



Andrew Murray Pretoria
23rd of August 2020
Liturgist:
Rev. Stefan Botha



† **Invocation and Greeting:**

Lord, into Your most holy presence we now come.
Calm our anxious spirits.
Remove the distractions that would keep us from You here today.
Break down the walls of separation that we have built to keep You from our distracted hearts.
Lead us in joy and celebration of the only reality worth knowing,
that You love us as we are.
Free us for joyful obedience to Your claim and call on our lives
this day and every day.

**Family of God, it is with joy that I greet you all in the Name of the Sovereign God.
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.*” Where Do We Go from Here?**

Good morning to all. We have been busy with a series on “*God and the pandemic*”, based on the book of NT Wright. We started by looking at the Church’s task and calling. Then we turned to the Old Testament to help us understand our life and times. Then we looked at Jesus and the Gospels. And last week we looked at the rest of the New Testament.

And, even though we started our streaming services this morning, we need to finish this important series. So, we will close this series with this question: Where do we go from here? What do we do with what we learned?

You’ll remember that a few weeks ago, we were urged to embrace lament as the vital initial Christian response to this pandemic. Roughly one-third of the Psalms are lamenting that things are not as they should be. The words they use are words of complaint: of question, sorrow, anger and frustration and, often enough, bitterness. They are all part of the prayer-book of Jesus himself, and the New Testament draws freely on them to express not only our own laments but the way of Jesus too.

The Lord’s Prayer is our “*norm*”. Are we looking for sudden signs of the End? No: we pray every day, “*Thy Kingdom Come on earth as in heaven*”, and we know that prayer will be answered because of what we know about Jesus.

Are we looking for fresh, sudden calls to repent? No: we pray every day, “*Forgive us our Trespases, as we forgive those who trespass against us.*” We know that prayer will be answered, because of what we know about Jesus.

Are we then looking for fresh reasons to leave our comfortable lifestyles and tell our neighbours the good news? Well, shame on us if it takes a pandemic to get us to that point. Why wasn’t Jesus’ command enough? “*As the father sent me, so I’m sending you*”; “*Go and make all nations into disciples*”.

As Paul knew in Athens, you don’t need extra signs. More is less, as so often is the case. You need Jesus: his kingdom-bringing life, death and resurrection; his ascended sovereignty; the promise of his coming to bring heaven and earth together in glorious final renewal. Every attempt to add new “*signs*” to

this narrative diminishes it. It implies that, in Jesus' parable of the vineyard tenants, the owner did after all have a few more messengers he could send, even after sending his only son and watching him be rejected and killed.

In a time of acute crisis, when death sneaks into houses and shops, when you may feel healthy yourself but you may be carrying the virus without knowing it, when every stranger on the street is a threat, when we go around in masks, when churches are shut and people are dying with nobody to pray by their bedside—this is a time for lament. For admitting we don't have easy answers. For refusing to use the crisis as a loudspeaker for what we'd been wanting to say in any case. For weeping at the tomb of our friends. For the inarticulate groaning of the Spirit. "*Rejoice with those who rejoice,*" said Paul, "*and weep with those who weep.*" Yes, and the world is weeping right now. **The initial calling of the Church, first and foremost, is to take our place humbly among the mourners.**

Grief, after all, is part of love. Not to grieve, not to lament, is to slam the door on the same place in the innermost heart from which love itself comes. Our culture is afraid of grief, but not just because it is afraid of death. That is natural and normal, a proper reaction to the Last Enemy. Our culture is afraid because it seems to be afraid of the fear itself, frightened that even to name grief will be to collapse for ever.

We must keep going, we tell ourselves, we have to be strong. Well, yes.

- **Strong** like Jesus who wept at the tomb of his friend.
- **Strong** like the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead and will give life to our mortal bodies too—but who, right now, is pleading for us with groanings too deep for words.
- **Strong** like the person who learns to pray the Psalms.
- **Strong** like the person who learns to wait patiently for the Lord, and expects neither easy answers nor easy words to say to the world:

*I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you
Which shall be the darkness of God ...
I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope,
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the hope and the love are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not yet ready for thought:
So, the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing ...
In order to arrive at what you do not know
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance ...*

So mused T. S. Eliot, written when the skies over London were dark with German warplanes. Eliot had realized that all the easy comforts for which we reach when things are tough are likely to be delusions. We grab at them—and perhaps we hope that God will quickly give them to us—so that we don't have to face the darkness.

