

The Great Omission

Has the Church been locked down and out?

By Steve Maltz

History will bear witness, in the weeks and months following the Coronavirus pandemic, of those who stepped up to the plate ... and those who may have seemed to be silent in the national narrative that unfolded as we were herded into our homes during lockdown, while the cruel virus raged relentlessly. Many risked their lives in acts of self-sacrifice, some even gave of their lives. I am deeply humbled by these acts, as we should all be, especially as we have considered our current generation 'the snowflake generation', in marked contrast to those who fought for their country in the two World wars. Over a half a million volunteered to help the NHS, people of all religious and cultural background and ages. The first two doctors to die of the virus were of Sudanese origin, who had dedicated their skills to our country for decades. Doctors and nurses, knowing of their vulnerability to the invisible menace, came out of retirement to help the national effort. Once such doctor was Dr Alfa Saadu, originally from Nigeria, who returned to the NHS to help out, after 40 years of service, only to be one of the first to die. One of so many tragic but heroic stories that could be told.

And what of us Christians? Of course, there are many Christians in the NHS and caring professions, who are working on the front line. One of them, a close friend working as a doctor at a hospital in Manchester had this to say: *"But frightened as I approach the edge of this waterfall in my small inflatable dingy, and look down and see that we only have 130 ventilators at my major teaching hospital and a limited supply of oxygen. To know there will be many lives lost that could have been saved is my nightmare, likely shared by doctors up and down the country. We see death and dying all the time, but never where it could have been avoided had we had enough resources. The horror of what is creeping upon us speaks to me of the Michelangelo fresco in the Sistine chapel; lives falling whilst we reach out helpless."*

It's the rest of the story that leaves me in confusion and inner conflict. In the two weeks since lockdown all I have seen is a Church in retreat, a Church unable yet to adapt to a changing paradigm of the "virtualisation of the koinonia" and concentrating in adapting the technology to fit the existing model, in order to continue to "feed the flock", let alone thinking of the Great Commission. Panic reigns, and unfamiliarity. The test will be when the initial shock leads to a realisation that new thinking may be necessary in order to move forwards. There could very well be an amazing opportunity being offered here, but time will tell ...

Nicky Gumbel, the creator of the *Alpha* initiative, has said that the outbreak has brought the church innumerable opportunities to share the gospel. This is to be expected, as uncertainty and fear grip our nations, but this is not the Church being proactive, this is the Church ticking some boxes. How can the Church really be proactive in this new environment that has been thrust upon us? I believe it can in two ways:

- a) Being bold

The problem with fake news is that even good news can fall foul to this process. There's a story doing the rounds that, if true, can fill us all with wonder and excitement and remind us how it must have been in those very early days of the Church. It concerns the A&E department of a hospital in the north-east: *"We have started a prayer group where we share scripture, encourage one another and pray over the staff and patients. Lots of the staff are reaching out to us for prayer and asking*

about our faith. Some of the staff have been watching city church's Sunday service online and they're not Christians. One of our nurses prayed with the whole team at handover the other morning and everyone was in tears in a good way. Me and one of my colleagues have sat and prayed with another member of staff privately. Staff who aren't Christians have been listening to worship music and saying we should bring regular prayer meetings into the work place and last night we were listening to worship music on the shop floor! Really amazing!"

It has taken a pesky virus to undo years of satanically-inspired political correctness, where simply praying over the sick or reading a Bible in hospital can lose you your job! Then there's the wrenching of the rainbow emblem away from the LGBT+ lobby, albeit not quite consistent with God's original purpose of covenant promise – though a symbol of hope is a good first step!

Our doctor friend also had this to say, "whatever my life will become this week, I walk in one hope, and one hope alone; Jesus. The very essence and personhood of the Lord Himself; He is the oxygen who will sustain life. He is the ultimate reality, and one who will carry me and I Him to save as many as we can, and mourn those we cannot. If and when I am sent to the front line, in a dark place I will look to Him for the miraculous. I will call upon His name for heavenly aid. To send His angels to bring about the impossible. And in that place, I invite you to stand with me and all Christian NHS workers, and bring down heaven's glory to those who most need Him. Heart felt, gut wrenching prayer that will grab hold of heaven and not let go. Prayer that will be answered in the summoning of angels to drive back the enemy from our land and in its wake bring a revelation of God's goodness. Prayer that would see a rapid multiplication of ventilators by industry that none thought possible, with testimonies of the miraculous. Prayer that would see success of a vaccine within months beyond human reach. Prayer for Africa that would see an unexplained wall of protection. In the aftermath of social and economic crisis may a song of hope rise up with the rhythm of God's beating heart, uniting all churches to bring hope and healing to a nation on her knees."

