

The coronavirus: can any words help?

Edited version of an essay by the Rev'd Professor Donald MacLeod

The coronavirus had one huge advantage: the element of surprise. It gave no advance warning, no early danger signs, not even a gradual evolution. One mutation, and suddenly it was there, invisible and unstoppable. Neither oceans, nor mountains, nor armed border guards nor national lockdowns could stop it. It took possession of the air we breathe and got its victims to carry it.

Some said the crisis was being over-hyped, and nothing like as bad as politicians and the press were saying. Well, that was true. It wasn't as bad: it was worse. The world had known many epidemics in the past: plagues which affected whole cities and whole nations and, in the case of the Bubonic Plague, a whole continent; and as recently as 1918-19 a virulent form of influenza had led to the deaths of 50 million people in Europe and in America, where - Mr Trump should note - it started). But the one now upon us was a pandemic, affecting the whole world from pole to pole and from east to west. Besides, these epidemics had taken place in what we like to regard as pre-scientific ages. This one was defying science itself.

Then there were others who said, blandly, 'God will protect us, and so there's no need for all these special precautions.' Sometimes we even seemed to be coming close to the thought-world of those cults which teach that if we're true believers then we should be able to pick up venomous snakes and drink deadly poison. No need, then, for the elderly to minimise their social contacts, and even less need to consider curtailing church services or to suspend the use of the common cup.

It is easy to mistake such sentiments as signs of great faith, but faith embraces every divine command, including the command to make 'all lawful endeavours to preserve our own life, and the life of others.' (Shorter Catechism, 68). Prudence will keep to a minimum the number of miracles we expect God to perform on our behalf.

We are such odd creatures, willing to stay off church to avoid passing on a common cold, but baulking at proposals to stem the spread of a deadly virus. Pseudo-courage may say that we aren't interested in measures to protect our own health, but our own health isn't the issue, at least not directly. We have a duty before God to do all we can to preserve the life and health of others. Christians are as likely as anyone else to catch the 'flu, perish in a tsunami, die in an earthquake, or even drown on their way to the mission-field. By the same token they are as likely as anyone else to contract covid-19; if they contract it they will spread it; and to minimise that risk they must take the same precautions, and share the same inconveniences, as the rest of the population.

Other voices loudly proclaim that the virus is a divine judgement and this has, of course, its grain of truth. Scripturally, all death and all diseases are the wages of sin; and though God has reserved His final judgement for the Great Day, He does sometimes pass interim judgements on nations and civilisations in the ordinary course of human history, as the Apostle Paul makes plain in Romans Chapter 1.

But the only reason we know that what happened to the Roman Empire was a revelation of the wrath of God (Rom. 1:18) is that an apostle, blessed with divine insight, and writing under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, tells us so. We today have no such insights. The wisest

of us has nothing to offer but his own interpretation of world events (2 Pet. 1:20), and when we venture to suggest that any human calamity is a divine judgement on the victims, we should remember the Lord's rebuke to those who thought that when the tower fell on the people of Siloam it was because they were more wicked than the common run of humanity (Lk. 13:4).

The premiss of those who see covid-19 as a divine judgement is that ours is a singularly dark, irreligious and apostate age. The slightest knowledge of history should be enough to remind us that the world is no more godless today than it always was. Ever since Adam and Eve were expelled from Paradise, every intention of the thoughts of man's heart 'was only evil continually' (Gen. 6:5), and this applies to us as much as to the rest of human history. John Knox never suffered the illusion that the people of Scotland were a 'people of the Book'; George Whitefield and John Wesley were pelted by mobs when they preached the Gospel in 18th-century England; the commercial and industrial life of Imperial Britain tolerated evils that shame us even today.

Is the 21st century godless? Yes! Do our politicians ever refer to God? No! But then neither did many Prime Ministers of an earlier age, and those who did, like Winston Churchill, did so only for rhetorical effect, not because they governed in the fear of His Name. Had God marked our iniquity we would have been wiped out long since. The fact that we haven't been owes nothing to the godliness of past generations, but to the fact that there is forgiveness with Him (Ps. 130:4).

Most of the Bible's references to the wrath of God speak, not of His anger against the world, but of His anger against His own people. It is His chosen nation that He punishes for their iniquity (Amos 3:2), and those He loves that He reproves and chastens (Rev. 3:19).

It is not, then, the evils and sins of the world that should be troubling us, but our own shortcomings as the people of God, and if we want to continue speaking of the pandemic as a judgement we should remember that it begins at God's own household (1 Pet. 4:17); and if that is the case, then the voice of all true piety will be asking, 'Lord, is it I?'

Is there anything the church can do? She can only ask that question in a spirit of real humility, knowing that care and compassion are not a monopoly of the church or of Christians. Covid-19 has not only unleashed the selfishness of panic buying and mass migration to remote and fragile rural communities: it has also demonstrated the depths of active benevolence which, thanks to Common Grace, still dignify our common humanity. This being the case, believer and unbeliever, church and unchurched, Christian and Muslim, will often find themselves working side by side.

At the same time, the very nature of the pandemic imposes severe limitations on what the church can do. The urgent need to restrict social contact means that she cannot do her usual things, such as opening her doors to the vulnerable or using her pulpits and altars to offer comfort to the anxious or going from house to house to minister to the lonely, the sick and the dying.

What, then, can we do? First of all, we can give our full support to 'the powers that be, ordained of God' and to the measures they propose. One marked feature of the crisis has been the dignity and gravity of the response from local and national government. Shorn of their usual adversarialism, and armed with the world's best medical and scientific advice, the Prime Minister and his Cabinet and our local authorities have focused firmly on limiting the spread of the virus, saving lives and making sure the NHS can remain fit for purpose. The time may come again when we will need to raise our voices in protest against government

policies. But now, more than ever before, is a time when those who fear God must honour those He has appointed to govern, and submit to every directive of the state for the Lord's sake (1 Pet. 2:13).