So that we don't have to "*watch and pray*" with Jesus in Gethsemane. There is a time for restraint, for fasting, for a sense of exile, of not-belonging. Of defamiliarization. A time for not rushing to judgments. It is all too easy to grasp at quick-fix solutions, in prayer as in life. It can be hard, bitter anguish to live with the summons to lament. To share in the groaning of the Spirit. But that is where we are conformed to the image of the Son.

I believe that it is only with Jesus himself, and with the Spirit, that we really see and know what it means to say that God is "*in control*" of his world. Jesus redefined God's kingdom around his own vocation, the

climax of which was to be his crucifixion, “*for our sins, in accordance with the scriptures*” (1 Corinthians 15:3).

He understood the whole narrative of Israel, itself the focal point of the Creator’s rescuing purpose for his world, as being funnelled down on to one point, the lonely agony of Good Friday. Jesus had to go into the darkness and take its full weight upon himself. He did so in the belief that this was what it would mean for the ancient promises to be fulfilled, for Israel’s God himself to come back in person to accomplish the Ultimate Passover. This would be the way to overthrow the dark cosmic powers. This would be how to rescue the world from death itself and all that causes it.

In doing this, and believing this, Jesus was thoroughly in tune with the vocation of human beings in Genesis: to reflect God’s purposes in the world. When humans sinned, God didn’t cancel that part of the creational package.

He called a human family—knowing full well that they were as flawed as the rest—to be his partners in the work of redemption and new creation. This human family, the people of Abraham, of Moses, of David, arrived at its destiny with Jesus himself, the Jesus who wept at the tomb of his friend, who agonized in Gethsemane, who cried out on the cross that he had been abandoned. That is how God’s kingdom was established.

That remains its character. You see that in the Sermon on the Mount. You see it in Acts, when Jesus’ followers go out to proclaim that he is already the world’s true Lord. Modern rationalists—including modern Christian rationalists, brought up to suppose that rationalist scepticism must be answered by rationalistic apologetics—easily imagine that you solve the problems of the world by sending in the tanks or the bombs.

That’s what the Western powers have done again and again at the political level. It’s what some apologists try to do on the intellectual level: “*God is sovereign; he can do what he likes; therefore whatever happens must be what God wanted, so we must be able to say why.*” That wasn’t how God established his kingdom, and it isn’t how that kingdom now works. Think again of the Antioch church sending help to Jerusalem.

Many things, after all, actually bring grief to God. They shock him. Providence is Jesus-shaped: it isn’t an iron grip, relentlessly “*controlling*” everything. In Genesis 6:6 God sees the wickedness of humans, and he doesn’t say, “*Well, I have allowed that in order to do something with it*”; it grieved him to his heart. The Hebrew text is explicit on that point. This clearly troubled some later Jewish thinkers, because the Septuagint translation (roughly second century BC) simply says “*and he thought it over*”.

Anyway, out of that heart-grief God called Noah, through whom God would make a way through the disaster. Yet there is a straight line from what Genesis 6:6 says about God to what Mark 14:33 says about Jesus: “*My soul is disturbed within me, right to the point of death*” (quoting Psalms 42 and 43, two classic “*laments*”).

John has Jesus say much the same thing: “*Now my heart is troubled*” (12:27, quoting Psalm 6). Jesus can see the flood of death and despair coming upon him. Unlike Noah, he will have no Ark. Nevertheless, he will take with him God’s whole creation, through the flood of death and out into the new creation that dawns on Easter morning.

Equally, some things apparently shock God. The Israelites were told again and again that they should not practice human sacrifice. However, they didn’t simply do it on the sly; they constructed great “*high*

places” for this specific purpose. God’s response is to say, I didn’t command this, nor did it come into my mind (Jeremiah 7:31; repeated in 32:35). Actually, the Hebrew text again says “*heart*” both times. God neither intended it nor even dreamed of it.

That is of course a paradox. We see it most sharply when Peter says to the crowd in Acts 2:23 that the death of Jesus was what God had intended and planned—but that the people who arrested, tried and killed him were wicked to do so. There is no way round this paradox, nor should we look for one. We are not given nice, comprehensible, mechanistic analyses.

