

NOVATE
VOBIS
NOVALE

The FURROW

A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

+ John McAreavey

Biblical resources for the Covid-19 pandemic

April 2021

Biblical resources for the Covid-19 pandemic

+ John McAreavey

It would be difficult to understate the impact of COVID 19. Since it made its appearance in these islands in March 2020, it has impacted on every aspect of our lives: our health and emotional lives, family life and relationships of all kinds, social interaction, business and the economy, and cultural life. It has affected Church life at every level; at this time gatherings for prayer, other than funerals and weddings, are restricted, as is appropriate. The impact of COVID 19 on people's faith has not been articulated widely; however, it would be surprising if it did not impact on people's relationship to God and their neighbour, as well as the fundamental corner-stones of Christian faith and practice.

While the arrival of vaccines has given grounds for hope, the virus will continue to impact on our lives and on our society for some time.

There has already been significant pastoral and theological reflection on the pandemic.¹ I wish to focus on *two* books by well-known scholars. While the two books under review are worth personal reading, I think their brevity, depth and accessibility makes them suitable for adult theology groups or reading groups on Zoom; such forums would allow members to reflect on the material in the light of their experience of COVID 19. The extracts cited below need a deal of un-packing but they may help us to re-examine fundamental truths and enable us to draw from them strength and wisdom.

GOD AND THE PANDEMIC²

The Anglican theologian and exegete, Tom Wright, notes the generous response of people to the UK Government's requests for

1 For example, +M Neary, 'Covid 19 – a challenge to faith' in *The Furrow* 71 (September, 2020), pp. 455-8; Ronald Rohlheiser, 'The illusion of invulnerability' in *The Irish Catholic*, December 17, 2020, p.30.

2 Tom Wright, *God and the Pandemic: A Christian reflection on the Coronavirus and its aftermath*, SPCK 2020, p. 3.

+Bishop John McAreavey is Bishop Emeritus of Dromore.

THE FURROW

help; so many people signed up that it was hard to find tasks for them all. This, he claims, is what the Christians have always done.

In the first centuries of our era, when serious illness would strike a town or city, the well-to-do would run for the hills ...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.³

In Chapter 2, Wright surveys responses to suffering and evil in the psalms and other Old Testament texts, such as the book of Job:

The book of Job is a standing reminder that the Old Testament operates on at least two quite different levels. There is the story of Israel – or rather, of God-and-Israel. This is the covenantal story: the narrative of how the Creator God called a people to be his partner in rescuing the human race and restoring creation. It tells of how that people – themselves ‘carriers’ of the disease that had infected the human race, the proto-virus called ‘idolatry and injustice’ which is killing us all – how that people themselves had to go into the darkness of exile so that, somehow, new life might emerge the other side.⁴

Alongside this narrative is a deeper story of the good creation and the dark power that from the start has tried to destroy God's good handiwork:

We are simply to know that when we are caught up in awful circumstances, apparent gross injustices, terrible plagues – or when accused of wicked things of which we are innocent, suffering strange sicknesses with no apparent reason, let alone cure – at those points we are to lament, we are to complain, we are to state the case, and leave it with God... Jesus not only drew on that story. He lived it. He died under it.⁵

In chapter 3, ‘Jesus and the Gospels’, Wright states that the New Testament insists we ‘put Jesus at the centre of the picture and work outwards from there’:

The minute we find ourselves looking at the world around us and jumping to conclusions about God and what he might be doing, but without looking carefully at Jesus, we are in serious danger of forcing through an ‘interpretation’ which might look

3 Cf. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, HarperCollins paperback 1997.

4 Wright, p. 13.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

BIBLICAL RESOURCES FOR THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

attractive ... but which actually screens Jesus out of the picture. As the old saying has it, if he is not Lord of all, he is not Lord at all.⁶

Wright focuses on the response of Jesus to the death of Lazarus (John 11):

So how is Jesus to engage with Martha, Mary and the critical crowd? ... He just weeps. And then – with the authority born of that mixture of tears and trust – he commands Lazarus to come out of the tomb. If there is one word for our present situation, facing not only a pandemic but all the consequent social and cultural upheaval, I believe it might be here.⁷

Wright articulates a paradigm: ‘as Jesus had been to Israel, his followers were to be to the world’.⁸ In response to the question as to why, in response to disasters in the world, God does not send a thunderbolt and put things right, he writes:

God *does* send thunderbolts – human ones. He sends in the poor in Spirit, the meek, the mourners, the hungry for justice people. They are the way God wants to act in this world... They will use their initiative; they will see where the real needs are, and go to meet them.⁹

In addition to the ministry of practical charity, Wright reflects on the whole creation ‘groaning in labour pains’ (Rom 8:22). He asks, ‘so what does this mean in practice?’