Secondly, the church must pray. How glib that sometimes sounds! Nothing is easier than prayer, and nothing is more difficult. All prayer is based on faith, which means that it starts from a position of assurance and certainty. But this assurance, in turn, is based on knowledge. What, then, do we know?

We know, first of all, that the world isn't praying for itself. It is taking all sorts of measures, but looking up and spreading the matter before the Lord is not one of them. But the Christian community, dispersed throughout the world, is a kingdom of priests (Rev. 1:6), with the privilege of approaching God's throne with confidence (Heb. 4:16), and a duty to plead not only for ourselves but for all around us. That includes those in authority, that they may be as wise as Solomon and as diffident as little children. But it also includes the whole struggling society around us. There is a great precedent for this in the letter Jeremiah sent to the exiles held captive in Babylon. In reality, it was a letter not merely from Jeremiah, but from the Lord, and it said, 'Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your own.' (Jer. 29:7).

We know, secondly, that God, and specifically the Lord Jesus Christ, has the whole world in His hands. Everything lives, moves and has its being in Him, and this means that when we pray, we are not confronting some corpus of impersonal natural laws or pleading for mercy from a biosphere trapped in an inexorable nexus of cause and effect. We are speaking to God, a living, loving, all-powerful personal intelligence in whom the universe as a whole and in each of its component parts holds together (Col. 1:17). For His own reasons (so far not made known to us) He has permitted this virus to mutate and to become what we can see only as an unguided missile of biological warfare. But God can cause it to mutate yet again; He can cause our bodies to enhance their immune systems; and He can guide and resource (and fight with) the vast army which is already gathered against the virus (medics, scientists, politicians and millions of ordinary people deploying only their common sense). Together, with divine blessing, that army will conquer.

Thirdly, we know that God cares deeply for the world and for its most distinguished inhabitant, the human race. This doesn't mean that He never permits epidemics or other natural disasters, but it does mean that even in the midst of such episodes (and they are only episodes) it still remains a world of incredible beauty, teeming with life and filled with what pleases eye and ear, touch and taste; and it remains, too, a world marked by stability and order, where even a virus has its own delicate genetic code, and where it remains possible to work out why it is so toxic and what measures might hold it at bay. God knows its secrets and will guide us to them. In the mean time, nothing has happened to shake our confidence that we live in a magnificent universe under a caring Deity.

Fourthly, we know that with God there is grace to help us in every time of need (Heb. 4:16). The language here is deeply suggestive. The Greek word translated 'help' (*βοήθειᾶ*) was a specialised technical term used by sailors when their ship was caught in a severe storm and belts or ropes were slung round the hull to prevent her breaking up. We see an instance of this in Luke's account of Paul's shipwreck, where he tells us that when the ship was driven before the storm the sailors 'used supports (*βοηθείαις*) to undergird the ship.' (Acts 27:17).

This is an apt metaphor for the danger the present crisis poses to mental health, especially in the case of those forced into complete isolation. We could easily go to pieces, but we have every right to trust God's grace to hold us together. Paul gives a similar assurance in 2 Corinthians 12:9. When we feel at our weakest and most helpless, God's grace is 'sufficient'

for us; and it is sufficient, he says, because it is 'power.' God doesn't just wish us well or send us on our way with bland words of reassurance such as, 'It'll be OK' or, 'Don't worry.' He pours His power into our situation or, more precisely, into ourselves; and that power, that grace, is not something abstract, detached from God Himself. It is the Almighty standing beside us as our paraclete: the God of all consolation, comforting, encouraging and empowering whatever the pressure. That is why Paul can assure the believers in Rome that, whatever happens, they will be triumphant conquerors (Rom. 8:37). Isaiah put it even more memorably: 'Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint. (Is. 40:31)

But apart from testing our faith, has the crisis any other message for us? It clearly does. It tells us in no uncertain terms how limited and fragile is our control of our world. Pascal once remarked that, for all our dignity as 'thinking reeds,' such is our weakness that, 'a vapour, a drop of water is enough to kill us.' We had forgotten that lesson, but it's come back with real force. A tiny organism, only a fraction the size of a drop of water, is enough to kill us.

Ancient man, expelled from Paradise, found himself in a world that terrified him: a world where, his imagination told him, the forces of nature were controlled by countless angry and unpredictable deities, each one demanding endless rituals and sacrifices, and yet never satisfied. Then with the slow and gradual rise of modern science the whole picture changed, and nature lost its terrors. With knowledge came reassurance, and power. We learned to fly, and to 'sail' under the sea; we split the atom, put man on the moon, and conversed with each other across vast oceans; and we conquered, more or less, diseases such as smallpox, tuberculosis, malaria and AIDS.

These were remarkable achievements, and enormous credit is due to those who pioneered them. But then, calamity! A bloody 20th century saw our greatest scientific insights and our greatest technological achievements put to hellish use; a prodigal use of natural resources polluted sea and sky, fields and rivers; and now, a tiny virus undetected and unforeseen by science, suddenly threatens hundreds of thousands of lives and forces whole nations into lockdown. We are no longer steering a steady course. Instead, we are forced into a series of evasive actions, hoping only to stave off disaster.

May God grant our leaders generous measures not only of wisdom, but of humility; and may He grant all of us the grace to go on our knees and cry, 'Save us, Lord, we are perishing!' (Mt. 8:25)