

Lockdown #2 and the Identity Crisis of the Church

In the first lockdown of 2020 churches were prevented, by law, from opening. In my own denomination the restrictions went even further: private prayer was not allowed, funerals were not allowed, and I, the vicar, couldn't even mow the lawn. There was some sense to it; we didn't know much about the virus and we all wanted to do our bit to protect the vulnerable.



It was, at the very least, inconvenient. Then the *pain* of it began to emerge, especially for those for whom physical sacrament and physical fellowship is an essential part of comfort and faith. Most of us took on board that pain and sought to use the season as a time of refining and realigning. Here was an imposed fast, a slowing down, a solitude. There was blessing in it. If nothing else, it taught us how to go online!

But now we have the second lockdown. It's different from the first. The approach is now more targetted, firstly by region, and now by activity. Schools are not closed. Some businesses are not closed. But church buildings, once again, *are closed* for public worship, even the facemasked, distanced, non-singing, non-hugging, non-chatting sort of public worship that we've been exercising and enforcing over the last few months. Private prayer is allowed. Broadcast of worship is allowed. Foodbanks and other ill-defined services of help are allowed.

The mood in the wider community is different this time. The main difference is the *inconsistency* of the response. We were all in it together in March and April. But now we know that the rules don't apply if you're powerful and have family in

Durham. The rules don't apply in the North until the South gets impacted. You're allowed to have a working lunch with a colleague, but you can't share a pint a few hours later. You can pay a housecleaner to come in to your home for hours at a time, but if you meet your grandkids in the park for a few minutes you're breaking the law. There is *anger* now. Some of it is unhelpfully absolute ("The pandemic is a lie!") but most of it is about weariness, confusion, and injustice.

So what is the church to do? In comparison, for my own church context, this second lockdown isn't *terribly* inconvenient. It does affect some more than others, of course, and we're doing what we can. Once again, if we have a mind to it, we can roll with the pain and the frustration and let it refine us. Who are we? What are we missing in this moment? How does this reveal what we are longing and yearning for in the Kingdom of God? We can share in the pain of the wider community and get clarity about our sense of hope. That sounds like the stuff of advent to me!

It's not our place simply to reflect the popular mood. If there is anger in the community, might it be that our task is to seek peace? I certainly don't think that the American-style bandwagon of #letusworship protests are in any way helpful to the gospel. Neither, in this moment, are acts of eucharistic civil-disobedience. Special pleading for churches to open is rightly met with incredulity; why should we get to operate our religious business when the gym owner can't, why should we get to meet with our friends on a Sunday morning when the local football team can't?

At this point we reach the crux of the issue. **Who are we, that we should be allowed to meet?** That's a non-rhetorical question, it needs to be answered: **Who do we think we are?**

In one of my former churches a local public relations company generously offered the church some pro-bono work. The analysis they did was helpful and insightful. But what struck me was

this: They approached it in terms of “marketplace.” In their framework church is a leisure activity. We are competitors seeking a share in the market of people’s free-time and discretionary-spend. For a theologically pretentious person such as myself, this is a confronting thought, because there *is* some truth to it. For the vast majority of people there is work time, family time, and leisure time. Church fits into the last category, with some overlap into the second. There is some *good* to that; we are a place where people can *be* and *receive* and *be fed* and not have to *perform*. If we do it well, we have a positive effect on wellbeing; we strengthen families and can provide relational, emotional, and practical first-aid when times of stress come along. But, of course, a football club, or a hiking group, or a bunch-of-old-schoolmates-who-catch-up-on-a-Tuesday-afternoon can do that as well, maybe even better. **Church is not *just* a leisure activity.** If we were, then we should, rightly, and consistently, be closed up with the rest of those groups right now.

