



Andrew Murray Pretoria
26th of July 2020
Liturgist:
Rev. Stefan Botha



† **Invocation and Greeting:**

God, as a society we have turned blind eyes
and deaf ears to the poor.

We can hear the cries of the needy,
see the struggle of the lowly and destitute.
How the weak and the orphan long for justice!
How the defenceless are in need of rescue!

We confess that we have centred our policies
on the success of profit-margins.

We confess that we have protected the interests of corporations and the wealthy
over the well-being of Earth's most vulnerable inhabitants.

We confess that we have judged unjustly
and show partiality to the wicked.

We confess that much of our economy and material wealth
is due to exploitation of human and natural resources.

We have not done our God-given duty of creation stewardship.

We have not loved our neighbour as ourselves.

We have not upheld righteous standards.

We have not pursued justice and mercy for all.

Forgive us, oh God, and lead us on the path of peace.

Restore us to your justice.

Bring us into the community of heaven.

Be merciful to us, oh God.

For your word is like a fire,
Like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces.
Break our hardened hearts;
Burn down our wicked ways.

Let the fire that Christ brings, kindle in our hearts,
igniting flames of justice and peace-making,
of shifting old, unhelpful paradigms,
of right-action and reform.

Let the ethics and policies of heaven come to earth.

Be merciful to us, oh God.

**Family of God, it is with joy that I greet you all in the Name of the God Who truly sees us.
I greet you in the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

† **Scripture Reading and Sermon: “*God and the pandemic.*”**

Good morning to all. Today, 11 years ago, I was ordained into service of this congregation. I am grateful to God, my family and to so many members of Andrew Murray Pretoria for making it such a memorable journey. In the past 11 years, I’ve experienced many things and situations, both good and bad, that I had never foreseen for myself. The current pandemic and lockdown included.

In this past week, I attended an online teaching session during which the preeminent New Testament theologian Prof. NT Wright spoke about our current global and spiritual crisis. I found it so clear and well thought through and inspiring, that I decided to share parts of it with you all in the next few weeks as a series, like we usually do at Andrew Murray, to help us reflect on our continued journey during this time.

So, as an introduction to our series, where do we start with this pandemic? It sounds like one of those Greek irregular verbs: panic, pandemic, pangolin, pandemonium. Instead, it turns out to be an irregular virus.

We’d had them before (SARS and even Mad Cow Disease). They were worrying for a time, but we got over them. Gloomy forecasts of millions of deaths turned out to be exaggerated. Surely this one would be the same?

We’re reminded of the ironic quote from Pastor Martin Niemöller. There are several versions of what he may have said, but the point is the same. Speaking about 1930’s Germany, he said:

*“First they came for the Jews; but I did nothing because I am not a Jew.
Then they came for the socialists, but I did nothing because I am not a socialist.
Then they came for the Catholics, but I did nothing because I am not a Catholic.
Finally, they came for me, but by then there was no-one left to help me.”*

So, it has been, I thought, with our reaction to the coronavirus.

First it hit the Chinese, but we aren’t Chinese, and anyway China is far away and strange things (like eating pangolins) happen there.

Then it hit Iran, but we didn’t worry because Iran, too, is far away, and anyway it’s such a very different place.

Then it struck Italy, but we thought, Well, the Italians are sociable, tactile people, of course it will spread there, but we’ll be all right.

And then it arrived in London. And New York.

And then it arrived in Gauteng via people known to some in our congregation! ... And suddenly there was no safe space on the planet. There is no neutral zone. No medical equivalent of wartime Switzerland, where you could escape for a while, relax, and ponder what ought to be done.

So, does anybody know what’s going on? Why is this happening? Is someone trying to tell us something? What are we supposed to do about it?

In most of the ancient world, and many parts of the modern world too, major disasters (earthquakes, volcanoes, fires, plagues) are regularly associated with angry gods. Something bad has happened? Must be because ‘*someone*’ has it in for you.

