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ALDHAM



COVID-19 SPECIAL ISSUE

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The latest advice from the Church of England is that in the current crisis, newsletters should not be put through letterboxes. This special issue is being sent by email to PCC members, other worshipping members of Aldham Church and those who normally get the newsletter by email. It will also be put on the church website, so anyone with access to the internet may read it.

DECODING CORONAVIRUS: SIN, JUDGEMENT AND (NOT) THE END OF THE WORLD

by Ruth Valerio and Gideon Heugh of TearFund

How to beat coronavirus:

Stay at home. Keep your distance. Wash your hands. Have a good theology.

Wait, a good what?

Theology is our understanding of the nature of God. This in turn influences the way we see the world. In times like these, when life as we know it has been turned upside down, it's crucial that we have a good Bible-based theology.

To help, we've put together answers to some of the questions that Christians might be wrestling with at this time:

Will God protect us? Why is this happening? Is the virus God's judgement? Does sin cause illness? Are these the end times? And, how should the church respond?

And the church, of course, means all of us. We are one in Christ, and no amount of social distancing can sever that connection. Speaking of which...

Will God protect us?

Having the right theology can save lives. Literally.

Most churches around the world have stopped meeting in person – for obvious, sensible and necessary reasons. Some, however, have not, citing their belief that God will protect them from the virus. This is bad theology, and it might cost lives.

God does protect. God does heal. Yet we are his hands and feet, and it's vital that we play our role, listening and acting upon the advice of experts.

We exist to honour God and to enable people in our community discover Jesus

I trust God with my health – but I also try and make sure that I exercise and eat well. If I break my leg, I'll pray for healing – but I'll also go to the doctor.

Trust God, but take action too.

Why is this happening?

To answer this question, we need to go back to the beginning.

God created a world that he declared to be very good (Genesis 1:31) – a world in which everything exists in harmony with God. Relationship with God, with others, with ourselves and with the rest of creation is central to God's loving purposes.

After those relationships go wrong, the Bible then tells the story of how God works to restore them – a plan that finds its ultimate fulfilment in Jesus.

Poverty, conflict, suffering, climate change – all these are the result of those broken relationships. The Bible is clear that God, people and the natural world are deeply interconnected, so if one aspect of that is broken then everything will be impacted.

As hard as it is to hear, the outbreak of coronavirus is not a 'natural disaster'. It is a disaster of our own making. Viruses jump species and get into humans, and environmental destruction makes this more likely to happen as people are brought into closer contact with virus-carrying animals. Deforestation, mining, animal trafficking and unsustainable farming practices are all likely factors at play.

Is this God's judgement?

God's original intention was peace between

all things – but this is not how we're living. He created a world in which everything is connected, and there are natural consequences when those connections are broken.

This doesn't necessarily mean that God 'caused' or 'willed' the pandemic – it is to recognise that the brokenness of creation ultimately causes us harm.

In some cultures, misfortune is seen as directly linked to that person's sin. But biblically, these links are rarely as simple as that. For example, in the story of Job, Job's suffering is not a result of his sin, but of the existence and work of Satan.

In Luke 13:1-5, Jesus is told about Pilate's massacre of some Galileans who were in the process of offering sacrifices. He responds by pointing out that those who were killed were not greater sinners than those who were not killed. And he makes the same point about the people who were killed when the tower in Siloam collapsed.

Jesus is clear that the existence of disasters doesn't mean that those who are affected by them are worse people than anybody else. Such events should never be an invitation to judge others.

Does sin cause illness?

In John 9:1-5 Jesus meets a man who was blind from birth. The disciples ask about the sins that have caused this blindness – was it his sin or that of his parents? But Jesus tells them that his blindness has nothing to do with sin. Not only that, but it provides an opportunity 'that the works of God might be displayed in him'.

The Bible does present links between sin and

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suffering in a broader sense. Our physical suffering is part of a chain of brokenness from Genesis 3 onwards. Also, there are lifestyle choices we can make that either promote or neglect our health and wellbeing. However, there are no biblical grounds for directly linking a person's illness with their sin. Even when Jesus heals the paralyzed man in Mark 2 saying 'your sins are forgiven', he did not explicitly say that the sins were the cause of his paralysis. And nowhere else does Jesus heal by saying 'your sins are forgiven'.

Illness must never be used as a basis for stigmatization and rejection. The Pharisees did that – Jesus didn't. His message was one of acceptance, inclusion and compassion for all.

Are these the end times?

Widespread conflict in the Middle East. A plague of locusts spreading across Africa. Flooding around the world. Surely these are signs of the end times?

If there's one thing that we can say for certain, it's that no one can know for certain. If Jesus himself did not know when the end times would be (Matthew 24:36), who are we to try and say?

It is important to keep a wider perspective throughout all of this. Christians have been trying (and failing) to predict the end of the world since the early days of the church. Although the word 'unprecedented' keeps being brought up, this is not the first crisis of this scale – indeed, there have been far, far darker times in human history. The great plague of the 14th century is estimated to have wiped out nearly two thirds of Europe's population. I'm sure they were convinced that the end times were upon them too.

War, disease, natural disasters – these are, sadly, nothing new. Jesus said his return would be sudden and unexpected,

and he said we were to ignore anyone who thought they knew about specific dates and times, likening people who look for scare-mongering stories to vultures (Matthew 24:28).

The answer is that there is no clear answer, and that we should ignore those who think they have one.

How should the church respond?

The church should be the light of the world (Matthew 5:14). As the shadow of coronavirus falls across the land, the church's mission is to shine as brightly as it can.

We must follow Jesus in showing God's love, bringing healing to a broken world and responding to people's needs: economic and emotional, spiritual and physical, both locally and globally.

We can and we must act.

When Ebola ravaged West Africa in 2014, it was local churches that helped lead the fightback. In Sierra Leone, Christians used video and radio broadcasts to spread vital health messages. Tearfund trained pastors and gave them phones so they could call people suffering with Ebola and pray with them. Churches gave practical help to people in quarantine and church members provided food, water and toiletries.

We are already seeing the church rising to the challenge of coronavirus. In many communities around the world, it is Christians who are coordinating local care, creating neighbourhood WhatsApp groups, dropping off food and toiletries to those who are self-isolating, and being there to provide emotional response.

In Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh – the largest refugee camp in the world – life is becoming even more miserable. Sanitation and hygiene facilities are already inadequate, and the streets are narrow and crowded.

But Tearfund's church partners are distributing hygiene kits and leaflets to educate people about handwashing, social distancing and recognising the symptoms.

Creating a better world

If we lean deeper into God's love, choosing faith instead of fear, we may find that new opportunities emerge. There is the potential for communities to come together more than ever before; for families to re-discover themselves; for busy people to slow down and build a rhythm of rest into their lives; for people to reconnect with God and his world; for nations to re-tune into God's word; for churches to learn how to use digital technology to enhance ministry; and for us to develop more local, environmentally-friendly economies.

One day, we will make it out of this crisis. But what sort of world do we want there to be on the other side? Can we repent of the world we have created, and instead look to build one without such a huge gap between rich and poor – a world where we live in harmony with creation, in which we understand that the well-being of one is bound up with the well-being of all?

In Christ, there is always hope. We can let that hope motivate how we live our lives today as we hold on to God our rock. And, with the love of Christ in our hearts, let us continue to reach out with compassion and determination.

PLEASE PRAY

God of love and light, In this time of fear, give us your peace. In this time of isolation, give us your presence. In this time of sickness, give us your healing. In this time of uncertainty, give us your wisdom. In this time of darkness, shine your light upon us all. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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