Are we anything else? To some extent, we’re also a *business* activity. We employ people. Much of what we do is charitable works (more on that in a minute), but we’re also content producers, pastoral carers, cleaners, support staff, and so on. We’ve already had to work this one through when there were restrictions on “socialising”: Is the vicar having a cup of tea with Mrs. Jones socialising or *working*? It *is* work, the exercise of a *profession*. (It’s also socialising, but let’s not complicate things for Mrs. Jones.) Moreover, there *is* a religious industry, and, if I were to be cynical, there may be some churches who are only pushing to open because the plate hasn’t been passed and the bottom line is hurting. But, of course, **church is not *just* a *business* activity.** If we were, then we should, rightly, and consistently, be closed up with the other businesses right now, and be hurting right alongside them.

Of course, churches also do *good works*. We are charitable enterprises that perform a utilitarian service. Who was it that recently tweeted that we have become the “church of good” more than the “church of God”? We run foodbanks, and support groups, and mental health services, and so on. We can argue, therefore, that the church provides essential services. Indeed, this *is* recognised; these clearly definable essential services have been allowed to continue. But is that really who we are? Such services often run out of churches because we have a philanthropic volunteer base, perhaps a higher degree of altruism. But a foodbank could be run by any group of well meaning group of civic-minded folk. The **church is not *just* a provider of essential utility**. Where we are seen to be such, we are rightly, and consistently, allowed to keep operating.

What we are running into is a different sense of what is *essential*. And that raises the question of: **Who are we? What is *our* essence?** There can be no escaping it; we are a *worshipping* community. We are *theologically* defined in our very soul. We are students of Jesus. We believe he died, rose, and is with us by his Spirit. We devote ourselves to him through private and corporate rhythm and ritual. We seek his Kingdom Come, which is more than just the doing of good, but the pursuit of a fulsome transformation of community, society, and individual lives... for *his* glory.

We don't bother with church just because we're fond of the people there and because we get a sense of being fed and fulfilled; **we are not *just* a leisure activity**.

We don't bother with church just because we've got a job to do, or a duty to perform; **we are not *just* a business activity**.

We don't bother with church just because it can do some good in the world, and fill a gap in the social fabric; **we are not *just* an essential utility**.

No, we bother with church because God is bothered with us. And

he calls us to devote our whole lives, our careers, our families, our passions, our dreams, our finances, and our time, to the pursuit of his kingdom... together. We are the body of Christ. And it is Christ who is our core, our essence, our reason to exist.

So the restrictions on public worship are not just an inconvenience for us. They brush up against the existential depths of our very selves.

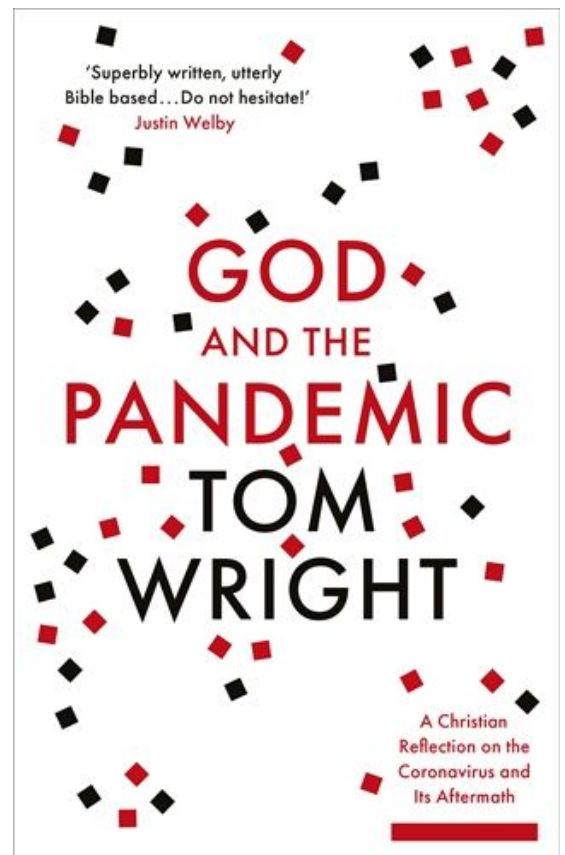
The lockdown is easier for some traditions than others. For some it is impossible to detach the physicality of this essence, e.g. the eucharistic presence for our Anglo-Catholic brothers and sisters, the raising of voices together in praise and worship for our Charismatic friends. For others, worship and fellowship is more cerebral and oral and aural; we can express it with some adequacy in an online setting. For myself, I think we can weather the lockdown in this current moment, at least for a short time. But, in essence, I agree with those who are starting to push back at the government: To be *who we are* we need to worship. **We don't need the building, but we do need to meet.** It is not some "essential service", **it is simply essential** to what it means to be who we are. We don't want to lose ourselves. If this season goes on too long I will add my voice to those who are saying "We can do this safely, let us worship together."