In the old pagan world of Greece and Rome, the assumption was that you hadn't offered the right sacrifices; or you hadn't said the right prayers; or you did something so truly dreadful that even the old amoral gods on Mount Olympus felt it was time to crack down on you.

The high-minded philosophers didn't think much of that. They came up with three alternatives.

- I. First, the **Stoics**. Everything is programmed to turn out the way it does. You can't change it; just learn to live with it.
- II. Alternatively, the **Epicureans**. Everything is random. You can't do anything about it. Make yourself as comfortable as you can.
- III. Then the **Platonists**. The present life is just a shadow of reality. Bad things happen here but we are destined for a different world.

We have our modern equivalents.

Some just want to tough it out. If the bullet's got your name on it, so be it. Most of the modern West is implicitly Epicurean. Stuff happens, but we want to scramble for comfort, so settle down, self-isolate, plenty of Netflix. This too will pass.

Some—including some Christians—opt for Plato. Death isn't the worst that can happen. We're heading somewhere else anyway. All right, let's be sensible, but please don't shut down the churches. Or the golf clubs.

Meanwhile, in the refugee camps, in the multi-storey tower-blocks, in the slums and the townships, the suffering gets worse. And the sorrow rises from the whole world like a pall of smoke, shaping the question we hardly dare ask: *Why?*

Actually, the best answer I've heard in the last few weeks has not been to the question '*Why?*' It's been to the question, '*What?*' What can we do?

In the UK, the government asked for volunteers to help the National Health Service with all the extra urgent non-specialist tasks. Half a million people signed up almost at once—so many that it was hard to find appropriate tasks for all of them. Retired doctors and nurses have come back into the front line. Some have themselves caught the virus and died.

They are doing what the early Christians did in times of plague. In the first few centuries of our era, when serious sickness would strike a town or city, the well-to-do would run for the hills (part of the problem was often low-lying, foetid air in a town).

The Christians would stay and nurse people. Sometimes they caught the disease and died. People were astonished. What was that about? Oh, they replied, we are followers of this man Jesus. He put his life on the line to save us. So that's what we do as well.

Nobody had ever thought of doing that kind of thing before. No wonder the Gospel spread. Even when the Romans were doing their best to stamp it out.

The fascinating thing is that much of the world has picked up the hint. As the historian Tom Holland has argued in his recent book, "*Dominion*", much of what we take for granted in social attitudes now, was Christian innovation.

The ancient pagans didn't do it like that. Medicine cost money. So did education. And the poor were poor (so people assumed) because they were lazy or unlucky. It wasn't society's job to look after them.

The Christians disagreed. They picked up their rule of life from the Jews, via Jesus of course. The Jews had those texts, those scriptures, which kept on circling back to the belief that there was One God who had a special concern for the poor, the sick, the outcast, the slaves.

Their thinkers sometimes flirted with bits of Stoicism or Platonism. Yet their communities, by and large, practiced a kind of extended communal family life.

The early Jesus-followers got hold of that, but extended it to the increasing, and increasingly diverse, 'family' of believers. Then—long story short—the modern world, touchingly, has borrowed bits of it (medicine, education and social care for all), and sometimes thinks it has discovered this for itself, so the 'religious' bit can now drop away. Some have argued this enthusiastically, such as the Harvard psychologist Stephen Pinker.

So where do we start? A Christian Response?

Faced with the rapid spread of the coronavirus, many people in churches have reached for 'Christian' equivalents of the ancient knee-jerk reactions. The world is full of conspiracy theories anyway: some in America think it's all China's fault, some in China have said it's all America's fault, and no doubt there are a thousand other ideas running around, spreading themselves as easily as the virus itself and in some ways just as dangerously.

The blame game is easy—especially when it's always someone else's fault. Those who have become accustomed to seeing all issues in terms of today's low-grade but powerful 'culture wars' will simply go for easy answers that reflect that irrelevant standoff. The COVID-19 crisis has, in fact, done to the whole world what Hurricane Katrina did in 2005 for New Orleans: in its devastating impact, it shows that the political and social timbers that hold up our societies, have already been rotting away.