Evil is an intruder into God’s creation. Any attempt to analyse either what it is, why it’s allowed or what God does with it—apart from the clear, strong statement that God overcomes it through Jesus’ death for sinners—is not only trying to put the wind into a bottle; it is supposing that we can imagine an orderly universe in which “*evil*” has an appropriate, allowable place.

That way danger lies: to give an account of God’s good creation in which there is a “*natural*” slot for “*evil*” to be found. The old philosophers’ “*problem of evil*” cannot be “*solved*” except at the foot of the cross; just as the politicians’ “*problem of evil*” (such as emerged after 9/11 when George Bush and Tony Blair talked grandly of there being an “*axis of evil*” which they were going to deal with) is always a dangerous way to go about things.

Bush and Blair thought that the way to solve their “*problem of evil*” was by dropping bombs from a great height. Every one of those bombs, as some people predicted at the time, turned out to be another recruiting agent for yet more extreme forms of radical Islamism.

In the same way, the rationalistic analyses of “*evil*” offered by some (“*God allowed the Holocaust to create an opportunity for some people to develop the virtues of heroism, self-sacrifice and so on*”—or perhaps “*God allowed the Holocaust in order that the modern State of Israel would arise*”) serve as recruiting agents for new forms of radical atheism.

They would offer the dark, disturbing picture of a god who deliberately allowed a dangerous virus to escape from a Chinese laboratory or market in order that, by killing millions of innocent people, God could issue a general call to repentance to those who were left, and create a stage on which some people (the doctors and nurses) could develop and display heroism. If that’s your “*god*”, many of our contemporaries would rightly think, don’t expect us to want anything to do with him.

It is altogether more appropriate, then, to recognize that God has in fact delegated the running of many aspects of his world to human beings. In doing so, he has run the risk that they will grieve him to his heart or shock him out of his mind. But when this happens, he will hold people responsible. That is the other side of the coin of his delegation of authority to his image-bearers.

After all, Jesus recognizes that Pontius Pilate has a genuine, God-delegated authority over him. He merely comments that God will therefore hold to account those responsible for handing him over (John 19:11). This is why we need proper investigation and accountability for whatever it was that caused the virus to leak out, and for the lesser ways in which various countries and governments have, or have not, dealt wisely in preparing for a pandemic and then handling it when it rushed upon us.

All that brings us to the question: how do we live with this problem, and how do we come through it? What—as well as lament—is the calling of the Church in the midst of it?

The Church's mission began (according to John 20) with three things which have become very familiar to us in recent days. It began with **tears**; with **locked doors**; and with **doubt**.

On the first Easter day, Mary Magdalene was **weeping** in the garden outside Jesus' empty tomb (John 20:1–18). To her astonishment, Jesus met her, spoke to her—and gave her a commission. She was to go and tell the disciples, who were in hiding. That he was alive, and that he was now to be enthroned as Lord of the world.

That same evening the disciples were still in hiding, with the **doors locked** (John 20:19–23). They were naturally afraid that the people who had come after Jesus would soon be coming come after them too. But the locked doors didn't stop Jesus. He came and stood with them. He shared a meal with them. He gave them their mission: "*As the father has sent me,*" he said, "*so I'm sending you.*" What did that mean? The most obvious way of taking it, as we'll see below, is to say, "*As Jesus was to Israel, so the Church is to the world.*"

The next week the disciples were in the same room, locked in once more. Thomas hadn't been there the first time. He had spent the week telling the others he'd never believe it until Jesus showed up and proved it was really him (John 20:24–29). **Doubting**. Jesus came again and invited Thomas to touch and see the wounds in his hands and his side: the scars which proved his identity, the wounds that revealed his love.

Tears, locked doors and doubt seem to go together. Different ways of saying similar things. Together they sum up a lot of where we are globally at this time.

Tears in plenty, of course: so many lives cut short.

Locked doors: well, precisely. The fear isn't just of certain people who may have it in for us; it's a larger, more nebulous fear that every stranger in the street might, without knowing it, give me a sickness which could kill me within a week. I might be able to give it to them, as well. So: lockdown.