But in the meantime there is a provocation for us. We are being made to confront ourselves. **I wonder how many Christians are actually agreeing with the government.** I don't mean about the policy decision, but about the miscomprehension of what it means to be a Christian community. Is church, to us, just a leisure activity, a practical pursuit, an altruistic provision? Is that what gets us out of bed on a Sunday morning when covid isn't around? If so, then we really really need the lesson of this moment. If so, then we have just become a hollow shell, confused about whose we are and what we actually care about.

The Archbishops' are right, let's make this lockdown a time of prayer. Let's make it a time of re-devotion to the Lord. Perhaps we'll find ourselves.

Review: God And The Pandemic

The Christian faith is *relevant*. At least, it's meant to be.



We have, of course, skewed our definition of “relevant” to mean something like “trendy, hip, and attractive to young people.” Relevance is actually deeper than that. It is about being connected, responsive, and impactful with respect to the real moment. 2020 is a very real moment.

In the midst of the pandemic the relevance of following Jesus has been (understandably) questioned. The doors of Christian churches have been shut, our liturgical and summer festivals halted. The rites and rituals for births, marriages, and

deaths, have been cancelled, postponed, or severely curtailed. What are we left with?

Some have given a utilitarian defense: We have kept foodbanks open. We have provided meals, and pastoral care networks. We have coordinated volunteers, and generally been facilitators of decent folk. It's true. But others have done that too.

Some have slipped into seize-the-moment optimism: We have expanded our horizons. We've gone online. We're more accessible than ever before. Our viewer numbers are bigger than our former congregations. This is great. We have responded well. But so have others. What makes this distinctively *Christian*?

Real relevance happens at the level of our core message and way of life. For us, it is all about Jesus. If Jesus is relevant, then Jesus makes *sense*, and Jesus makes *sense of life*. This is the essence of the Scriptures; the Bible is not some abstract articulation of doctrine, it is *applied* belief which grows from the intervention of God in real times and places. As people devoted to Jesus, our words and actions are meant to be similarly connected, responsive, and impactful. Frankly, we should have something to say.

Many have said things poorly. Leaving aside the ridiculousness of prosperity preachers naming and claiming immunity and right-wing political conservatives anathematising face-masks, even the estimable John Lennox has asked *Where is God in a coronavirus world?* but doesn't do much more than reiterate his defense against New Atheism. Relevance isn't just about seizing a new opportunity to say the same things in the same ways, it's about showing how the same truths are alive enough to connect with, respond to, and impact a new set of circumstances; the gospel is not defeated by shifts in context.

Tom Wright's *God and the Pandemic*, is relevant, properly

relevant.

It's short, it's easy to read, and it's substantial. It is simple. Five chapters: Introduction to the context, followed by relevant expositions of the Old Testament, the Gospels, and the rest of the New Testament, and a conclusion asking "where do we go from here?"

And it is not trite. In fact, the essence of Wright's message is to push back at our propensity for platitudes. To read the signs of the times isn't about digging in to the moment to find some hidden "inner cosmic moral mechanism" (p17), as if 2020 locates us on the end-times roadmap for those who are privy to a plan. It's about locating *ourselves* within the revealed heart of God and the divine narrative of his history.

