in our self-isolation, small shrines where the presence and healing love of God can dwell.

For me this is a wonderful basis from which to make sense of suffering, healing and the love of God.

First, we may desire explanation and intellectual comprehension. We may want to make sense of what is happening in our world. Not to have explanation and comprehension can leave many of us with a sense of anxiety. But perhaps it is not for us to have that explanation and comprehension. As the quotation says — 'It is no part of Christian vocation, then, to be able to explain what's happening and why.'

Of course, that leaves us with some questions. What is the point of our intellects, or study, or theology? Actually, for me, they are vital because they help me to grasp my vocation. They help me to worship more profoundly. They enable me to trust more completely as I glimpse this amazing God that is mine, the God of God's people.

We see this in the way Jesus interacts with the disciples in the

gospels. Jesus says outrageous things. These are exemplified by the 'I Am' sayings in the fourth gospel: 'I Am the way, the truth and the life [...]'; 'I Am the bread of life [...]'; 'I Am the true vine [...]'. These are not sayings put there to give intellectual completion. They are there to make us respond with the mind and heart. What does he mean? What is he saying? Are these simply outlandish claims? And as we wrestle, we begin to understand more, we trust more, and we follow more closely. Of course, we will never intellectually grasp fully what Jesus is saying. But my experience is able to grasp it, my feelings can handle it, and my intellect does expand my response to Jesus.

I hear these things. I wrestle with these things and my trust, faith and worship are deepened. My vocation to be a disciple, to be a follower and to be a worshipper, is strengthened. But I really cannot *explain* it in all its fullness.

So, what is the Christian vocation? What are we called to do? The saying above suggests lament, or at least partially lament. Is this the case?

Today if you were to offer most members of our faith different options, the majority would normally choose the practical as opposed to the spiritual way. What do I mean? Well, if there is choice between prayer or visiting and helping someone who is ill, then visiting the one who is ill will usually take priority. Or if there is the choice between fund-raising for a good cause or gathering for worship, then fund-raising would usually take first place. If it is a choice between spending time with family or friends, or attending worship, the family would be the priority. It is the great frustration of many clergy that at Christmas, for example, worship is easily abandoned for 'spending time with the family'. It is an equal frustration that at Easter, going to the seaside or to the country is sometimes more important for many than worshipping on the most profound day in the life of God's people. I remember on one occasion my mother (who was a member of my church) said that she could not worship on Good Friday because she needed to go to the bingo to collect a voucher to get a free teddy bear! As a member of the clergy I am always hurt that less people worship at Christmas and Easter than on other Sundays of the year.

And so it may be that for most people in the Church, whatever is said, experience suggests that people see practical activity and good work as more important than what may be considered spiritual activity — worship, prayer, celebration or lament.

But we have to hold on to this. Prayer is just as important as anything practical, and perhaps even more important. The spiritual life must be first — worship, prayer, reaching to God — and it is more important than the practical. To pray is certainly as important as helping the needy. To

worship is as important as spending time with the family. This is not just in a practical sense, but in a God-given sense. The world does tell us to love our neighbour and we readily accept that. But Jesus says first love the Lord your God will all your heart, all your mind, all your strength and all your soul.

When faced with something such as the coronavirus pandemic, to respond in a spiritual way is maybe as important, or more important than to respond practically, because the practical way may well be doomed to failure or provide only temporary help. We do not seem to stop the pandemic in doing the practical, but we may give voice to the feelings of the whole people in lamentation, and ultimately this may matter more.

Of course, being part of a community matters, and we set up a Facebook page for our estate called *Waverley Help* which has been hugely popular through the crisis. There is a great deal of sharing and offers of help. Interestingly the most active posts were those in which people expressed a sense of anxiety, frustration and depression. One day I put up a post on those lines and three hours later there was a Tupperware box of scones and a pot of jam left on our doorstep by someone I had never met! Even on a fairly secular modern estate, the sense is that the practical at that moment seems less important than how we feel in our hearts.

I could spend a few paragraphs explaining and talking about lamentation, but I am not going to. We have an instinctive sense of what lamentation is. We can go and read about it and think it through in our own mind. We can start with Google if necessary. I will leave that with you! However, what the quotation above is saying is quite profound; that we have to go through the stage of lamentation before we can be the temples and the place of the Holy Spirit, where healing and new life can begin to come. And that is healing; becoming the place where new life and new hope and healing can begin. This is the place where healing ministry is.

Healing ministry is about praying for people and communities. It is asking God to bring new life where there is darkness and suffering, whatever form that may take. It is about allowing people to know that their hearts, their feelings and their fears are given voice, and God is asked to touch. Those called to the healing ministry are called to pray for new life. And it is all about experience. It is helping people to experience God in the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. It is about stepping beyond the intellect into the place where the mystery of God is, a God whom we can trust to bring new life in the way he chooses. It is one of the great struggles of healing ministry that you almost never hear of what God may have done or not done. But very occasionally you do hear what God has done or not done and one of the joys of healing ministry is that you almost never hear people say that was a waste of time. Somewhere in prayer for healing they

may not understand but they may know they have experienced God.