And, like a weed growing between the weeping and the lock-down, there is **doubt**: what's this all about? Is there any room left for faith, for hope? If we are locked away from all but a few, any room for love? These are hard and pressing questions.

They are the kind of questions the Church ought to be good at answering. At answering not just verbally (who's listening, anyway?), but symbolically. If the earliest disciples found Jesus coming to meet them in their tears, fears and doubt, perhaps we can too.

But how? What, in particular, might it mean to say that "as Jesus was to Israel, so the Church should be for the world"?

As we saw earlier, John's Gospel displays the signs that Jesus was doing. These were not things like earthquakes or famines, plagues or floods. They were not meant to frighten people into submission or belief, or to warn them that the world was coming to a shuddering halt.

They were signs of new life, of new creation. They were signs of God coming into the ordinary and making it extraordinary. Coming to bring healing to a world of sickness. Giving bread to the hungry; sight to the blind; life to the dead. They were signs that the world was coming into a new springtime. A new beginning.

In the upper room, Jesus was commissioning his tearful, fearful, doubting followers to do the same. And so, they did. Right from the start. In Paul's very first letter he tells the Galatians to "*do good to all people, especially those of the household of faith.*"

The outside world couldn't believe it. As we saw, when faced with a plague, the early Christians would pitch in and nurse people, sometimes saving lives, sometimes dying themselves. Their strong belief in God's promises for life beyond the grave gave them a fearlessness which enabled them both to keep cheerful in the face of death and to go to the aid of sufferers whose own families and communities had abandoned them for fear of the disease.

This is well set out in Rodney Stark's famous book "*The Rise of Christianity*". Stark makes a compelling case that the way the Christians behaved in the great plagues of the early centuries was a significant factor in contributing to the spread of the faith. Stark, and others who have followed him, have collected the evidence from the plagues of the 170s ad, which killed the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, and the 250's. (Nobody is quite sure what diseases they were. One might have been smallpox, the other measles, both killers when attacking unprepared populations.)

The emperor Julian, who tried to deconvert the Roman empire in the late fourth century, after it had become officially Christian under Constantine, complained that the Christians were much better at looking after the sick, and for that matter the poor, than the ordinary non-Christian population. He was trying to lock the stable door after the horse had bolted. The Christians were being for the world what Jesus had been for Israel. People took notice. Something new was happening.

The tradition continued. It was the Christians who built hospitals and hospices. The followers of Jesus were first in the field, too, in making education available outside the circles of the elite, and in the care of the poor. All were needed, as they still are.

As for medicine, it's only in the very modern period that there has been something of a lull in major epidemics, as germs became identified and understood, and vaccination and other preventative measures became the norm.

So, from the time of Jesus until the last century or two, plagues and the like have continued to come and go, often with terrifying consequences. If we thought that because we now lived in the "*modern world*" we were exempt—that our science and technology had now produced "*progress*" that would eliminate all such things—we were obviously wrong.

So, throughout Church history, Jesus' followers have usually avoided such lines of thought. Instead, like the church in Antioch, they have got on with the job. They have visited the prisoners, cared for the wounded, welcomed the strangers, fed the hungry. And they have tended the sick.

In most past ages that has been done day and night, in good times and bad, in the Black Death and the Bubonic Plague, in war and peace, in the slums of the city and the isolated farmhouses. Clergy and laity alike have done it, at considerable and often fatal risk to themselves. The urge to meet the Lord himself in the faces of the needy—in accordance with Matthew 25—has always been strong.

When the present pandemic began to take hold, a passage from the writings of Martin Luther went the rounds on the internet, with Luther's usual combination of down-to-earth wisdom and practical piety. Luther faced several plagues in Wittenberg and elsewhere in the 1520's and 1530's, and in his letters to church and civic leaders he insisted that preachers and pastors should remain at their posts: as good shepherds, they should be prepared to lay down their lives for their sheep.

Likewise, civic and family leaders should only flee from a plague if they had made proper provision for the safety of those left behind. He offers advice which sounds as relevant today as it was five hundred

years ago. Plagues, he says, may perhaps be messengers from God; but the right approach should be practical as well as faithful. This, he says, is how one should think to oneself:

“With God’s permission the enemy has sent poison and deadly dung among us, and so I will pray to God that he may be gracious and preserve us.