Necessarily, that centres us on Jesus. "The minute we find ourselves looking at the world around us and jumping to conclusions about God and what he might be doing, *but without looking carefully at Jesus*, we are in serious danger of forcing through an 'interpretation' which might look attractive... but which actually screens Jesus out of the picture." (pp19-20). "If there is one God, and if he has come in the person of his own son to unveil his rescuing purposes for the world, then there can be no other signs, no other warning events, to compare with this one" (p22). "Jesus is already reigning", he assures us, his "rule over this world" is a *present* one, "starting with his resurrection and ending when he has finished the work of subduing all 'enemies' – the last of which is death itself, a very relevant consideration at this time (1 Corin. 15.25-26)" (p24).

If you want to know what it means to talk about God being 'in charge of' the world, or being 'in control', or being 'sovereign', then Jesus himself instructs you to rethink the notion of 'kingdom', 'control' and 'sovereignty' themselves, around his death on the cross. (Page 25)

Wright reaches into the Scriptures and shows how Jesus is *presently present*. That is relevance. He is neither located in the past with dusty words of lore, or waiting in the future with fantastical notions of shallow victory. Jesus is present, ruling, reigning, working, within the broken plagued world.

The demonstration and inauguration of that ruling, reigning work is the cross. And therefore the victory, the hope, the renewal, and all the other things we're looking for in this present moment, is also found there. Pointing to the episode of Lazarus' death, Wright reminds us how the King brings the Kingdom of God: "He just weeps. And then – *with the authority born of that mixture of tears and trust* – he commands Lazarus to come out of the tomb" (p28, emphasis mine). How much more the authority revealed in the pain of Gethsemane? How much more the authority revealed at Calvary? Christ's power is the form of authority that is made strongest in weakness, and which we discover by *sharing* in the suffering of Christ as we (relevantly!) engage with this world.

The clearest call from Wright, then, in this season, is to *lament*. We weep, we mourn, and we respond as the Holy Spirit empowers us within that helplessness. Isn't that the sort of kingdom that Jesus envisages, inherited by the meek and those who mourn and those who are poor in spirit (crf. the beatitudes)? Isn't that a conceivable *embrace* of the current moment?

...God does send thunderbolts – human ones. He sends in the poor in Spirit, the meek, the mourners, the peacemakers, the hunger-for-justice people. They are the way God wants to act in his world.... They will use their initiative; they will see where the real needs are and go to o meet them. They will weep at the tombs of their friends. At the tombs of their enemies. Soem of them will get hurt. Some may be killed. That is the story of Acts, all through. There will be problems, punishments, setbacks, shipwrecks, but God's purposes will come through. These people, prayerful, humble, faithful, will

be the answer, not to the question Why? But to the question What? What needs to be done here? Who is most at risk? How can we help? Who shall we send? God works in all things with and through those who love him. (Pages 34-35)

Wright's book, therefore, has a prophetic edge. A lot of our church energy has gone into shoring ourselves up, battening down the hatches. We are either fearful or comfortable with respect to how disturbed our church meetings and finances are. But those things are irrelevant. We are not about re-spinning our strength for the "new normal", we are to be moved by lament in the gift of the present time.

We *groan* with all creation, Paul tells us in Romans, as we long for the completion of it all. This is a revelation in *our* Scriptures, the word of the Lord to *us*. Can we not proclaim to this world, by giving voice to this groan? Do we not know the deep joy of meeting the Spirit of adoption, the Spirit of the Father, the Spirit of Jesus, who also groans within us? A happy dapper brave face will just reveal ourselves. But if we groan with his Spirit, we don't just have some sort of chance of experiencing an awareness of Jesus, we find ourselves being sent in the same way he was sent, sharing in his authority, following his commission. "We hold the vision and the reality side by side as we groan with the groaning of all creation, as as the Spirit groans within us so that the new creation may come to birth" (p74).

This, then, is also a *vocational* book. If there is any utilitarian potential in this pandemic it is this: that it may catalyse the church to remember itself, by remembering Jesus and the raw, almost primal nature of his kingdom. The tears of the King are the pathway to a new creation and Wright calls us to it.

