



COVID-19... Where is God?

Many people, in recent days, have been asking this question. Our present challenges have brought the question to the forefront of minds - even though we are, of course, surrounded by suffering and death all the time. What follows is an attempt to offer a few thoughts in response to this important question - expressed in what I hope is simple language. Do please respond to it, in the comment section at the end of the Facebook post, or by email (to rector@stfaith.com) if you prefer a one-to-one discussion.

The **central question** is 'where is God in human suffering?'. Or, perhaps more urgently, the question is '**why doesn't God stop the virus?**'. The same question has, of course, been asked for centuries. This current plague is no different, in essence, to other plagues that humanity has experienced before. (No doubt many fervent believers asked the same question during the Black Death).

The answer to the question rather depends on what the questioner means by the word 'God', itself. If the questioner's view of God is of a kindly, slightly deaf old man in the sky, who will only interfere in the world if the right number of people ask him loudly enough - then the answer to the question is quite simple: 'because you're not praying hard enough' or, worse still, 'you

don't have enough faith!'. But that doesn't seem to me an adequate way of thinking of either God, or the important questions people are asking of God right now.

My picture of God is rather more complex than 'an old deaf guy', and with Good Friday in mind, it certainly includes the picture of a God who suffers and dies for us on a cross. The answer to the question 'where is God?' must therefore be rather more complex too.

My general position is **this**: God has created a world of infinite possibilities, in which we, his loved children, can grow. That world has challenge built in - whether in the form of natural disasters (earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes - as well as viruses). How we respond to those challenges is the question. For it is through challenge that we grow, and develop. There are very few, if any, human accomplishments which have been achieved without the crucible of a 'problem to solve', or a challenge to overcome.

To use a simple example, imagine an aircraft about to crash due to engine failure. Imagine, then, a giant 'hand of God' reaching out of the clouds and putting the aircraft safely on the ground. What would be the effect? All aircraft engineers would be made redundant. No longer would we have to worry about health and safety. The aircraft manufacturers would realise



that they are not needed. Nor would pilots need to be trained. People wishing to get to America would just step off Lands End, and expect the hand of God to pick them up and take them to New York!

In such a world of divine intervention, we would be like toddlers, who expect mummy or daddy to catch us when we fall....never learning to stand on our own two feet. To extend the metaphor - how many parents have agonised over the pain they must cause their child to enable them to grow? (My Dad always said that you'll never learn to ride a bike until you've fallen off it half a dozen times).

I suggest that God loves us *too much* to interfere with the natural course of this, or any other virus. God's passion is for our eternal salvation not for the saving of our short lives on earth. Viewed from the Divine perspective, *all life is temporary*, anyway. God wants to save our souls. The healing of our bodies may not be the best way of achieving that ultimate end.

You see, God wants us to grow in maturity of spirit...not just to have safety and good health. In fact, it is quite often in the midst of our suffering that God is able to do his greatest work. How many people don't even think about their eternal souls until they are confronted with the stark reality of their impending death? If the Cross means anything, it surely means that suffering (how ever much we might resist it!) has a place in God's plan for the world.

But this does not mean that God is silent - sitting back while we 'learn our lessons' and grow. No, I believe he is active and participating in all human suffering. I'm reminded of the true story of a Jewish man who was being paraded past a firing squad in a concentration camp. His Nazi guard pointed to the fellow Jews who were being lined up

to be shot, and taunted the first Jew, saying 'where's your God now then?'. The Jew simply pointed to the condemned men, and replied...'There. There he is'.

There's another aspect to the idea of God being involved in human suffering: as I said in my sermon on Palm Sunday, the Kingdom of Heaven is at work every time a neighbour helps a neighbour, or a doctor or nurse cares for a patient.

Does my thesis mean that we don't need to bother to pray? Absolutely not! But our prayers, I suggest, need to be focused rather less on asking God to 'please solve our problem', and rather more on asking God to 'grant us the wisdom and the serenity to be part of the solution to the problem'.

C.S. Lewis (the writer of the Narnia books) once said (in effect): "real prayer doesn't change God. It changes the person who prays". I *think* he meant that we are not to imagine God as reluctant to act, or deaf to our pain. But rather that the task of prayer is to attune our spirits to the Holy Spirit. We should expect to spend far more time *listening* to God in prayer than *speaking*. Perhaps then God will be able to teach *our* deaf ears what we need to learn - how our society needs to be re-structured and re-formed, so that his Kingdom may truly be experienced 'on earth as it is in heaven'.

In respect of our current predicament, I don't think we have yet heard God speaking clearly - but perhaps we have heard some whispers. For example, in the face of a world economy which has so quickly collapsed, perhaps we are being asked to think about how we structure the economy in the future? In the face of a collapsing health service, (with thousands of vacant posts before the Crisis even started) what might God be saying about the political choices we have made (as a nation) in recent years? The church is also listening to the whisper of God...what might be God saying to the church about what it means to BE the church? What role might the internet play in the future of the church - given the number of people who have re-connected to the church in recent days through that medium?

What do you think of these thoughts? Do let me know, either by email (for a one to one discussion) or by commenting on the Facebook post!

Canon Tom Kennar