Then I will fumigate to purify the air, give and take medicine, and avoid places and persons where I am not needed in order that I may not abuse myself and that through me others may not be infected and inflamed with the result that I become the cause of their death through my negligence.

If God wishes to take me, he will be able to find me. At least I have done what he gave me to do and am responsible neither for my own death nor for the death of others. But if my neighbour needs me, I shall avoid neither person nor place but feel free to visit and help him.”

- Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel, from a letter of 1527.

There is a gritty wisdom at the heart of this. Luther clearly believed that the “*normal*” course of action was for a Christian to stay and help, rather than run away, when a plague strikes a district. Yet he knew, even in the days before people understood how germs and viruses worked, that it was quite possible for a well-meaning person to make matters worse.

We today know that only too well: someone may carry, and transmit, the Covid-19 virus without knowing they have it. So the natural inclination of a Jesus-follower, to obey Jesus’ call to go and help at the place of danger, even at the risk of one’s own life, looks rather different when that apparently heroic action might easily make matters worse. The generous one-dimensional desire to be a hero, to “*do the right thing*”, needs to be rounded out with the equally generous willingness to restrain apparent heroism when it might itself bring disaster.

Yet this cannot become an excuse for doing nothing. **Out of lament must come fresh action.** At the very least, clergy (properly trained, authorized and protectively clothed) must be allowed to attend the sick and dying. If, as sometimes seems to be the case, secular doctors suppose that such ministry is superfluous, this must be challenged at every level.

As we thank God that in the last two or three centuries the long-term calling of the Church to bring healing and hope has been shared in the wider secular world, we must **work with** the medical profession, not least to ensure a fully rounded, fully human approach. This applies particularly when people are near the point of death; the hospice movement of the last fifty years has been largely a Christian innovation, privately funded, witnessing to a hope that secular medicine has sometimes ignored.

The call to Jesus’ followers, then, as they confront their own doubts and those of the world through tears and from behind locked doors, is to be sign-producers for God’s kingdom. We are to set up signposts—actions, symbols, not just words—which speak, like Jesus’ signs, of new creation: of healing for the sick, of food for the hungry, and so on.

This means things like running food banks, working in homeless shelters, volunteering to help those visiting relatives in prisons, and so on. These can be rewarding tasks but they, and all similar things, are also demanding. For them we will need, as Mary, Thomas and the disciples in the upper room needed, the living presence of Jesus, and the powerful breath of his Spirit. That is what we are promised.

In following this vocation, we will thereby be doing what Jesus told his followers in John 16: in the power of the Spirit, we will be holding the world to account. Just as the Jesus-followers were showing the officials of the Roman empire that there was a different way to run society, so there will be signs of God’s kingdom that can emerge from the creative, healing, restorative work of church members today.

Situations and opportunities will vary, but out of the lament of God's people new possibilities can and do emerge. As Jesus' followers today grieve in prayer at the heart of the world's pain, new vocations may emerge, both of healing and wisdom and of holding up a mirror to those in power to show what has needed to be done.

Of course, there often is the inclination to suppose that the Government now runs "*health*" and the churches can go back to being "*spiritual*", to teaching people to pray and showing them how to get to "*heaven*".

Ever since the eighteenth century the "*secular*" world has done its best to take over, and to claim the credit for, a great deal that the Jesus-followers used to do. The Church has often gone along for the ride, sliding off into a Platonic rejection of "*the world*" and offering an escapist "*evangelism*" and "*spirituality*".

Yet when government funding is cut, and the health services can no longer do what they need to, churches should be the ones—but often are not—to raise their voices in protest and to step in and help. We have a long track record on medical work, much longer than any other society or company.

Suddenly to be told that we cannot and must not do it, but must leave it to "*the professionals*", feels like being told that we cannot and must not be the Church. Others claim to know best (though actually the scientific advice is worryingly diverse) and we aren't wanted on the patch. We should not be afraid to take the high ground. This is part of the work of holding the world to account in the power of the Spirit.

This raises the current controversy over whether church buildings should be locked, and services held over the internet from people's homes. Here there seem to me to be two quite different things which need to be said (as often happens in Christian theology). We need to hear them both.