The followers of Jesus are called to be people of prayer at the place where the world is in pain. (Page 42)

Wright does unpack some of the outworking of it all. He dips into how Christians have turned their groans into actions in the past, willing to care where the state has not, and so showing how God's kingdom is different to the world. He cautions against the privatising of worship through the prolonged pivot to online services. He warns of following the "secularising lead" – "The sign of the new creation, from the ministry of Jesus forward, has been the healing presence of Jesus himself, and his death and resurrection above all" (p69). There is a necessary place for public worship, public help, public speech as a way to express God's Kingdom. The world is destabilised, and the "pagan subtexts" (p 72) of our secularised situation will play out in a fight between the gods of money, health, and deadening pleasure.

These are not unprecedented times. But this is a season that is forcing us to be honest. This is the case for the Western world particularly, and the Western church as well. Wright's book helps express that honesty, and perhaps some repentance. If nothing else, it helps us groan well.

Video Series: Being God's People At Home

God is leading us and calling us in this strange season. It's an opportunity to invest in a mode of being his people that draws us closer to him, stimulates our call, and increases our delight in the leadership of Jesus. This immediate time will shape us and serve us as we go into what is ahead.

Gill and I and others in our household have been putting together some thoughts and talks about how we might respond.

In particular, how we might grow in the reality that we are currently expressing as “church in our homes” and while our homes are the location of God’s church. In our homes, households, and “telehouseholds” we minister to one another, and draw closer to God.

Two videos have been uploaded, we’ll be releasing more over the next little while from time to time.

Video 1: Introduction

Video 2: Lectio Divina: Being immersed in God’s word

Delight and Defence of The UK Blessing

If you’re anywhere within 200ft of a Christian’s social media you will have encountered this youtube video. Musicians and worship leaders from a number of churches across the UK, singing “The Blessing” over the nation.



The video is here in case you’ve missed it: The UK Blessing on youtube.

Let me be clear from the outset here: I *delight* in this song and how it’s being used. This post isn’t a substantial critique. It’s a bit of wondering, a bit of defence, a bit of

leaning off from it to think about the times we're in and the church of which we are a part. The song itself (attributed in the main to Kari Jobe and Cody Carnes) came into the limelight coincidentally with the Covid-19 pandemic. We've sung it ourselves as a household in this strange season.

So here goes: I **delight** in this song.

I delight in the content of the song. Its main motif draws upon the Aaronic blessing of Numbers 6:22-27:

The Lord said to Moses, 'Tell Aaron and his sons, "This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them:

‘‘‘The Lord bless you

and keep you;

the Lord make his face shine on you

and be gracious to you;

the Lord turn his face towards you

and give you peace.’’’

These are deep and rich words that Scripture leans on from time to time to give assurance of God's love and favour. It's there again in Psalm 67, for instance. It's not about individualistic blessing: the focus is on *nation* and *generations*. This also has rich grounding (Exodus 20:6, Deuteronomy 7:9) as does the invocation of God's *presence* (e.g. Joshua 1:9) and God being *for* his people. These deep waters well up in the New Testament (e.g. Romans 8:31) as declarations of how fundamentally, totally, existentially, substantially, utterly, profoundly is the blessing of God to be found in Jesus of Nazareth, died and risen again as Lord and Saviour!

Notice how a lot of this biblical grounding is from the formative days of God's people, Israel, in the time of their rescue from slavery in Egypt, their wandering in the wilderness, and the entering into the promised land. These were not easy roads. There were afflictions from around them,

and the afflictions of sin and wayward hearts within them. Sometimes it may seem like the loving heart of God looks like discipline (some of us are feeling that at the moment) and feels like his absence (ditto): but the deeper truth remains and calls the heart to trust him. He is for you. He is with you, to the thousandth generation. May his face look upon you and give you peace. **At this time of affliction**, however we might feel it and experience it, these are life-giving words to sing.

