

In the days of the plague

These are times to try our souls; to test the resilience of the human spirit and of local communities. Night after night, as day follows day we have heard announcements and a whirlwind of news that send us reeling. A global virus had sprung from nowhere to keep us contained in our homes and swiftly began reorienting our relationship to government, to the outside world and to each other.

Familiar life folded; the public world shrunk and we were left with our private persona framed with a stark reminder that what we are in relationship is what we are. Safe certainties, lazy assumptions and well-grounded expectations have been sent packing. None of us will forget where we were and what life was for us before the Covid bomb went off across the globe. The silent bio terrorist has been unleashed. Henceforth we will see everything with 2020 vision.

History offers some guide as to how events can upend society with dazed rapidity. In his wonderful and wondrously self-serving account of the 'World Crisis', Winston Churchill wrote about Cabinet deliberations of the bewildering lead up to the First World War: "The Parishes of Fermanagh and Tyrone faded back into the mists and squalls of Ireland and a strange light began immediately, but by perceptible gradations, to fall upon the map of Europe". Amazingly even Brexit has been eclipsed!

People do get through these things and life returns to normal – except that a hundred years ago in the wake both of Spanish flu and global war, there was a new normal. As Psalm 46 has it, 'God is with us until the morning dawns'. But what sort of new day?

In a later conflict, during the Blitz, Winston Churchill's cabinet was heartened to witness altruism, compassion and generosity of spirit and action. In the wake of profound de-stabilisation, will society revert – revert to the 'me, me, me – get, get, culture' that is the sworn enemy of community spirit? Will we sink under the weight of the present distress? Or will we come to a new time.

It is early; far too early to forecast what shape that takes. For now we see dramatic changes to our lives. This is not going to be a two-week shut down and then everything will be ok. Mentally it is challenging for populations to be stuck at home. Keeping people's spirits up is one thing. How do households handle getting on everyone's nerves without a spike in domestic violence?

Societies are built from a number of systems; many of which were already creaking at the edges. The strain on some of these could prove overwhelming. Trust in the kind of institutions that are vital to a mature and secure democracy had fallen low in popular estimation. Now the expert has returned.

To be sure there are many dangers toils and snares we will have come in getting through this. Pandemics tend to magnify existing inequalities rather than flatten them. Psychological trauma from coronavirus will happen. As the American Psychology Association observes in a survey of Hong Kong residents about SARS, nearly two-thirds expressed helplessness; nearly half said their mental health had severely or moderately deteriorated because of the epidemic. When trauma goes unaddressed, symptoms can appear and worsen over time. In this case, unaddressed trauma from quarantines and social isolation, feeling one's own life is in danger, illness, or the loss of a loved one to coronavirus could have public health repercussions that reverberate for years. Will nations stay closed? Will touch become taboo? Will we become afraid of other humans? What will become of restaurants?

Will we be subject to a mass form of OCD, as none of us will be able to stop washing our hands?

Could Covid take us to where we should be? This too is in our hands.

But crisis moments also present opportunity: amongst them now are more sophisticated and flexible use of technology, less polarization, a revived appreciation for the outdoors denied us for a while.

What if Covid-19 permanently shifted attitudes to the acceptability of big changes in society? 2020 was supposed to be the year when environmental concern reached a tipping point to take us to the Glasgow COP 26 conference. Pollution came down for a brief moment. You can see Beijing again!

What if Covid-19 gave a new impetus to resolving conflicts faced with a common enemy that was respecter of persons and jumped national borders as quickly as they were closed?

What if Covid-19 permanently shifted working patterns and companies forced to embrace remote working by the pandemic discovered that their employees could work at home just as well and so what was the point of coming into the office anyway? Will we ask if we really do need to do a task face to face with others? Will virtual Government and virtual church come at last to have their day?

What if Covid-19 generated less trust in market solutions that were left as naked as the Emperor without his new clothes?

What if Covid-19 obliged us to take far more seriously the social impact of disconnection and isolation and obliged the church to take this more seriously as a vital strategic issue? (The connection between social relationships and health is often overlooked. We had to protect older people from the virus but ended up cutting them off from the very thing that's crucial to their well-being). The task of living peacefully and meaningfully together was way over-due for a re-think.

What if Covid-19 encouraged intergenerational connection: older people to ramp up ways to stay in touch and younger offspring to check in with grandparents and other older people in their lives? What if Covid-19 produced a renewal of society as community solutions became a marked feature of a new social landscape? What if Covid-19 eroded escalating political and cultural polarization we had been trapped in and helped change course toward greater national and international solidarity?

What if Covid-19 gave society a powerful shake-up? We had heard it said that modernity had produced a generation or three that were at least comfortable in material terms and knew how the world worked. Fragility arrived from nowhere. Can the great disruption open spaces for God at last?

What if Covid-19 taught us that we are not in control? Actually, we never were except in the delusion of our minds, feather-bedded by being entertained to death. Yet living in the days of the plague (Numbers 25v18) might see a recharged commitment to a near-to-the-bone worldview that recognizes we have but a short time on earth. Then as now, atonement was needed. It is available.

This is a new way of being-in-the-world and it utterly compromises the way we were; and the only way to be that we knew about. What an opportunity for people of faith, drawn to another world!

Taking the long view, it will be a marker that will be both huge and hopeful if the present emergency hastened emergence – the emergence of a renewed vision of community many of us have laboured for and progress towards environmental renewal we had hardly dared to think could happen. The renewal of the church now just could prove central to this. May it be so! Amen.