



Shining like stars!

I'm fascinated by my own feelings around this COVID-19 pandemic. Some of those feelings have been quite negative, even critical, so I've taken time to reflect and figure them out.

My biggest negative feeling (my feeling – not criticism) has been around how the church in the UK is responding; at least some of the parts I have seen of it so far...

I was at a church service last week and, suddenly, in the middle of the meeting, we were asked to stand, raise our hands, and pray for the nations of the world because of COVID-19. That's great – there's nothing wrong with that at all, but I was left feeling, *"Why has it taken this virus to motivate us to pray for the nations like that; aren't large parts of the body of Christ suffering around the world all time? In the face of the difficulties a lot of Christians face, isn't this virus one of the least of their worries? Shouldn't we be praying for them concertedly and regularly anyway?"*

I was then at a prayer meeting and almost the whole time was dominated by thoughts of COVID-19. The prayers were good, Christ-centred, but the meeting left me thinking, *"The media is dominated by this virus, why should our prayer meetings be dominated by it as well. Aren't there many other things the Holy Spirit is leading us to pray about too?"*

Of course, we should be sensible and wise. My view is that, as Christians, we should listen to the advice coming from the Government and abide by it, we should not be irresponsible, but shouldn't we also be those who reveal a different nature to that of most people in this world? Amid this crisis, any crisis, shouldn't we be those who are recognised as being free from fear, free from fear of this virus, even free of the fear of death? Shouldn't we be the bearers of comfort, hope, compassion and practical service, always, but particularly during times of need and crisis? Shouldn't we be the bearers of the Good News of Jesus Christ, all the time, but particularly when people may be a little more predisposed to hear it and receive it?

Our Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, said, *"many more people should expect to lose loved ones amid a coronavirus outbreak in the UK"*. Indeed, many have died

around the world already. How does that, and the constant media reporting about this virus make us Christians feel, and do?

Even before the latest strict measures the Government has announced I think many felt a sense of anxiety and concern for themselves. Even if it was unspoken, many people were thinking, *“How will this affect me? Do I need to panic buy, even though I know it could cause others harm? Should I find a face mask and start wearing it? Do I avoid other people? Should I stop meeting with other Christians? What if I get infected? How serious will it be for me? Could I die?”*

Those thoughts are all understandable and, rather than ignore them, we ought to each ask ourselves why we are, at times, thinking like that. *“Why are those things running through my head? What’s at the root of all that, and what does it say about me? What does it say about my trust in God? What can I learn about myself from those responses so I might grow in spiritual maturity as a disciple of Jesus Christ?”*

Death holds fear for many Christians, for some it is the ultimate fear and it really is one of the roots of many of the fears we experience. In the case of the virus, many of the lesser fears track back from the fear of dying. But as Christians that should not be so!

A friend and missionary partner just sent me a letter from a North Korean, inside of North Korea, who recently received one of their MP4 players containing an audio Bible. In the midst of this COVID-19 outbreak and poverty, he was greatly comforted, and made hopeful, by the Word of God. He said...

“I receive hope of living as I am praying. The virus situation in Pyongyang and Sinuiju is more serious than the border areas. I think we will all die from starvation or being infected. Both are deadly and cause despair, but after knowing Him, my fear has vanished. We truly thank you again.”

Last year, a close friend and long-term partner in Gospel ministry died, and I was asked to speak at his funeral service. There, with the family, I experienced deep grief, but it was one of the best days of my life. His wife, his sons, close friends, gave their tributes through tears of sorrow and joy. Because he was a true believer in Jesus Christ many of us were certain of his new whereabouts – far above our sense of loss was a level of rejoicing that he had made it, that he had got home! Right in the middle of that funeral service, the truth of the resurrection of the dead was almost physically tangible for us!

Last week, the wife of a dear friend and partner in ministry succumbed to cancer, in her mid-thirties. The same is true again; though we properly experience grief, we rejoice in the certainty she is at home with the Lord. Her death, though difficult to understand at such a young age, is not a defeat because God gives us victory over sin and death through our Lord Jesus Christ. Our earthly mind struggles to grasp that at times, but we can rejoice because death has no hold on us! The truth is our eternal life is just that – eternal!

In John's gospel, chapter 11 and verses 25 to 26, Jesus said to Martha, *"I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die. Do you believe this?"*

Well, do we? If we really do believe, we can bring any anxiety (1 Peter 5:7), fear, even the fear of death to God and really start to live our lives to the full (John 10:9-10), for all to see, and for all to benefit from!

As Christians, we declare the Word of God to be true! There are some great Bible verses we can recall which reinforce that declaration, for example: *God's Word is true; it is living and active; it is everlasting; it is settled forever in heaven; God watches over his Word to fulfil it; God's Word always bears fruit; it will accomplish what he desires; it will achieve the purpose for which he sent it!*

But it's one thing to hear and declare God's Word – it is another thing to do it – to live it out! James is clear on that isn't he: *"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says"* (James 1:22-25).

So, in this time of crisis, free from fear, even free from the fear of death, what can we as faithful believers in Jesus Christ be doing?