Of course, some may (and have) suggested that the blessing that the Scriptures reserves to God's people shouldn't be invoked over the world at large. The critique is not invalid: the blessing of God is not merely a universally and thinly applied sense of warmth, it is deep and located and especially attached to God's determined work, his promises to his people, and his presence in the person and work of Jesus. But it's not wrong to pray for the blessing of many. I've addressed this question before. I long for all people to know the loving presence and saving grace of God, who knows us and made us and has given us his Son to save us and lead us into an eternal life that begins now. Especially now.

I delight in the recording and release of this song. Having had to come to grips with sermon recording and livestreaming, I can very much delight in the video and audio editing skills!

It's not perfect, of course. I've already seen some comments from those who haven't seen someone who looks like this that or the other; not all the intersectional categories have been covered. I feel it a bit myself; there's a lot of big evangelical charismatic mega-churches in that mix: Where are the "ordinary worshippers" who look more like me and mine? I've got a well-honed cynicism after years in this church game. The "what about me?" response is an understandable human reaction, but in this case I/we should get over it.

This song hasn't come from some tightly planned bureaucratic

focus-group vetted process of fine-tuned diversity management. If there is anyone who has “made it happen” it’s Tim Hughes (formerly of Soul Survivor, and now of Gas Street Church Birmingham) and his espoused attitude towards the song is commendable. It has come about from a loose arrangement of friends and networks and invited and offered contributions. It’s organic and messy, and therefore not perfect. And that’s good.

It also hits a pretty good balance regarding the spotlight and avoiding the sort of brand-driven recognition we often slip into. One of the *points* of this song is to show that the churches are alive and working together. So it needs some sense of being able to recognise people and places and names of congregations. It does a good job of avoiding the celebrity factor. People are not named, *churches* are. It’s been released under a neutral brand. The naming of churches serves the purpose of showing a community of communities without overdriving the brands. And I love knowing that there are Eastern Orthodox and Catholics and !Pentecostals and St. Someone’s of Somewhere all in the mix.

For me, unlike other attempts at this sort of thing, this feels like my brothers and sisters, and I can sing with them. I *know* these faces. I have seen quite a few of them in real life. I’ve had conversations with a number of them. There’s at least one face in that mix that I’ve served coffee to across my dining room table. The family of God is both bigger and smaller than we think.

Again, I’m good at cynicism. I’ve seen ego-driven light-show presentations done with not much more than a Christian aesthetic. This is not that. It’s not absolutely pure and precise, but so what? It’s a cracked-jar crumpled-paper offering of people who want to declare the love of God over a hurting nation. It is something to delight in.

The only thing that wears my heart, just a little, is this.

There's not enough of Jesus. One of the cracks in our jar (that I think this current season is rubbing at, one of the loving disciplines of God for us right now) is that we have been in a rut of church being about church rather than church being about Jesus. The church *is* a blessing – but that's a truth of vocation (what we are called to and enabled to be) rather than identity (what we are by our own right in and of ourselves). The declaration at the end: "Our buildings may be closed... but the church is alive" is great, but it's unfortunate in that it's simply about us. It's the same with the blurb in the video description which is about *our* unity and *our* good works. It's almost there, but not quite. **We are only a blessing because Jesus is. We are only alive, because Jesus is. Let's say that.** We embody the blessing, but Jesus is the substance of it.

We're not singing ourselves over the nation, we are singing the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. Keep doing it.

Amen. Amen. Amen.

This Season As Parable – The posture of faith in a corona closed world.

Like many of us, I've been pondering things in this current pandemic season. I'm finding it helpful to see some parallels between these times and the effect of Jesus' teaching, especially his parables.



Allow me to explain myself: Jesus, famously, made use of parables. Rather than “answering plainly” he would tell a short story. We know many of them by name: The Parable of *The Prodigal Son*, *The Lost Sheep*, *The Good Samaritan*, etc. They have become well-known to us. So well-known, in fact, that we have become immune to their *force*.

Parables are meant to *impact*.

Here's an example from someone other than Jesus: In 2 Samuel 12, the prophet Nathan confronts King David about his corruption. He could have spoken plainly, but I doubt he would have been heard. Instead, he tells a parable, the story of a rich man who oppresses his poor neighbour. David is *drawn into* the story until he is confronted: “You are the man!”

