

COVID-19 and Christianity

Introduction

Unless you have lived under a rock for the past couple of months, you'll have noticed that COVID-19/coronavirus is sweeping the globe apace. As of Friday evening, over 155,000 people have been tested positive for the virus (with many more suffering from the virus but not tested), and over 6,000 deaths globally¹.

As I'm sure you are all aware, COVID-19 is a new illness that can affect lungs and airways, and it is caused by a virus called coronavirus².

It's been declared by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as a pandemic³, and has had a significant impact socially, politically and economically. The impact is felt on a very trivial level (football matches cancelled, actually getting a seat on the tube) to the very serious (significant loss of life, particularly amongst those over 70).

Rather than go over all of the stuff that we have heard on the news this week, I thought we'd think about what principles of Christianity can be useful. I don't anticipate that it will be exhaustive but hopefully gives us some things to think about.

We'll then conclude by thinking about Jesus, the healer.

¹ <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>

² <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/>

³ <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>

Points

1. Humility: most of us are not experts in immunology

Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. **Do not be wise in your own estimation.**

(Ro 12:16)

In the past couple of weeks, a rather large number of the population have suddenly become armchair 'experts' in immunology, herd immunity, fatality rates and social distancing measures. The reality is that *most of us don't know anything about this area*, and a bit of humility around what we know is a good thing.

2. Submit and pray: follow medical guidance and pray

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake **to every human institution**, whether to a king as the one in authority, (1 Pet 2:13)

Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, **to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed, to malign no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing every consideration for all men.** (Tit 3:1-2)

First of all, then, I urge that **entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority**, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. (1 Ti 2:1-2)

These passages are important - one of the distinctive features of the early Christian community was that they were model citizens. They paid their taxes, they obeyed rules, they were considerate for everyone, they prayed for a tranquil life.

We can mirror this by following the medical advice (shown on right⁴) and by

Do

- ✓ wash your hands with soap and water often – do this for at least 20 seconds
- ✓ always wash your hands when you get home or into work
- ✓ use hand sanitiser gel if soap and water are not available
- ✓ cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or your sleeve (not your hands) when you cough or sneeze
- ✓ put used tissues in the bin immediately and wash your hands afterwards
- ✓ try to avoid close contact with people who are unwell

Don't

- ✗ do not touch your eyes, nose or mouth if your hands are not clean

⁴ <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/>

praying for the medical experts and political leaders.

3. Love your neighbour: panic buying is kinda selfish

Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to act. Do not say to your neighbor, "Come back tomorrow and I'll give it to you"—when you already have it with you. (Prov 3:27-28)

Love your neighbour as yourself. (Mark 12:31)

So in everything, **do to others what you would have them do to you**, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets (Matt 7:12)

These passages are well known but I think they apply to the way we react. Our natural human reaction is to feel vulnerable, out of control and therefore we look to make ourselves feel better.

A fairly obvious example of this has been the panic buying that's been happening over the last couple of weeks in the UK, but also previously elsewhere in the world (Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan etc)⁵. Psychologists give a couple of reasons why people behave like this from a desire to be 'in control' to 'mirroring' others.

But this kind of panic buying has an impact. Food banks in Britain are running out of staples including milk and cereal as a result of panic-buying and are urging shoppers to think twice before hoarding as donations fall in the coronavirus outbreak⁶. This isn't consistent with loving our neighbour as ourselves - especially as if we panic buy, we are likely to encourage others to panic buy which reduces supply all round.

⁵ https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/9398b8/stockpiling-toilet-paper-reasons

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/10/food-banks-run-out-of-milk-and-other-staples-as-shoppers-panic-buy-coronavirus>

For a bit of a historical perspective, Christians over the ages have dealt with major outbreaks of diseases. Often, in the early centuries after Jesus, Christians were known for their very selfless approach to helping the sick. Examples are given of Christians helping during the Antonine plague (2nd century)⁷, the plague of Cyprian (3rd century), and many more.

