

Doubt in lockdown- doubting Thomas (John 20v24-29)

They had been in lockdown for a while now. It was getting to them. How much longer would it last? To venture out was a source of apprehension: it just wasn't safe.

Yes Jesus had burst through the tomb a week ago but they remained entombed. He had come into their lockdown room and everything had changed – apart that is from remaining shut in. Thomas had not been there when Jesus had shown up and spread the peace around so deeply. His was not to hear the first hand reports of the women who had approached the tomb in the darkness. His was not to experience the company and community enlivened and transformed by the living Christ. Well-founded scepticism would not allow him to enter into it afterwards either. Thomas was not a man to be swept off his feet about anything. Really?? Doubt prevailed.

At this time, many are very sceptical about what seems like an irrelevant church with forms of worship, doctrine, buildings and denominational difference that have nothing to say at this time. The other day though, on 'Any Questions' for Good Friday, the panel was asked 'does the Covid emergency strengthen or weaken faith in God?' Well done Archbishop for answering that one well!

There are several ways we could approach this. None of them can be allowed to be trite when many we encounter amongst family, friends and church have the unbearable torture of being unable to be with a loved person who is slipping away. I heard of someone I knew who died on Good Friday and his wife had to keep away. This is a wretched time; a dystopian fantasy made flesh; a disaster movie.

As with the problem of suffering generally, personal life that we inhabit means that we default to individual circumstances. Why did God allow this coronavirus or this cancer to happen to me or that family next door or those health workers on the news doing a fantastic job saving others? God works far above our pay grade so to speak, at a system level that requires higher order thinking.

Let's be clear.

1. God did not cause Covid. Pathogens are jumping the species barrier. SARS, MERS, Ebola, and now the current Wuhan coronavirus (COVID-19) have all been linked to wet markets as the origin of outbreaks. Zoonotic viruses are transmitted from animals to humans (and sometimes in the other direction). It is not just these markets: humans encroaching on an animal's environment or changing the management of animals is a contributory factor. It is where animals are slaughtered in situ for customers that represent a powerful transmission point. This is what humans have brought on themselves.
2. Viruses are both good and bad. Most are good for you! Pathogens are not evidence of a system intentionally designed to cause human disease and suffering. Viruses are particles so tiny that they can't even be seen by an ordinary microscope, only under an electron microscope. They are not actually alive in their own right. They cannot reproduce themselves except by hijack – taking over a living cell. You could be forgiven for thinking that the only function of viruses is to cause disease. But that's not true. The system helps to produce the variety that is critical for life. They take resistance to disease from an organism to another. Most viruses live in their host without causing problems. Pathogen is evidence of something gone wrong. Could God have shaped a world system of living things without the role that viruses play?

3. Is this the right question? There has been a strong outbreak of neighbourliness. Mutual help in the community has gone viral just like love is viral. As with Auschwitz when the question was posed where was God? – one response has been ‘where was humanity? At this time, we see a common humanity come to the fore. If we look for God now in terms of a disembodied presence somewhere above the fray then we could be looking in the wrong place. God doesn’t just act and be where the church is – even though we see the church as a special channel for grace. Sparks of grace are everywhere and will never be extinguished. The church simply has to take social isolation seriously as a strategic issue. It’s a no-brainer!
4. The Emergency shows up the value, not just of community, but of the value of people. That might sound strange at a time when a vicious and non-discriminating pathogen is ripping through our community. But in my own area of interest, what might be termed a sociology of value – even those that have seem to have little value; especially those that seem to have less worth have been crucial. Our social experience is shaped by the value society places on us. It has stood out how that those who keep our country ticking over, low income people who go unnoticed because they matter less are the really vital people, the ones doing the crucial jobs we need. This is personal and interpersonal as well as social. We hear sad stories of death and dying without loved ones as it matters that we need to feel that we matter. If hope is defined by the things worth working for, when we emerge from our holes, we need to build a very different value system based on fresh realisation that personhood has worth.
5. Even at the same time that we can ponder what good can come out of it (all very well for the survivors), that at the heart of Christian faith is God coming to embrace the human situation. The cross represents that in fullest measure. There is no evidence that Jesus went down with a virus but it would be surprising if not. The living God is not above it. The church has not been very good at communal lament but to weep with those that weep is the mandate now.

Which brings us back to Thomas. He knew what the score was. His doubts were not the unthinking reaction of a lazy spiritual dullard who is slow-witted. More than the others maybe, for him the resurrection had raised the stakes so high.

The church is called to be a non-anxious presence at this time, to show what happens when you have Jesus. Thomas and the others were at a crucial time of transmission. Everything had changed. Familiar patterns of synagogue didn’t work anymore. What should the church be and look like now that they were no longer a motley crew following Jesus around for three years? Buildings are empty now (and the church is re-deployed) but in those days, they didn’t have any buildings. We can embody how you do life when all is stripped away. We are not holding on to what we have but not to replicate what has happened before. It would be a tragedy if we went back to where we were.

In a time when fundamental questions inevitably arise, being with people in their doubts is crucial. Death and darkness could not over-power Christ. This has to carry through into an attitude to life.

With the assurance of irrefutable evidence, Thomas emerged from doubt into a new realisation. The church should learn from this and re-invent itself so as to be highly contagious. Love is viral too!