Then we have to leave it with God, within his mystery, and trust.

For me, the most profound part of the Bible where it talks about healing is the final chapter of Job. Often in healing workshops I lead a study on this final chapter. People argue about the book of Job. Did it happen? What happened? What is it? Who wrote it? Why? I always have the sense that it is some sort of drama, some sort of play and some sort of theatre. I look at it and think that I could certainly stage that as a play, with plenty of dramatic dialogue, plenty of action and a great deal of humour. It would be a bit like a modern mummies or mystery play. But that does not really matter. It is what it shows us of people and God that matters.

There is no question that Job gets a raw deal and that he is treated horrendously. His doubters bring all their intellectual power and weakness to try to help Job make sense of his suffering and make sense of God. Most of them seem to want Job to know that he must be some sort of miserable sinner, and they go on for forty chapters with their intellectual wrangles. And they fail. In the end, and only in the last chapter, three things really happen.

First, Job comes to the sense that all these intellectual efforts fail, and he simply says, 'I know you are God. This is how I feel. Do what you want. I trust'.

Second, Job is restored in some way. But he is restored to somewhere different from where he started with a new family and new healing. God takes him somewhere new. He was not simply returned to where he was before. A few years ago I had a major health scare. It was very difficult, and for most of the struggle I wanted to run away. I yearned that things would be like they were before. But it was never to be. However, I did come through the problems, but to somewhere different, with a different life and a different 'heart'. That was the experience of Job. He was changed and taken to somewhere new.

Third, Job finds a new place in the community. Suddenly in the last chapter of the book his brothers and sisters appear, and a new wife, and daughters and sons. It is all new and different.

And so, Job experiences God working in his life, giving new life, a new place and a new community. When I pray for someone to be healed, that is what I pray for. But I have to accept that I am ministering beyond my understanding of God, beyond understanding what God may want and yet ministering within the mystery of God. I cannot understand. The person whom I am praying for cannot understand. But we will experience God, and that will be enough, because experience and emotions will know God when our mind positively helps our sense of trust and worship. We do, though, have to accept that sometimes our mind simply ends up floundering.

I pray for healing, but when I do, I am ministering within the mystery of God, and the prayers I have made may have to remain in the mystery after I have finished praying. But that is alright! That is the ministry of healing. That is being a follower of the infinitely loving God. Prayer for healing is ministry in the mystery of God.



## 'Peace be with you'<sup>1</sup>

NORMA HIGGOTT

United Diocese of Moray, Ross and Caithness

COVID-19, and the period of lockdown which it created, has meant some major changes in the way we all do things in our lives, our work, in our social lives and in our spiritual lives. However this moment of pause, no matter how long it is, should not change the way we show forth the love of God to those around us because although the doors may be locked, whether literally or because of scrubs and a mask, Jesus should still be there, in and through our presence with people, offering peace and love and compassion.

This time of pause should enable us to reflect on the things that matter most for us and for those around us and encourage us to look at what it is we want to be able to do and find new ways of doing just that. We want to continue to be able to connect with people or reconnect with people outside our immediate family group in a caring and supportive way, and that means we have to adapt in our homes, in our workplaces and in our church lives. We need to reimagine how we get alongside folk and find effective and meaningful ways of providing spiritual care and offering compassionate healing love. As people we are not good at facing up to some of the really deep questions that are very much a part of our life at the moment. We can do all the practical things, and, as clergy, we can provide online services and post reflections — but somehow talking seems more difficult to do especially long term. There are only so many times we can ask how a person is doing without it becoming a chore. For the majority of people as time goes on the loneliness and the fear begin to gain ground and they want to talk about how awful it is, how they want it all to end, how are we going to cope with the fear once we are able to get out again and why is this happening, why is God not answering their prayers and healing their pain. Difficult and challenging questions, requiring us all to face our own questions and our own pain and mortality — things which make us feel vulnerable and cause us pain.

For staff at the Highland Hospice, and for me as a chaplain, COVID-19 has meant a rethinking of how we can be alongside folk while maintaining social distancing, sharing their pain and comforting them in their distress

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<sup>1</sup> 'A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you"' (John 20. 26 NRSVA).

while not being able to touch them, and helping them to plan for how life might be in the short or longer term while our faces are covered by a mask. Meeting and speaking to folk while wearing a mask and scrubs creates a sense of anonymity, not only for us as chaplains but for the nurses too, and also makes it particularly difficult for those with hearing problems to feel a sense of relationship with us. Our job involves a lot of difficult conversations and having to have those conversations through a mask, or a visor is really tough; it all just feels really unnatural. Much of what we do is tactile — a comforting hug, a compassionate touch — and not being able to do that at the moment is really, really hard. The safety equipment we have to wear, for our own and our patients' wellbeing, feels like a barrier to our communication; we're not used to having to work like this and it feels really impersonal. We have never experienced such barriers before and it has challenged us to continue to be loving and compassionate beyond the mask and the scrubs, to use our body language to indicate our care and concern when a smile or an empathic look doesn't work.