I can't direct you; you should decide for yourself how you will live, but here are some thoughts:

- *James 1:2-8; 3:17-18* – **Ask for wisdom and be wise!** Above all, seek God's wisdom in all things – he will give it to you freely if you do not doubt! He will show you how to act.
- *Romans 12:12* – **Don't think as the world thinks – don't behave like it!** Don't let the media lead you! The media is primarily there to sell media, not to inform you properly. It will almost always veer towards sensationalism and frequently breed fear and confusion. Yes, follow Government advice but let God's Word dwell in you richly; be informed by it, both the written Word of God and the voice of God within you. Let it influence you far more than any other source!
- *Roman 8:14 (but do read verses 9-17!)* – **Cultivate your relationship with God the Holy Spirit and seek to be led by him.** As children of God we hear his voice, we can 'see' what he is doing, we can discern what he wants for us and what he wants us to do. Try and imagine what our neighbourhoods and communities could be like if we truly gave ourselves to being led by the Holy Spirit – much more than we already do.
- *Mark 12:30-31* – **Love God and those around you – serve them – do things for them!** Peter reminds us to press on through every trouble, hardship or evil. Whether persecutions or pandemics, we can trust in the Lord, knowing, *"It is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil"* (1 Peter 3:17). Worry or anxiety is common to us all, but God says we can

give that to him (*1 Peter 5:7*) and face troubles and threats with courage, leaning our full weight on him, and on each other (*Galatians 6:2*), to love and serve him and others well. What we do for others, the result of our ministry, the way we live our lives, can be like letters written to people by the Spirit of the living God, revealing his love and compassion through us! (*2 Corinthians 3:3*). So, we should love and help people whenever we can. Here are just a couple of things for you to consider:

...Think about those who may be in need, not just yourself. Your movement may be limited but you can still text people, phone them, email them – whatever it takes – to find out if they are OK; as many people as you can, but especially your Christian brothers and sisters (*Galatians 6:10*), and ask how you can help them. I have already heard of some people buying food for their elderly neighbours, and of some people eating meals together across Skype! What a great idea – can you be as creative? Let's make sure we are quick to serve and slow to hide.

...Pray for the sick and do things for them. Throughout history, Christians have often shone out because they were willing to help the sick during plagues, pandemics, and persecutions. They loved people and weren't afraid of death because they understood that *"to live is Christ and to die is gain"* (*Philippians 1:21*). Rather than just asking *"How do I stay healthy?"* perhaps we should also ask *"How can I help the sick?"* If you shouldn't visit, use technology to 'be with' people, praying for them, ensuring they know they are loved and cared for.

- *1 Peter 3:14-15; Mark 16:15-18; 2 Timothy 4:1-2; Matthew 9:37-38* – **Seek out opportunities for the gospel – and share it!** *"When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd"* (*Matthew 9:36*). Though we should not be afraid of death, we should be deeply concerned about it for those who have not yet been reconciled to our Father God, through the Cross of Jesus Christ! Really – people will be dying – we should take their eternal salvation very seriously. So, pray earnestly – asking God to give you the compassion of Jesus Christ for the people around you. Ask him for opportunities to share the Good News of the Gospel with them by whatever means you can. I've sometimes heard soldiers returning from battle saying words like these, *"Even atheists pray when the bullets are flying, when their lives are at real risk!"* When fear assails people, when they grow anxious because they recognise a theoretical or real threat to life, they are often more open than ever to hear words of eternal life. And we have those words! Our testimonies, our stories of coming into a saving experience of Jesus Christ, our accounts of God's faithfulness and help towards us through all the phases of our own lives, can really help people explore spiritual things and come through to meet with the author of life himself! So, rehearse your testimonies, your stories of God's faithfulness, practice sharing them with your Christian friends so that, at every opportunity, you'll be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you

to give the reason for the hope that you have, with gentleness and respect (*1 Peter 3:15*).

- *Acts 4:29-30; 1 Corinthians 12:21-27; Hebrews 13:3*– **Pray for the Body of Christ!** As someone who has the privilege of travelling the world to be with Christians who are being persecuted for following Jesus, I couldn't finish this letter without asking you to pray for them. Many of our Christian 'family' members will be impacted by COVID-19, but millions of them already suffer greater impact from forces who seek to do them regular and repeated harm. Great news then that Jesus Christ continues to build his church and nothing, not even the forces of evil, can prevail against it! (*Matthew 16:18*). Our team at [Release International](#) prays for persecuted Christians every day; this virus will not stop us from doing that and, at our prayer time this morning, we recalled *Hebrews 13:3* and asked ourselves, "*Can the circumstances we are experiencing because of COVID-19 help us to stand with our persecuted brothers and sisters in ever deeper ways?*". Yes – of course! If we end up being confined to our homes (with our comfort and digital connectivity) we can pray for those who are in prison with no comfort at all. If we can't get all the provisions we are used to having, we can pray for those who are prevented from even having their daily bread! If we are separated from loved ones, we can pray for the families of those who have been imprisoned or martyred for their faith. If you want to know something more about the suffering, yet prevailing, church of Jesus Christ and how you can stand with them – you might take a look at this: [Voice Magazine 109, January 2020](#). Make sure you scroll to the end of the magazine to find our Prayer Shield. Who knows, because of COVID-19 you may have more time on your hands than you are used to – what an opportunity for believing prayer! (*Ephesians 6:18; 2 Chronicles 7:14.*)

There's much more I could write, but even if we only do the things written above we will shine like stars among our generations (*Philippians 2:12-16*); generations of people who need to be reconciled to God, and it is we who have been given that marvellous ministry of reconciliation, no-one else!

Paul Robinson – 17 March 2020