The historian Eusebius recalls the response of Christians to the two plagues in Rome, according to the account of Dionysius:

The **most of our brethren were unsparing in their exceeding love and brotherly kindness. They held fast to each other and visited the sick fearlessly, and ministered to them continually, serving them in Christ.** And they died with them most joyfully, taking the affliction of others, and drawing the sickness from their neighbors to themselves and willingly receiving their pains. And many who cared for the sick and gave strength to others died themselves having transferred to themselves their death.

...

But with **the heathen everything was quite otherwise.** They deserted those who began to be sick, and fled from their dearest friends. They shunned any participation or fellowship with death; which yet, with all their precautions, it was not easy for them to escape.

(Eusebius, Eccl. Hist. 7.22.7-10)

In fact, it has been suggested, by the sociologist and religious demographer Rodney Stark, that death rates in cities with Christian communities may have been just half that of other cities due to the selfless acts of Christians⁸.

⁷ <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/daily-life-and-practice/the-antonine-plague-and-the-spread-of-christianity/>

⁸ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/13/christianity-epidemics-2000-years-should-i-still-go-to-church-coronavirus/>

But, taken to an extreme, self-sacrificing Christians who don't care about themselves could be a negative factor. Someone trying to be a hero could go round trying to help lots of people, for example, the elderly, but for lack of self-care contracts the disease and then infects lots of people.

So, to truly love your neighbour as yourself, there needs to be thought given as to how to care and love:

- Physical visits could be replaced with online interactions
- Meals could be taken round but only if hygiene and sanitation is a priority for anyone trying to help (leave on doorstep)
- Order people a Deliveroo
- Make sure the elderly are looked after

4. Evil and good: almost certainly not a judgment from God

There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answered and said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? **I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.** Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.

Luke 13:1-5

so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; **for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.** (Matt 5:45)

God brings things on the evil and the good, the righteous and the unrighteous. Unless we know for sure, and I'd argue in this case we really don't, it's probably not the time to a) be trying work out whether

it's a judgment from God and/or b) quoting Bible prophecy to celebrate this event⁹.

5. Body: have the same care for one another

And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.

(1 Co 12:26)

Over the next few weeks and months, let's make sure we are there for one another, and care for one another as a body.

6. God: is our shepherd, who cares for us

Be **anxious for nothing**, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. (Php 4:6)

Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.

They say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust." (Psalm 91:1-2)

We have a God who we can trust in, who is a fortress we can trust. We can pray to him in times of trouble, as a God of comfort. Ultimately, the Christian hope is that God will set up a kingdom on earth when all sorrow and sighing will flee away.

Jesus

Lastly, I thought we'd briefly think about Jesus, the author and finisher of faith.

⁹ "Back in the 1980s, AIDS was new and hitting the homosexual and drug-using community hard. Many Christians, including many Christadelphians, said that this was God's judgment on those segments of society. Now we are faced with COVID-19 which seems to be especially hard on older people. My observation is that no one seems to be suggesting that this is somehow God's judgment on seniors (and neither am I, by the way). My questions are why do we appear to be selective on pronouncing God's judgements in similar circumstances and what does this say about us? Can we learn anything from this?" (Kyle Tucker, Facebook discussion)

Jesus the healer who repeatedly healed the sick, partly to alleviate pain and suffering, and partly to show us that he can heal sin.

Jesus, the counter cultural teacher who challenges our love. **Luke 6:35-36.**

Jesus, the man who gave his life for us, showing real love - in the giving of himself.

Jesus, the man who rose from the dead to show that the grave has no power, and offers us life everlasting.

So, when we face things like COVID-19, let's recognise our limitations (we're not experts), follow the medical guidance, pray for our leaders, love our neighbour (and try not to panic buy), care for the sick, care for each other, and trust in God - the healer of all diseases.

And now, let's remember Jesus Christ, his life, death and resurrection.

Exhortation Notes

15th March 2020

Key points and verses:

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