

Sermon at St Margaret's – 15th March 2020

How do we respond as Christians to the Coronavirus?

Today, we find ourselves wrestling not only with the practical realities of the Coronavirus - washing our hands, cleaning surfaces, avoiding unnecessary physical contact, self isolating if we become ill; we surely now are fully aware of the protocols - but we are also wrestling with the theological challenges of Coronavirus.

We see on our TV screens the volatility of the Stock Market and the uncertainty of our pensions. We hear of panic in grocery stores as hand sanitiser and toilet rolls fly off the shelves and families stockpile canned soup and other non-perishables. We ponder the novelty of this virus, wonder if we are at risk as we move from handshakes during the Sharing of the Peace to fist bumps, BSL peace signs, and elbow nudges and we seek to understand where and how God is at work in a pandemic such as this.

I believe that honest robust Christian theology provides insights, cautions, and practical guidance for responding to the current concern about the Coronavirus. Robust Christian theology does not assume to speak God's thoughts but follow God's vision for each one of us. So we begin with recognising our own limitations and fallibility. We don't individually have the solutions, but collectively we may discover that we can and will find a way through.

Christian Theology therefore is always concrete and always relational. Our spiritual experiences are always grounded in our specific place, time, and culture. No mortal receives a God's eye view. Our theological treasures, even those we are willing to live and die for, are in earthen jars, fallible, despite the fact that they illuminate, guide and inspire our lives. Unchecked, our quest for answers can lead us to make harmful and crass theological statements such as:

'The Coronavirus is God's punishment for our nation's immorality'.

It is all too easy to find someone to blame. Of course all our actions have consequences, but God does not work like we do, and is far more graceful and loving than we can ever be. Those who see plague and virus as divine punishment for the expansion of human rights need to be reminded that others may see climate change denial, wilful focus on profits above the health of our planet, or economic injustice as equally immoral and equally worthy of divine punishment. Thank God that the One who seeks abundant life (John 10:10) is never ever, and has never been, party to unredemptive suffering.

The reality is that health and illness are multi-factorial in nature, including not only God's desire for wholeness, but also our environment, our lifestyle, our choice of economics, our accessibility to health care, diet, and many many other influences.

So where does that leave us as a Christian community? What about prayer? Prayer is a vital part of our ongoing and deepening relationship with God. Please do not give up on prayer especially when life becomes tough - prayer is all the more vital in these frightening and unsettling times - but prayer alone will not halt the Coronavirus. Prayer is not an excuse for passivity or inaction, prayer is also action. We pray for the flourishing and care of our families, communities, nation and planet and then we act that prayer into reality. God is at work in the world through us, seeking healing and wholeness, inspiring physicians, researchers, nurses and other health care providers, first responders, and compassionate friends. God's work involves us. God needs us to be companions in responding to this crisis.

As St. Teresa of Avila affirms:

"Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."

We are God's agents, his body, in healing the world. God is alive and active, because through our prayer God inspires and energises our quest to enable the flourishing of the other, healing the sick, preventing illness and comforting the dying.

What then can we say positively that will inspire a healthy theological response to the Coronavirus? Here are some aspects of a healthy theological vision in a time of pandemic:

We live in an interdependent world. We do not live independent lives. There is no solitary or isolated person or nation. We are all part of an intricate fabric of relatedness, as Martin Luther King asserted. Our joys and sorrows are one. What happens in China affects what happens in Blackheath and Lewisham, and vice versa. Accordingly, practical theology balances localism with global concerns, and evaluates economic and technological decisions in terms of the common good as well as personal gain. Therefore as a nation our responses to the Coronavirus must include wider and wider circles of community, focusing on other nations, as well as our own.

Remember that God is at work in the world. We need to discern where God is moving in our lives and in the current pandemic to bring healing to the vulnerable, prevent future illness, and join God's arc of morality, spirituality, and healing.

And each one of us can really make a difference, most especially when we work with others, letting go of our independence to join in healing relationships. What we do may tip the balance from anxiety to peace, despair to hope, death to life. We need to both take sensible precautions and act deliberately to bring healing and hope to as many people as possible.

And a healthy theology in a time of Coronavirus has practical implications:

God's presence in the world challenges us to hopeful action and not panic. God's action in the world invites us to pursue novel responses, to be creative in our personal and communal behaviours, to explore new ways of responding to one another for the greater good. God wants us to be creative in relationship in, to, through and beyond the current threat.

We must as individuals and communities move from self-interest to national interest and then beyond national interest to world loyalty. The Coronavirus is showing us that we need to see our national interests as part of a larger planetary vision. We cannot be safe while others are at risk. We cannot secure our borders while other nations are mired in poverty and violence. We cannot ensure the future of our children and grandchildren if we assume climate change as a global phenomenon won't harm our nation. I repeat, what happens in China affects Lewisham and Blackheath and vice versa.

My hope and prayer is that as we confront and overcome the Coronavirus, as we surely will, we will also begin to start to confront and overcome the equally dangerous virus of personal and national individualism and balance our self-affirmation and love of nation with an equally powerful love for God's world. We are being given an opportunity to explore a new kind of patriotism in which our love of family and nation inspires us to love the whole of God's world and seek solutions and even sacrifice for the common good, not only to respond to this pandemic but to ultimately heal the planet. Amen.