Being unable to sit close and talk quietly and reassuringly to people when facing the challenging questions thrown at us about why God is letting this happen, or hearing statements about how God is punishing us for all the evil we have done, or encountering people's guilt about long-forgotten misdemeanours which they feel have led to them being in this situation, is so much more difficult. Social distancing and masks mean talking louder and somehow that becomes less reassuring. The doubts and fears that people begin to feel, are often exacerbated when accompanied by loneliness, isolation and fear of catching the virus. Death seems so much closer suddenly; it is in everyone's mind and it is scary especially when you already have a terminal illness and you are scared to face that reality and looking for reasons why you are suffering, and others are not.

For our families and for others in the wider world it has meant seeing some people, perhaps not the one they thought was the frailest, dying before their time. It has created situations when family and friends have been unable to visit for a last time, to say their goodbyes, to give a final hug or kiss, to feel that they have been there for their loved one. It has meant that for many, as an anniversary occurs, they have been unable to visit a graveside or a special place where ashes were scattered. It has affected us all in ways we are only just starting to understand and has made us all much more aware of death and how easily it can happen, and how unexpectedly. To acknowledge this sense of loss and the sadness lockdown has created in the face of death it is important to offer people other ways of reflecting on their loved ones — ways to help them to remember the love they shared, the memories they created and to look at the positive things they have experienced at this time and what they might like to do to



acknowledge what has happened when things change again to something more like normal.

Larry S. Chengges's 'Someday Life Will Get Better', says a lot of what we as spiritual carers need to reflect on when we are working alongside folk in these difficult times:

I know you are sad today and I wish I could help you get past your hurting...

But sometimes, it seems we just have to hurt a while, and no one can show us the way out. We have to find it for ourselves when the time is right.

For now, just know that it's alright to hurt, because I will help you with your hurt.

It's all right to cry; I will share your tears.

For it is only through crying that you learn what it is really like to laugh;

Only after feeling sadness can you really experience joy.

To allow yourself to feel what comes naturally, but to know that someday life will be easier...It will be easier to smile.

The world around us will still be very scary and we will still feel anxious, overwhelmed and helpless, not sure how or when things will get back to some sort of normal! So much has been made harder by lockdown — not being able to be together or with our loved ones as families as they leave this world, no proper funerals, no wakes when we've been able to talk about our loved ones, share the memories and laugh together at forgotten silly moments in their lives. None of the normal rituals. Our lives are on hold and lockdown means we are being forced to take time for ourselves, but sometimes that means we are on our own at a time when we really want others around to share our sadness and grief.

Being alone is not always a bad thing when we are grieving — it encourages us to recognize what has changed and accept that we are in a very different place. But that can be hard, so we need to recognize too that we need each other, need support and even in these days of 'social distancing', 'shelter in place' and quarantine, reach out to one another to share our burdens. That is the best antidote to isolation, distress and fear. We need to find ways of connecting, throughout this time, to enable comfort to be offered, compassion to be shared and God's love to be demonstrated. Using social media allowed us here at the Highland Hospice to hold our annual Time to Remember service at the same time as usual but

in a very different way — a way which ultimately reached out to far more folk than would usually have attended in person. It was available to a much wider audience and people responded well to this new way of reflecting. It encouraged us to think about how effective it had been and to decide to look at this going forward as a way of reaching out to folk who seemed to need the comfort of such a time of remembrance. Christians need to reflect on how we share this message that we are the Church; it is not the building that offers peace and love, it is Jesus through us, his body. We need to endeavour to create those opportunities.

We all have the gifts necessary to be emissaries of hope, reflecting the grace, mercy and love of God in the midst of troubled times. We are in that in-between time, a time when we wonder what the future holds for us, for our nation and for the world. A time when the future of our society and our church is unknown. For Christians we know that after Ascension came Pentecost, but that there was a time of waiting in between. A time when everyone was challenged to wait for the Holy Spirit to come. It was a scary time for them all, but life had to go on and they had to be creative and courageous in moving forward into the future. That is where we are too — in a scary time, being challenged to find new and creative ways to be emissaries of hope, and having to move forward all the time with courage, learning from our mistakes and creating a new and positive future — knowing that someday life will get better again and that we can do all this in the power of God and through God's great love for us all.

## Book Reviews

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN, [\*Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Anxiety\*](#) (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade, 2020). xii, 80 pp. ISBN 978-1-7252-7673-4; Paperback, £9.75; Kindle, £8.07.

Walter Brueggemann has for several decades been one of the most respected Old Testament/Hebrew Bible scholars in the anglophone world, but also an often-lonely prophetic voice in North American Protestantism. He has heeded the challenges of liberation theologies around the world and contributed to the development of hermeneutical methods founded on rigorous scholarship but responsive to the issues of the day.

The Preface was signed on Palm Sunday, and the Foreword two weeks later by Rabbi Dr Nahum Ward-Lev, a Jewish scholar eminent in inter-faith relations and peacebuilding. This book is therefore a rather more efficient response to the coronavirus pandemic than that of the United Kingdom government and precedes the full force of the carnage still unfolding in North America. The depth of Brueggemann's scholarship, and his spiritual insight, have enabled him — at the age of eighty-seven — to offer to Christians and any other readers a slim but substantial resource for facing a time of stress, uncertainty, and fear. While drawing on his academic learning, he carries this lightly, and the text is accessible — if morally demanding — to the lay reader.