First, church buildings are not an escape from the world, but a bridgehead into the world. A proper theology of "*sacred space*" ought to see buildings for public worship as advance signs of the time when God's glory will fill all creation. We should therefore celebrate every way in which the living Lord whom we regularly worship in church buildings is out and about, bringing healing and hope far beyond the visible limits of church property.

The poet Malcolm Guite, has caught this brilliantly, reflecting on this last Easter with churches locked, and on the recent innovation in Europe of people coming out of their houses on Thursdays to applaud our courageous health workers.

Easter 2020

*And where is Jesus, this strange Easter day?
Not lost in our locked churches, anymore
than he was sealed in that dark sepulchre.
The locks are loosed; the stone is rolled away,
and he is up and risen, long before,
alive, at large, and making his strong way
into the world he gave his life to save,
no need to seek him in his empty grave.
He might have been a wafer in the hands
of priests this day, or music from the lips:
of red-robed choristers, instead he slips
away from church, shakes off our linen bands*

*to don his apron with a nurse: he grips
and lifts a stretcher, soothes with gentle hands
the frail flesh of the dying, gives them hope,
breathes with the breathless, lends them strength to cope.
On Thursday we applauded, for he came
and served us in a thousand names and faces
mopping our sickroom floors and catching traces
of that corona which was death to him:
Good Friday happened in a thousand places
where Jesus held the helpless, died with them
that they might share his Easter in their need,
now they are risen with him, risen indeed.*

There is a deep wisdom here. Jesus does not need church buildings for his work to go forward. Part of the answer to the question, “*Where is God in the pandemic?*” must be, “*Out there on the front line, suffering and dying to bring healing and hope.*”

However, there is a **second** point which has to be made. In those countries such as our own where churches (and other places of worship, including synagogues and mosques) have been shut, for thoroughly comprehensible reasons, there is a danger of accidentally sending the wrong signal to the wider world.

For the last three hundred years the western world has regarded “*religion*” (the very word has changed its meaning to accommodate this new viewpoint) as a **private matter**: “*what someone does with their solitude*”.

The Christian faith as a whole has been reduced, in the public mind, to a “*private*” movement in the sense that—so many say—it should have no place in public life. Thus, I can still go shopping in the crowded mall; but I cannot go and sit in the ancient, prayer-soaked chapel across the street. Worship becomes invisible.

Shutting churches will appear to collude with this. By saying that we will temporarily abolish corporate worship and join with others only on live-streamed services from the pastor’s study, we may seem to be agreeing that we really are just a group of like-minded individuals pursuing our rather arcane private hobby.

The danger with e-worship is that it can turn into P-worship—the Platonic vision of “*the flight of the alone to the alone*”. Since there are cultural pressures in that direction already, it’s important that we should recognise the danger.

Happily, the signs so far are that many people have “*been to church*” in that virtual reality who would not have come to a church building, so that is an exciting development. Yet our churches have been for centuries physical and often audible reminders, on high streets and in city squares, on village greens and in suburban developments, of the vital dimension to life which Western modernity has tried to crowd out.

We will no doubt learn many things in this time of enforced “*exile*”—which is what it is—but we should be praying towards the day when our buildings will function within our society as they were designed to do. In other words, I am concerned with the ways in which the Church, faced with a major crisis, has meekly followed what seems to be a secularizing lead.

The sign of new creation, from the ministry of Jesus forward, has been the healing presence of Jesus himself, and his death and resurrection above all. Public worship of the Triune God, in a public place—observing whatever security measures are appropriate—has always been a major part of sending out that signal to the watching world.

When Paul tells the Philippians to “*Rejoice in the Lord always*”, the word “*rejoice*” doesn’t just mean “*feel very happy deep inside*”. It means, “*Get out on the street (with proper safe distancing of course) and celebrate!*”

Lots of other people are doing it, after all—in Paul’s day, there were processions and street parties and religious ceremonies going on a lot, in public, and people could see what was happening. Paul wanted the Jesus-followers to do the same. In the Bible the word “*joy*” signifies something you can hear. From some distance away; check out Nehemiah 12:43.

I find myself caught between these two viewpoints, both of which seem to me right. I totally understand that we need to be responsible and scrupulously careful. I am appalled by reports of would-be devout but misguided people ignoring safety regulations because they believe that as Christians they are automatically protected against disease, or that (as I heard someone say on television) “*you’ll be safe inside church because the devil can’t get in there*”. (I wanted to say: Trust me, lady, I’m a pastor: the devil knows his way in there as well as anybody else.)