Nathan's parable brings David to a *crisis*. He cannot stay where he is. The status quo is not possible anymore. He *must* respond, one way or another. **He can either respond with hardened heart, or he can fall into faith.** In this case David softens his heart and responds with contrition and repentance. The parable has its impact.

When Jesus speaks in parables he brings his hearers to a similar crisis. They cannot remain unmoved. They will either harden themselves against his word, or they will fall into faith.

In Matthew 13:1-9, Jesus shares the famous Parable of the

Sower. It's a beautiful metaphor involving a farmer sowing seed indiscriminately; it lands on shallow soil, weedy soil, hardened soil, and good soil. He later explains the metaphor; the seed is the word of God which can come to nothing in the poor soil of the pleasures and pressures of life, or bear much fruit in the good soil of those who "hear and retain it."

This story prompts his disciples to ask, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?". Jesus responds by quoting the prophet Isaiah:

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?"

And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

He said, "Go and tell this people:

***"Be ever hearing, but never understanding;
be ever seeing, but never perceiving.'***

*Make the heart of this people calloused;
make their ears dull
and close their eyes.*

*Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
hear with their ears,
understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed."*

Isaiah 6:9-10

Isaiah spoke to God's people at a point when they were wallowing in complacency after a period of prosperity, even as their world was threatened by a looming invader. They had lost their way. They had forgotten who they were. They were God's people but they had become self-assured, oppressive, and unrighteous, just like the other nations. They didn't just need *teaching*, they needed *impacting*. Like Nathan with David, they needed a real *crisis*. So Isaiah was to speak to them in a way that only faith would grasp. Without that soft heart, they

would be “hearing but never understanding”, confirmed in their hardness.

Jesus speaks in parables to do the same for his generation.

Consider the Parable of the Sower. For those with “ears to hear” with a heart of faith, it is wonderful truth. God’s life-giving word *is* scattered indiscriminately; it’s not just for the strong or wise or holy. God has spoken to everyone, in all places and all circumstances. Heard with a heart of faith, this story generates a yearning to be good soil. It impacts faith and leads to more faith.

But for those who can’t hear it that way, it will have the opposite effect. For those who hold the word of God as something reserved for the upright and pure, a tool for those who have been schooled in the right Pharisaical school, this parable is a confrontation, even an offense. The reponse of the Pharisees to Jesus was often condescension, derision, or anger. They heard but didn’t understand. The parable reveals their lack of faith.

When it comes to faith (or the lack of it) within God’s people, parables have a prophetic *amplifying* effect. “Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.” (Matthew 13:12)

This then, is my reflection: **This coronavirus season is working like a parable to us**, the church. It is having a similar prophetic amplifying effect. **It is bringing us to a crisis.** It’s not just a crisis of medical and economic management (although that is real). It’s not just a crisis of bereavement and trauma (although that is very very real). It is bringing us to a crisis of faith.

In the westernised world we have chuffed along in our churches in a context of comfort and prosperity. It’s a bit like Isaiah’s day. We have built a religious industry. We have made

our appeals to the masses. We have gotten good at offering something decent on a Sunday, and mechanisms attuned to felt needs throughout the week. But that edifice has been shaken; we cannot even meet together at the moment.

Even as we do our best (and there *is* much good) in the netflix world of livestreams and zoom, we recognise that the former status quo is gone. If we can put 90% of our “product” online, just what were we doing anyway? The question is raised. The moment is impacting us.

The impact is also similar to Isaiah’s day; it is raising the question of *identity*. *Whose* are we? The difference is literally a matter of faith: We are either God’s people, and confirmed in that, or we are self-made with a borrowed Christian aesthetic, and that is what will emerge. It’s a parabolic moment.