The title of the first chapter would communicate the message to most readers — 'Reaping the Whirlwind'. This examines different ways in which the Hebrew Bible responds to disasters: natural, political, and military, imminent and past. There are passages in which disasters are interpreted as the judgement of God, the consequence of human evil, and in particular that of the political rulers. Droughts and floods, human, animal, and crop diseases, and military defeat and political and socio-economic ruin are at times viewed as punishment for sin, evoking a prophetic call to repentance, hoping for God's mercy. Other passages speak of God's greater purposes being realized through human suffering, akin at times to the birth-pangs of a woman in labour. Others speak of the inscrutable mystery of God, and the inability of human beings to understand or to control forces at work in the world. 'The dangerous holiness of God defies the domesticating efforts of the ancient priests even as it escapes the efforts of modern science' (p. 12).

In his studies and reflections, Brueggemann offers no trite or simple explanations. There are insights to be gained, and lessons to be learned, relevant to the current situation to be found in all three hermeneutical

traditions he identifies in Scripture. The cross of Christ defies all human logic, even as it engages the intellect of the philosopher and the theologian. The comfort offered is in the testimony that God's people have in the past responded to disaster in prayer and penitence, sought God's mercy, and humbled themselves before God's inscrutable wisdom and great purposes, however costly to themselves.

Irrespective of whether this proves a book of enduring value, it is a significant contribution to the task of the Church in the current crisis.

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Saeb Erakat and Mitri Raheb, eds, [\*The Double Lockdown: Palestine under Occupation and COVID-19\*](#) (Bethlehem: Diyar Publisher, 2020). ISBN: 978-9950-376-41-0; [free PDF here](#).

This is an interesting short collection that feels as if it is one step on from a journalistic 'first rough draft of history' (as Alan Barth famously put it). There will doubtless be numerous — and much more detailed — scholarly explorations of COVID-19 in Palestine under Israeli occupation, but this book offers a very useful first step for anyone wanting to explore the topic.

The editors — the PLO's chief negotiator and lead of the PLO's Negotiation Affairs Department and a noted Bethlehem cleric — have drawn together a varied collection addressing a number of different themes. Some of the articles are very short (less than two pages) and some considerably more substantial, all seeking to 'reveal different aspects of life in Palestine under COVID-19' as the editors put it (p. 7).

The Israeli occupation dominates every aspect of Palestinian life in East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and this volume includes numerous examples. For example, early in the pandemic Israel closed COVID-19 testing facilities in Silwan, East Jerusalem because it suspected supplies had come from the Palestinian Authority — and that would bring Israel's (illegal) claim to sovereignty over all of Jerusalem into question (as described by Bernard Sabella, p. 24).

Similar instances can be found throughout the volume; as Dalal Iriqat puts it: 'we have witnessed Palestine acting as an independent state [... but] since Israel controls the borders' collaboration with Israel was required (p. 40). Palestine appears in general to have had far fewer cases of COVID-19 than Israel, in part because a state of emergency and lockdown was declared very early on, though Palestinian workers bringing the virus into occupied territory after working in Israel are numerous: seventy-nine

percent of cases fall into this category (p. 42). Throughout the pandemic, Israel has failed to acknowledge its responsibilities for the occupied population under the Geneva Conventions — but as several authors note, this has been the norm for Israeli policy for decades. The new Israeli government's threat of annexation has been pursued throughout the pandemic with the support of the US administration, bringing a legal veneer to the reality that 'Israel is sovereign in all of historical Palestine' (p. 45): such moves will, of course, formalize the present apartheid situation.

There are problems in common with other contexts that arise from the pandemic, but that are considerably exacerbated by the Israeli occupation. For example, an essay by Hani Abu Dayyeh discusses the collapse — and measures for the recovery — of the tourist industry, responsible for a notable part of the Palestinian economy. The question of violence against women is addressed in considerable detail by Randa Siniora in one of the best essays in the book. She uses both statistical data, and quotes and stories from women who have escaped domestic abuse. As in so many other countries dealing with COVID-19, regulations designed to protect the wider population fail to take account of women experiencing abuse, such as the rule that 'a woman cannot enter an anti-violence shelter without first having been quarantined for 14 days' (p. 71) — clearly an impossibility for most women seeking to escape abusive relationships. She also describes the impact on women of extraordinary new levels of poverty, and the fact that as primary care-givers women are far more likely to contract the virus than men, along with some of the responses that organizations are making in an effort to respond to these problems (pp. 73–75). It is notable that most of the articles in this volume focus on East Jerusalem and the West Bank with few mentions of the catastrophic situation in the long-blockaded Gaza Strip; Siniora's essay on women is a notable exception to this.