That is the kind of superstition that gives Christian faith a bad name. Equally, the debates about locking churches can easily stir up lesser controversies, between those for whom the building and all its bits and pieces has been a vital part of their spirituality, and those for whom all such things are irrelevant since one can worship God anywhere. Both sides here may learn from the present crisis, and we do well to hold one another in charitable prayer.

Part of the answer to that prayer, as many have seen, might be **to recognize the present moment as a time of exile**. We find ourselves “*by the waters of Babylon*”, thoroughly confused and grieving for the loss of our normal life. “*How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?*”, as in Psalm 137, translates quite easily into “*How can I know the joy of the Eucharist sitting in front of a computer?*” Or “*How can I celebrate Ascension or Pentecost without being with my brothers and sisters?*”

Of course, part of the point of Psalm 137 is precisely that this Psalm is itself a “*song of the Lord*”. That is the irony: writing a poem about being unable to write a poem.

Part of the discipline of lament might then be to turn the Lament itself into a song of sorrow. Perhaps that is part of the way in which we are being called right now to be **people of lament**—lamenting even the fact that we can’t lament in the way we would normally prefer.

We need to explore those questions, and the new disciplines they may demand, in whatever ways we can. Perhaps this, too, is simply to be accepted as part of what life in Babylon is like. We must, as Jeremiah said, settle down into this regime and “*seek the welfare of the city*” where we are. Yet let’s not pretend it’s where we want to be. Let’s not forget Jerusalem. Let’s not decide to stay here.

This is where the churches urgently need to think and pray through what can and should be said, and how to say it in such a way that the leaders of the western world can hear it and act wisely.

Perhaps the most vital question of all, and one which should be near the top of serious conversations at the highest level between Church, state and all interested parties, is how we move back towards whatever the “*new normal*” is going to be.

Some people have expressed the pious hope that when this is all over, we will have a kinder, gentler society. We shall pay our nurses much more. We shall be prepared to give more in taxes to support health services, and we shall give much more help to the hospice movement. We shall have enjoyed the fresh air so much, unpolluted by thousands of cars and planes, that we will want to travel less, and spend more time with family and neighbours. We shall celebrate our emergency services, our delivery companies, and all the people who have looked after us.

I wish that this were true. I fear, however, that as soon as restrictions are lifted there will be a rush to start up again such businesses as we can—and, in all sorts of ways, that is quite right and proper. Nobody who is desperate to avoid bankruptcy is going to think twice about using the car again, or the plane, if it will help.

We are told on all sides that the economic effects of the lockdown are already catastrophic and could get worse. The problem is then quite like the tragic decisions which leaders face during a war: deciding whether to sacrifice that unit for the sake of rescuing this one, and whether to send coded messages to the enemy which will make them bomb those houses instead of these public buildings.

We have been concentrating entirely on “*staying safe*”—at a massive cost in terms of bankruptcies, unemployment, and social malaise. The huge government handouts to those in need as a result will, sooner or later, have to be paid for.

Certainly if the debate is conducted between those who see death as the worst of all possible results and those who see economic ruin as the worst of all possible results the end product is likely to be an acrimonious dialogue of the deaf.

As in the ancient pagan world, a plague makes people say, “*Which gods are angry? And how can we appease them?*” As today’s secularism is more and more revealing its pagan subtexts, it is fascinating to imagine our present dilemma as a clash between Asclepius, the god of healing, and Mammon, the money-god.

Mammon, of course, regularly demands human sacrifices; that is why the poorest of the poor are most at risk in the present medical emergency. Perhaps it’s no bad thing for Asclepius to have his turn, though Mars, the god of war, and Aphrodite, the goddess of erotic love, are never far away.

Certainly, it won’t do to cut back on the imperative to healing, just because we hear our favourite god Mammon calling to us from the other corner, looking forward to more of those human sacrifices.

If all this is approached purely pragmatically, as though the machinery of state were, well, machinery, rather than the wise working interrelationship of fully alive human beings, the result will be predictable. The weak will go to the wall again. They usually do.