We can imagine the two different responses:

We could do it without God. We *can* rebuild the edifice. We *can* market the spiritual experience. We can even do a decent job of being a neighbourly community on a par with any decent Mutual Aid Group. We can find our activism of choice that wants to put the world back together again a certain way, and get on board. We may even take some of our current moment with us: the comfort of doing church in our pyjamas is not nothing!

It’s not necessarily malicious or morally bad, but in this direction it can all be done in our own strength. Like Isaiah’s people seeking help from Egypt... like religious leaders dismissing the up-start from Nazareth and turning back to their traditions... we will not hear the call to faith in the current moment. Just put it back the way it was, or the way we now want it to be.

In this direction, the trust is not in God, it’s all about us. Extend it out and we imagine not just church, but *divinity itself* in the form that we want it, purged of all that we find

disagreeable. This can manifest at any point on the church spectrum: From woke do-goodery, to blinkered protestations, to marketing tactics, to immovable emptied traditions, it can be sweet, or acidic, stimulating, or soporific. But it has this in common: My world, My terms. A Christian aesthetic, but God not needed, not really.

I can see our current parabolic moment amplifying this faithless response. Yes, I see it around me, but mostly I mean this with respect to *myself*. I want to *do*. I want to *seize the moment*. I want to *plan the future*. This is *my* time! Let us choose the future that most aligns with our sense of self-security and call that “faithful”!

The real difference isn’t about choosing one self-made future as more virtuous than another self-made future. If we look at it like that, we are hearing but not understanding.

Rather, the other effect of this moment is to *undo* us, and bring us to God. That is the heart of faith.

We are also seeing this in this moment. People are being undone. They are wondering, seeking, yearning, *thirsting* for something beyond themselves. Perhaps its because we’re facing mortality honestly again. Perhaps our pretenses of safety have gone and our simple *smallness* has re-emerged as real. Perhaps life once looked like a rut and rail in a predetermined direction, but now there are *possibilities*. Whatever it is, this moment is undoing us. It is at this moment in the parable that we look up to see the face of Jesus speaking.

Look at the response to Jesus’ teaching. Faith often looks like bewilderment. It’s the Pharisees that go off with self-assured certainty of how they want things to be, but the path of faith looks more like confusion. Eyes have been opened, now blinking in the sun, exclaiming both “Lord, at last!” and “Lord, I don’t know what to *do*!” The Bible describes this moment in many ways – from *amazement* to being

“cut to the heart” to declarations of bewailing truth *“I am ruined.”* *“Go away from me Lord, I am a sinful man.”*, and *“My Lord, and my God.”*

The faith-filled response is not so much as a position or determined direction, as a *posture*.

It is a posture of surrender. It is cross-shaped, a laying down of everything. It can feel like a refining *death*. Let it be that it is no longer we that live, but Christ that lives within us! We repent. We believe.

It is a posture of response. Jesus says, “Come, follow me!”, and we leave our nets and follow him. We are stripped of our security, and led into the unknown. But it’s OK, we are led by Jesus. He is of greatest value.

It’s a posture that bows to grace in the suffering. Of weeping when needed, and laughing at other times. Of praying “Lord, your will be done!”

It’s a posture that waits for him, as the edifices crumble, and the collapse of more substantial things is more than possible. And it ponders firstly, not “What can we make of this?” but “What will our Lord now do?” It is aware of needs, and fears, and griefs, and opportunities, and possibilities; but it doesn’t just up and thrust forward. We only do what we see the Father doing. We *wait*.

Above all, it is a posture of worship. We remember who we are, and we are *His*. Our distinctive is our worship: before *anything* (even before we all manner of good things, like a loving community), we are Jesus’ people. Everything else comes from that, or we lose it all, even our love in the end. So we sit at his feet. We stare at his face. We rest our head against his breast. Our love is in him, bearing his name.

Across the spectrum, it has this in common: Lord, your world.

Lord, your terms. Lead us, in this moment, lead us. It's all about you, Jesus.

This season is like a parable, it is impacting us with a crisis of faith. The status quo is not possible. And there are two responses for the churches: to harden ourselves in self-assurance and build our future, or be softened in faith and be his right now.

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