Whilst several authors describe the unprecedented closing of churches and mosques, they address the uniqueness of the situation in Israeli-occupied Palestine. For example, in an article by Mitri Raheb, one of the co-editors, he notes the significance of closure, 'because even under curfew, many Christians and Muslims used to gather to pray not only as an expression of faith but also as a symbol of creative resistance to the Israeli occupation' (p. 89) — but, of course, it is not possible to creatively resist the virus in this way. As elsewhere, Palestinian participation in services needed to happen remotely, and Raheb quotes a pastor: 'The church is not empty, the church has been deployed.' (p. 91).

Throughout the collection, the intersection between life under occupation and life under lockdown is highlighted. Whilst most of the essays explore these questions in factual terms, with statistics and news

reports of events, perhaps the most moving contribution is the final essay by Varsen Aghabekian describing the death of her father, and the additional complications around organizing his last days of hospital treatment and then his funeral after he passed away. In a volume that focuses to a substantial degree on overviews and general descriptions of the impact of COVID-19 on Israeli-occupied Palestine, the very human story of a grieving daughter and how she dealt with a personal tragedy reminds us of the impact of both COVID-19 and the Israeli occupation. Responding to the virus necessitates scientific and medical ingenuity, as well as mutual care; responding to the occupation requires political imagination, spiritual fortitude, and *sumud* (the Arabic for steadfastness, perseverance). Whilst the rest of the world worries about mustering sufficient resources for the former, this book helps to remind us that Palestinians are also in a continual struggle to resist the illegal occupation of their land, complicating their COVID-19 responses enormously.

[MICHAEL MARTEN](#)

Independent Scholar

THOMAS O'LOUGHLIN, [\*Eating Together, Becoming One: Taking up Pope Francis's Call to Theologians\*](#) (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2019). pp. 192. ISBN 978-081468458-0; Paperback £19.99; Kindle, £11.19.

In 2015, answering a question from a Lutheran Christian married to a Roman Catholic, Pope Francis gave a nod to Catholic theologians to reopen the question of shared communion with other Christian churches. Such sharing is, of course, the general rule among Protestant churches, including Anglican churches, but (with certain exceptions) is ruled out in Catholic faith and practice. At the same time the Pope suggested that the Eucharist might properly be seen as a sign of unity 'on the way', not merely as a sign of unity accomplished. Thomas O'Loughlin, a liturgical theologian and professor at the University of Nottingham, has taken up the Pope's invitation with enthusiasm, and in this book collected what he describes as 'a series of theological reflections strung together', all pointing in the same direction, to opening up the Catholic church to a much wider practice of eucharistic hospitality. His book is written in a popular style, light on academic baggage, but its seriousness as a theological contribution should not be judged by that.

The trains of thought in these explorations are not simply collected, in fact, but form a sequence, beginning with the function of meals as a natural phenomenon of household hospitality, in which sharing and refusal

to share are ways in which friendship and hostility are expressed. Into this train of thought is fed a supporting one about the experience of meals as constitutive of a family life, allowing the given relations of the family to realize and extend themselves to include mealtime guests as fictive family members. In the Eucharist this natural foundation of the rite in a mealtime celebration is transformed by the Holy Spirit, following the logic of grace building on the structures of nature, to make churches the more-than-fictive families they are called by God to become. From this again there follows a third train of thought about the role of the Eucharist in the Spirit's strategy of mission, gathering those who have been alienated from God and one another to celebrate the Good News together, forging differences of approach into the unity of a single body. This opens the way, fourthly, to a train of thought about the interrelation of the sacraments. Baptism is the sacrament of a beginning, and demands growth and completion, opening-up into the life of shared faith in the Body of Christ. To acknowledge a common Christian Baptism without acknowledging a common Christian Eucharist generates a curious tension. In which context O'Loughlin returns to the conception of the Eucharist as a 'journeying meal', which is also a token of the unconditionality of the grace of God, a 'free lunch'. And in conclusion he offers a final, polemic train of thought about the correct relation of sacramental life to theology, urging the importance of putting the sacrament first, as formative, not merely illustrative, of the conceptual expressions of faith.

This modest but not lightweight essay points us to an understanding of the Church's sacramental life determined primarily by faith and hope, rather than by confession of a deposit of formulated faith. And as all doctrinal formulation has to be made humbly before the working of a God who is greater than we can think, and has to be serviceable to the 'mixed body' that constitutes the Church this side of its perfection, such a proposal for locating the emphasis deserves some sympathy, even from theologians whose approach has, in his view, left the Church in an impasse. Yet perhaps he, in his turn, will not resist the suggestion that the ritual-anthropological angle of approach is not the only, or most decisive, way of getting to the core of the meaning of the Eucharist and unlocking its dynamic for Christian unity. The Gospel narrative of Jesus's life, death and resurrection, which forms the identifying core of *this* meal and the identifying bond of *this* family, also puts tradition in its proper place, making it the good servant, not the bad master, of the ongoing work of the Spirit in gathering the people of God. O'Loughlin betrays a certain suspicion of history, which is odd, given the other side of his persona as a historical theologian. He seems to conceive it, or to suspect that we will conceive it, as objective and lifeless, in opposition to the present lived reality of the Holy Spirit. That is a

pity; for Christian faith is faith not just in the liturgical presence but in the ongoing work of God through the ages, and the name of Jesus Christ is the name of a divine accomplishment that generates a dynamically active faith.