And then there are specifically (would-be) 'Christian' conspiracy theories. Some people think they know exactly what's gone wrong and what God is trying to say through it all.

Some are saying, eagerly, that this is the sign of the End. The 'End-Times' industry has been massive in America over the last couple of generations. Spin-off versions are popular in most other countries, too. Former highlights include Hal Lindsey's famous, "The Late Great Planet Earth", and the "Left Behind" series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins.

They construct a horror-movie scenario out of bits and pieces of the Bible, strung together with the string of fundamentalist piety. It's not biblical or anywhere close to good and responsible theology. It's basically Platonic: 'going to heaven' is the aim, leaving the world behind to its Armageddon. And now the coronavirus is hailed as the sign that it's all about to happen.

For other Christians, this is simply a way of saying: This is a moment of opportunity! Now that everybody is thinking about death rather than wondering which cupcake to buy, perhaps there will be a massive turning to God. Perhaps we can use this moment to tell our friends about Jesus and how he can take them to heaven. Perhaps this time they'll listen.

Others quote the Old Testament prophets to produce a version of the ancient pagan theories. When bad things happen, it must be God that's done it (because he's responsible for everything), so that must mean that he is angry with us for some reason.

The prophet Amos comes to mind: "*Does disaster come to a city,*" he asked (Amos 3:6), "*unless the Lord has planned it?*" Famine, blight and pestilence—all of them were meant to lead God's people to repent of their evil ways (4:6–11).

But it didn't work. So now even worse things will happen. Many of the other prophets would have agreed. Some today are eagerly jumping on this bandwagon in order to vilify their pet hates: it's all the fault of those 'other' people of whose lifestyles we disapprove.

The place to begin is with the Old Testament. That's where some of the apparently key texts can be found. Of course, this raises a big question of interpretation. Can we make a straight transfer, or at least a dynamic analogy, from what some wonderful but scary people said in the eighth century BC to our muddled and frightened world in the twenty-first century ad? We will look at this next Sunday.

But this week, let us ask ourselves, what can I do to bring help and hope to those around me that are struggling or suffering because of the pandemic and this lockdown. Doing that, we align ourselves with a long and divine tradition of God's church in the broken world. Amen.

+ Prayer

Lord Jesus, when you were on earth,
they brought the sick to you and you healed them all.
Today we ask you to bless all those
in sickness, in weakness and in pain.

For those who are blind and who cannot see the light of the sun;
the beauty of the world, or the faces of their friends:
Bless your people, O Lord.

For those who are deaf and cannot hear the voices which speak to them:
Bless your people, O Lord.

For those who are helpless and who must lie in bed while others go out and in:
Bless your people, O Lord.

For those whose minds have lost their reason and
those who are so nervous that they cannot cope with life:
Bless your people, O Lord.

For those who must face life under some handicap;
those whose weakness means that they must always be careful:
Bless your people, O Lord.

For those suffering from the Corona virus
or the effects of the pandemic,
those who are infected, at risk or have lost loved ones:
Bless your people, O Lord.

For those suffering from debilitating or terminal illness and for their caregivers:
Bless your people, O Lord.

For those who are near the hour of death and in their final struggle:
Bless your people, O Lord.

Father, your only Son took upon himself
the sufferings and weakness of the whole human race;
through his passion and cross he taught us
how good can be brought out of suffering.

Look upon our brothers and sisters who are ill,
whom we now remember in a special way.
In the midst of illness and pain,
may they be united with Christ,
who heals both body and soul.
We ask this through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

† **Benediction (Amen)**

Whatever we face, we do not face it alone.
Wherever we go, we do not journey alone.
However we suffer, we do not bear it alone.
Whoever we are and wherever we go and however we journey,
we go in peace, in hope, and in faith
for we go with Christ, who always goes with us.
Go...

**(+) In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.**