What can we learn from this? That the Church works best in adversity, I think. The first apostles were mostly martyred for their faith, as were a whole gallery of Christian saints throughout history. True revivals these days tend to spring up where the comforts of materialism don't hold sway. God works best when the shackles are removed.

The gift of the virus is that it has jolted us into reality, where life and death situations are not just acted out on the TV screen. People should now be more open to the possibility of the absolute truth Of a God who loves us and wishes to save us. The iron grip of our Marxist-leaning, trivia-obsessed culture has been compromised by a *pleomorphic enveloped particle containing single-stranded RNA associated with a nucleoprotein within a capsid comprised of matrix protein!* How interesting.

How can the Church respond to this? Those medical staff in the north-east were quick to fill the gap with the hope of the Gospel:

But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, (1 Peter 3:15)

How about the rest of us?

b) Being responsive

The Church has always been slow in adapting to changing circumstances, usually for good reason, when relying on ageless certainties is often safer than venturing into new unknown territories. Sudden change has fallen on us swifter than the blade of a guillotine. Once we have dusted

ourselves up and gathered our senses, it befalls us to ask one pertinent question, *where is God in all of this?*

Now there's a question. Tom Wright, supposedly our nation's leading theologian, suggests, in an article for the influential *Time* magazine that "*Christianity offers no answers to Coronavirus. It's not supposed to*". His view is that there is no explanation to this great shaking and that "*some Christians like to think of God as ... knowing everything, in charge of everything, calm and unaffected by the troubles in his world. That's not the picture we get in the Bible*". Which Bible is this, Prof. Wright, pray tell?!

Others paint a very different picture. And this is where it gets difficult. There seems to be a bucket-load of evidence that God is truly shaking the nations here, because, apart from everything else, *the nations are undeniably being shaken!*

"This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and what is desired by all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,' says the LORD Almighty". (Haggai 2:6-7)

But is it God doing so, allowing it to happen, letting Satan off his leash or – as Tom Wright seems to be saying – has been caught unawares?! The timing of the virus is also very telling, coming in the period leading up to Passover time, with the plagues of Egypt very much orchestrated by God ... to show His power to those who opposed Him.

"For by now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with a plague that would have wiped you off the earth. But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth". (Exodus 9:15-16)

Then, of course, there are those end-time scenarios, that are best left to those, such as Philip Wren and David Serle, who know far better than me about such things. We are in a very difficult position, because if we are truly in an end-time scenario of great judgements against the Earth, how do we get this across? Up to now these have been "internal affairs", grist to the mill of many a Christian conference, but, if we are truly in this period, it is affecting everyone. How do we do our evangelism to a people reaping the bad decisions of their leaders? How do we explain a plague targeting the old and infirm? How do we do this, while asserting the love of God? These are questions, they are not criticisms of God's plans, we have to be responsive and know how to get the true message across, rather than the safe haven of a "*clueless God who is lamenting with us*".

We need real Godly wisdom to reach people in a paradigm where the only people able to evangelise flesh to flesh are those treating those who have succumbed to the virus. The rest of us need to find our way through this, by responding to the restrictions and acting accordingly.

One way of doing so is to embrace the advantages of the technology that has been forced upon us. Let's not just stream our services over YouTube from empty churches or even front rooms, but let us explore the interactive nature of this technology. As soon as we breach the barrier of understanding that "spirit to spirit" is a new reality, rather than the "flesh to flesh" fellowshiping we are used too. The latter is, of course, to be desired, but the former is not to be discounted. We may be pixels on a screen, but we were all made in God's image and we must never forget that. We must adapt if we are to reach people.

There is so much more that could be said on this subject but the best way forward for all of us is to accept that, like Abraham, we are now strangers in a strange land, but God is always in charge and

wants to take us into a journey that could lead to new ways of reaching the World that could only have been dreamt of before.

And a people, who have seen that a tiny virus has thwarted the cleverness of the scientists, doctors, politicians and academics, must be wondering, *surely there must be some answers, somewhere*. And only we can answer that particular question.