Since Archbishop Coggan urged the point ineffectively on Pope Paul VI in 1977, Anglicans have generally taken the view of O'Loughlin, to which he finds Pope Francis sympathetic, that shared communion would assist us on the way to our destiny in the unity of Christ's body. But the temptation to cry 'Just what I've always said!' should be resisted until we have taken the full measure of that phrase, 'on the way'. It is meant as a serious description of our shared destiny, a way of understanding where we are headed when we share together in the sacrament. Does it still sum up where Anglicans imagine themselves headed in relation to the other Christian churches? They certainly used to see themselves that way forty years or so ago – there was a popular slogan, widely believed in though not institutionally endorsed, 'Full visible unity of the churches by Easter 1980!' Today, for a variety of reasons, some entitled to more sympathy than others, assent to the ambitions of the great twentieth-century ecumenical project is, on the best reading, muted by exhaustion, and set in a less flattering light, no more than polite lip-service. Forty years ago the new Pope John-Paul II wrote, in his first encyclical: 'To all who for whatever motive would wish to dissuade the Church from seeking the universal unity of Christians the question must once again be put, Have we the right *not* to do it? Can we fail to have trust?' Professor O'Loughlin writes as one who has kept faith with that challenge. Will he find Anglican readers in Scotland who are prepared to do so? I shall take it as a hopeful sign when I begin to hear petitions included in the prayers of the people, not only for Tom our Rector, Dick our Bishop and Harry our Primus, but for the parish minister, the Catholic priest, the Baptist pastor together with their local congregations – all worshipping, perhaps, less than a hundred yards away on one of those 'holy corners' typical of our Scottish towns, an architectural reminder of the great failure we have never struggled to overcome.

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Andrew Mein, Nathan MacDonald and Matthew A. Collins, eds, [\*The First World War and the Mobilization of Biblical Scholarship\*](#), Scriptural Traces: Critical Perspectives on the Reception and Influence of the Bible 15; Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies, 676 (London: T & T Clark, 2019). x, 307 pp. ISBN 978-0-567-68078-5; Hardcover £73.38; Kindle £67.29.

This collection reflects the work of an international group of scholars, initiated to mark the centenary of the outbreak of hostilities in 1914. The majority of contributors are based in British universities, some of whom are American in origin, three are based in North America, there is one Dutch and a solitary German contributor. Given that, for entirely valid reasons, vastly more attention is paid to German scholarship than to British or American, this is singularly unfortunate. It is more or less assumed that Roman Catholic and Russian and other Orthodox scholarship, and that of other European countries, was either non-existent or had nothing to say, notwithstanding the frequently mentioned destruction of the library of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven by German forces in 1914. Many of the chapters discuss the same scholars, the same books, lectures, and sermons, the same anecdotes, and make the same or very similar observations about them. The cumulative impression is accordingly of obsessive demolition of German scholarship by the descendants of the victors in the 1914-1918 war.

This impression is unfortunate, and not entirely accurate. There are important contributions to understanding the social, political, and cultural forces which impacted on biblical scholarship in Germany, and, to a lesser extent, in Britain and the United States. Sobering observations are made about militarism, nationalism, and anti-Semitism, which were to become all too relevant to further conflict not very long after 'the war to end all wars'. While a comprehensive treatment of the developments in scholarship through to the end of the Second World War might have been unmanageable, it would have been useful, and wholesome, for there to have been some consideration of how the forces at work before and during the 1914-1918 war continued and mutated in the face of political and economic developments leading to the outbreak of the 1939-1945 war. The authors are not uncritical of British scholars and church leaders either, even if some of them seem unable to distinguish Scotland from England, or think Scotland is part of England. This may be the attitude of the current government of the United Kingdom but is, nonetheless, as incorrect today as it was in 1914. The chapters on the impact of the Russian revolution (James Crossley) and on the pacifist tradition (Hugh Pyper) add important dimensions to what might otherwise have been a narrowly focussed and

repetitive book. More on dissenting voices on both sides would have been useful.

As Britain (and not only England) leaves the European Union, the issues raised in this book acquire a renewed importance. While churches and biblical scholars are much reduced in their influence since a century ago, the power of nationalist myths is clearly resurgent. The most influential voices in post-truth societies may appropriate Christian language and symbols, and the capacity of religious leaders and biblical scholars to challenge racist and militarist exploitation of Europe's Christian heritage may be minimal. Whatever the shortcomings of earlier generations of scholarship exposed in this book, their successors face intellectual and moral challenges of their own in an increasingly uncertain world – and, if this earth continues to sustain human life for long enough, they too may be found wanting by future generations.

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PAUL S. FIDDES, BRIAN HAYMES AND RICHARD L. KIDD, [\*Communion, Covenant, and Creativity: An Approach to the Communion of Saints through the Arts\*](#) (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020). xiii, 195 pp. ISBN 978-1-5326-6863-0; Paperback, £22.00; Hardback, £39.00.