After the 2008 financial crisis, the banks and the big businesses, having accepted huge public bail-out money, quickly got back into their old ways, while the poorest parts of the world just got poorer and stayed that way.

Someone needs to stand up and read—perhaps not the riot act, but Psalm 72. This is the list of priorities that the Church should be articulating, not just in speech but in practical proposals to go at the top of the agenda:

*“Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king’s son ...
May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness.
May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor ...
[The righteous ruler] delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper.
He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy.
From oppression and violence he redeems their life,
And precious is their blood in his sight.”*

(Psalm 72:1–4, 12–14)

This too could be mocked as wishful thinking. But it is what the Church at its best has always believed and taught, and what the Church on the front lines has always practised. In the early days of the Church, the Roman emperors and local governors didn’t know much about what Christianity really was. Yet they knew this strange movement had people called “*bishops*” who were always banging on about the needs of the poor. Wouldn’t it be nice if people today had the same impression?

So, what does that mean in a world where some of us find being locked down a minor nuisance while others are still crowded in refugee camps or in third-world cities where “*social distancing*” is about as easy as flying to the moon?

We need to think globally and act locally—but, in doing both, to work with Church leaders from around the world to find policies that will prevent a mad rush back to profiteering with the devil taking the hindmost.

Of course, in the middle of that, we need to strengthen the World Health Organization and insist that all countries of the world stick firmly to its policies and protocols. There are, no doubt, big questions to be asked of some of the world’s superpowers who have used the current crisis as an occasion for grandstanding or other political game-playing. The electronic rumour mills and the “*fake news*” channels have been working overtime as well.

In all this, I return to **the theme of Lament**. It is perhaps no accident that Psalm 72, setting out the messianic agenda which puts the poor and needy at the top of the list, is followed immediately by Psalm 73, which complains that the rich and powerful are getting it their own way as usual.

Perhaps that is how we are bound to live: glimpsing what ought to be, then struggling with the way things actually are. However, the only way to live with that, is to pray with that; to hold the vision and the reality side by side as we groan with the groaning of all creation, and as the Spirit groans within us so that the new creation may come to birth.

What we need right now is someone to do in this challenging moment what Joseph did at Pharaoh’s court, analysing the situation and sketching a vision for how to address it. We urgently need statesmanlike, wise leadership, with prayerful Christian leaders taking a place alongside others, to think with both vision and realism through the challenges that we shall face in the coming months.

It could be that in the days to come we will see signs of genuine new possibilities, new ways of working which will regenerate old systems and invent new and better ones, which we could then recognize as

forward-looking hints of new creation. Or perhaps we will just go back to “*business as usual*” in the sense of the same old squabbles, the same old shallow analyses and solutions.

If we simply sit and wait to see, and wring our hands either because our churches are locked, or our golf clubs are shut, or our businesses have been put on hold, then it is all the more likely that the usual forces will take control. Mammon is a very powerful deity. Our leaders know what it takes to appease him. If that fails there is always Mars, the god of war. May the Lord save us from his clutches.

If we are to escape those dark forces, we must be alert to the dangers and actively, prayerfully taking other initiatives. The garden is far less likely to grow weeds if we have been planting flowers.

It isn't for us to tell Church leaders, let alone leaders of other faith communities, how they ought to be planning for the coming months, what they ought to be pressing upon our governments. Yet those of us who watch and wait and pray for our leaders in Church and state must use this time of lament as a time of prayer and hope.

What we hope for includes the wise human leadership and initiative which will, like that of Joseph in Egypt, bring about fresh and healing policies and actions across God's wide and wounded world:

*“O send out your light and your truth; let them lead me
Let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling.
Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy;
And I will praise you with the harp, O God, my God.
Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.”*

(Psalm 43:3–5)

† **Prayer**

Lord, we thank You today that You are all-powerful, all-knowing and always perfectly good.

Thank You for Your daily mercies to us as we struggle through challenging times.

Father, we confess that we do not seek Your presence as we ought.

We confess that we have settled for lesser things,
when we know You desire us to have a personal, close relationship with You.

Lord, revive our love for You.

Draw close, help us to become ever more aware of Your presence in our lives.

And help us to in turn share Your love with our neighbours.

Lord, we put our hope in Your unfailing love.

In Jesus' Name, 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.