*Communion, Covenant, and Creativity* is a successor to an earlier volume by the same three authors entitled *Baptists and the Communion of Saints* (2014), though as is made quite clear from the beginning, this present text stands on its own and does not require familiarity with the first book. The covenant ecclesiology that the authors draw on from their own Baptist tradition is integrated with the doctrine of the communion of saints in both Eastern Orthodox and Western catholic traditions, and here is linked with close attention to the creativity of poets and writers, artists and musicians, at the end of which each author reflects on all these with discussion of the communion of saints under the three headings of 'One world', 'Hiddenness', and 'Participation'.

I begin with a general comment. This book is an excellent exercise in careful theology and broad ecclesiology that teaches us many lessons. First, it is a refreshing reminder of the necessary place of theology and theological thinking in the wider culture of the arts and creativity. Second, it is, in the very best sense of the word, a relaxed and hospitable encounter with a broad experience of spirituality and the Church. There is, for example, a moving and careful description of a Baptist's experience of an

Anglican requiem mass by Brian Haymes, bringing about the sense of unity which binds together the fellowship of saints in heaven and the Church on earth. Haymes writes that ‘in this act of worship I was particularly struck by the way some matters which can easily fall apart were being held together, in particular, word and sacrament, life and death, earth and heaven’ (p. 125).

The first part of the book, entitled ‘The Communion of Saints: Indications’, is a series of five essays linking this common theme with examples from the arts — literature, visual art and music. Paul Fiddes begins with a careful essay on the poetry of Thomas Hardy and T. S. Eliot, and a short story of James Joyce. It is a model exercise in tracing the creative relationship between literature and theology, and how the former ‘might assist the theologian in *making* doctrine, not just *illustrating* it’ (p. 18). What we learn in the poetry of Hardy, as he laments the death of his wife, is a ‘subtle sense of an absent presence’ (p. 18) and this is this book’s first expression of the unity of all things, both here and beyond, as opposed to false dualisms, in a common participation (for the Christian Fiddes if not, perhaps, for Hardy) in God.

As each of these three authors writes from deep within his own experience and expertise, so Richard Kidd, in the second essay, draws us deep into the world of the artist Paul Nash. Kidd begins with three core concepts — connectedness, memory, and strangeness, drawing also on the phenomenological philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. He uses the writings as well as the paintings of Nash, taking up a phrase that speaks of ‘this reality of another aspect of the accepted world’ (p. 35). It is this ‘other aspect’ of the familiar world that takes us to the heart of Nash’s art — and also prompts our further theological reflection on the Christian word and sacrament.

There are two essays on music, the first by Brian Haymes is entitled ‘A Death Observed’, on Sir John Tavener’s opera *Thérèse*, which is a meditation on the life and death of St Thérèse of Lisieux. The final essay in this section is again by Paul Fiddes on musical images and death, carefully discussing Elgar’s *Dream of Gerontius* and Brahms’s *German Requiem*. All the themes of the book are brought together in the last three essays, when the deep conversations between Fiddes, Kidd and Haymes become quite evident.

This is deeply cultured writing that is born from profound Christian faith that is theologically sensitive and spiritually hospitable to other traditions. As we reflect upon our unity with the communion of saints, we learn to be more open to the riches of the traditions of the Christian Church and its final and ultimate unity. Essential also to proper participation and theological engagement is the exercise of the imagination through the arts,

recognizing that this cannot be from a distance, safely objectified. As Kidd concludes his essay entitled 'Hiddenness': 'The aim of this book has been to explore how the imagination of faith can help us to find our way through our experience of darkness, the hiddenness of God, and the hiddenness of neighbours and still find ourselves emerging strengthened and hopeful into a greater light' (p. 156).

This is a rich and sometimes difficult book that will well reward careful study in a time that can sometimes seem to be theologically desolate and culturally in decline. Perhaps we are here reminded that neither of these things need to be so.

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CHUN LING YU, [\*Bonds and Boundaries among the Early Churches: Community Maintenance in the Letter of James and the Didache\*](#), Studia Traditionis Theologiae: Explorations in Early and Medieval Theology 29 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018). xxii, 313 pp. ISBN 978-2-503-58073-9; Paperback, £91.00.

This book is a revised version of a thesis supervised by Paul Foster, for a PhD awarded jointly by the University of Edinburgh and the China Graduate School of Theology, where the author, also known as Kelvin Yu, now teaches. It is an interdisciplinary treatment of James and the *Didache*, dealing specifically with issues relating to conflict and management of internal tensions, and maintenance of community boundaries in the churches reflected in those documents. Yu makes no attempt to define these communities precisely, but notes the diversity of views in scholarship and the uncertainties that remain. Both documents seem to relate to groups of congregations located in some variety of precise contexts, in which defining an identity and way of life in relation to a wider Jewish milieu remains unresolved, and in which distinctions of wealth and social status threaten to destabilize community relations.

Yu has read widely in New Testament scholarship, embracing traditional approaches as well as more recent works employing social scientific methods and theories. He has also taken some trouble to familiarize himself with differences within the social scientific disciplines, and with early liturgical scholarship. It is not always clear how methods derived from different disciplines are integrated, but his treatment of the material is essentially sound. It is clear that yet more may be learned by

further exploration of the issues he raises, and of the often-neglected documents he examines. Subsequent scholarship will be in debt to Yu for this contribution to our understanding of a wide range of issues in the development of early Christianity.

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ROBYN WRIGLEY-CARR, [\*The Spiritual Formation of Evelyn Underhill\*](#) (London: SPCK, 2020). xvi, 173 pp. ISBN 978-0281-08157-8. Paperback, £12.99. ISBN 978-0281-08158-5; ebook, £8.99.

Robyn Wrigley-Carr (with theological literacy developed as an international student in institutions as varied as Regent College, Vancouver, and the Divinity School, University of St Andrews) teaches theology and spirituality at Alphacrucis College, Sydney, Australia. She is now herself established as a contributor to the study of spirituality, which is of considerable interest across the globe. Having become expert in the ways in which Baron Friedrich von Hügel offered his insight as a 'spiritual director', Wrigley-Carr became familiar with his support for Evelyn Underhill, to which the latter made such a distinctive contribution in her turn in the twentieth century. As a most learned Roman-Catholic layman, von Hügel could offer to many the fruits of a cosmopolitan education, for his Austro-German father was a diplomat, his mother Scottish, so he enjoyed both a formidable range of intellectual resources as well as informed ecumenical sympathies. Once married to an English aristocrat and settled in London, of independent means with some income to follow from his publications, friendships and hospitality quite unpredictably prompted many to seek his attention, of whom Underhill was one (pp. 1–17, 48–84).

Readers may already know of how Wrigley-Carr identified Underhill's two supposedly lost prayer books at Chelmsford's Retreat House at Pleshey, combined them into one publication — [\*Evelyn Underhill's Prayer Book\*](#) — and found herself with a best-seller on her hands. Hence this second publication, which focuses on the importance of von Hügel for her stability in the Church of England until his death in 1925, at which point she had to find other spiritual directors during the responsibilities which fell to her without her intending anything of the kind (pp. 36–42). We may, however, add that whilst appreciating the significance of this most formidable figure for Underhill from the time of the publication of

*Mysticism* in 1911 (and many subsequent editions) until the Baron's death in 1925 we may also bear in mind that she had always had a family 'anchorage' as it were in the Church of England, in which she had been baptized, confirmed, and married. Wrigley-Carr provides a valuable introduction to her life (pp. 18–47), but not to what may be an important element in what may seem to have been in an otherwise conventional church background. She had an uncle who was a parish priest in Toxteth; a cousin, Francis, had a career in the Church of England which included a stint as a priest in St Alban's, in what was known as Birmingham's 'biretta belt' as well as various responsibilities including the Grosvenor Chapel, Mayfair, and a final destination as Bishop of Bath and Wells. His own writings on prayer arguably signal some measure of sympathy between the two, not least because both were 'Modernists', i.e. enthusiastic to learn from new disciplines and perspectives. He may have been an under-appreciated influence.

The Baron's support, however, was central to Underhill's own public identification as a member of the Church of England in 1921, leading to going on her first retreat at Pleshey in 1922, and then, from 1924–1936, her development from the privacy of providing spiritual direction for those who for years had approached her for assistance (pp. 85–112), to becoming a retreat leader (pp. 113–36). Together with the edition of her prayers, we thus have a unique insight into her practices and guidance of others in what amounted to a role and vocation entirely new for a woman in the Church of England. In this she was sustained by Lucy Menzies of St Andrews between 1928–1935, who as warden of Pleshey kept the retreats going for a time when Underhill's health began to fail, and who encouraged the publication of Underhill's 'retreat addresses' (pp. 122–24), of which some at least remain as unappreciated 'classics'.

The connection between the two of them had developed entirely by accident. Menzies' great love for Iona resulted in her life of St Columba (1920, and many subsequent printings). Reviewed in *The Westminster Gazette* she discovered that the reviewer was Underhill. They began a correspondence, became firm friends and colleagues, Menzies distinguishing herself with her own publications, including eventually editions of Underhill's papers and a biography of her. Having become an Episcopalian, Menzies is commemorated in the chapel of All Saints, St Andrews.

Underhill was made a Doctor of Divinity of the University of Aberdeen in 1938, three years before her death. Menzies was made a Doctor of Divinity of St Andrews in 1954, the year of her own death, thus following the honourable tradition in the award of such degrees to women distinguished for their theological scholarship begun in St Andrews in 1904.



It is indeed timely that Jane Shaw (Harris Manchester College, Oxford), herself the author of several books on the revival of mysticism in the early twentieth century, plans a centenary programme to commemorate Underhill's 1921 Upton Lectures in Philosophy of Religion (the first woman to be invited to give theology lectures at Oxford University). Hampton Parish Church, where she is buried, is providing a new ledger stone memorial to Underhill as 'Christian, Scholar, Spiritual Guide' including her words, 'A Christianity which is only active is not a complete Christianity'. Thus Wrigley-Carr's admirable book has recovered a most important dimension of the life and work of a distinctive theologian of the twentieth century, at a time when her work is at last receiving the attention it deserves.

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