It means that, when the world is going through great convulsions, the followers of Jesus are called to be people of prayer at the place where the world is in pain.¹⁰

Wright reflects on our image of God at a time of immense cosmic suffering:

Dare we then say that God the creator, facing his world in meltdown, is himself in tears, even though he remains the God of ultimate Providence? That would be John’s answer, if the story of Jesus and Lazarus is anything to do by.¹¹

6 Ibid., pp. 19-20.

7 Ibid., p. 28.

8 Ibid., p. 33.

9 Ibid., p.34.

10 Ibid., p. 42 Later, he brings these concepts together: ‘we, the followers of Jesus, find ourselves caught up in the groaning of creation, and we discover that at the same time God the Spirit is groaning within us. This is our vocation: to be in prayer, perhaps wordless prayer, at the point where the world is in pain’ (p. 47)

11 Ibid., p. 46

THE FURROW

In chapter 5 ('Where do we go from here?'), Wright urges us to embrace lament as the vital initial Christian response to this pandemic. He observes:

Roughly one third of the Psalms are lamenting that things in the world 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 NT draws freely on them to express not only our own lament but the way of Jesus too.¹²

Consistent with this, Wright points out that 'the Church's mission began (according to John 20) with 'three things which have become very familiar to us in recent days, tears, locked doors and doubt'.¹³ I will conclude this section with a poem of Malcolm Guite, an Anglican priest and poet:

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 doors are loosened; 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
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.¹⁴

¹² Ibid., p. 52.

¹³ Ibid., p. 59.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.67.

BIBLICAL RESOURCES FOR THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

VIRUS AS A SUMMONS TO FAITH¹⁵

Walter Brueggemann, an American exegete and scholar, wrote this work as an encouragement and guidance ‘about how we may think and speak critically, theologically and biblically about our current crisis of virus in order that the community of faith may maintain its missional identity with boldness and joy’.¹⁶ As regards his theological method, he writes: ‘I believe that any serious crisis is a summons for us to reread the Bible afresh’.¹⁷

Chapter One - ‘*Reaping the whirlwind*’ (*Leviticus, Exodus, Job*) – identifies three traditions of biblical interpretation of evil: a) a transactional *quid pro quo* – we reap what we sow; b) the purposeful mobilisation of the negative forces of creation (cf. Isaiah 2:12-17) and c) YHWH’s holiness enacted in freedom (the classic text being the whirlwind speeches in the book of Job). None of these approaches will find favour in the world of modern Enlightenment. Then he writes:

The church, however, has long understood that the modernist narrative is not adequate for the mystery of creation. In times of emergency, it is possible (and necessary?) to step outside the modern narrative and to take a peek into the vast claim of creator and creation. It will only be a peek, not a permanent habitation. But the peek might be revelatory and transformative.¹⁸

Brueggemann goes on to refer to what he calls ‘a season of wonderment:

The wonderment does come, perhaps at night, perhaps in the midst of quarantine ... In our imagined autonomy we have, in the global narrative, been on a spree of self-indulgence and self-actualisation that has exercised little regard for the neighbour. And now we are required to wonder more deeply. It is the task of the preacher to authorise and guide such wonderment. The end of such wonder may happily come in the form of a vaccine. But its beginning is the fear of the Lord’¹⁹

In Chapter Two, ‘*Pestilence ... mercy? Who knew?*’ (2 Samuel 24:1-25), Brueggemann observes that ‘as an Old Testament teacher, it is not a big stretch for me to try to segue from the current virus to Old Testament talk about ‘pestilence’ and ‘plague’. While they are not

15 Walter Brueggemann, *Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief and Uncertainty*, Paternoster: Thinking faith, 2020.

16 Ibid., xi.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., p. 18.

19 Ibid.

THE FURROW

exact equivalents, ‘they are close enough to invite imagination and reflection’.²⁰ After ‘lingering’ with this text, he concludes:

The virus may indeed amount to a curbing of our worst social habits and invite a slowdown to the pace of creation’s reality. It may lead to gentler treatment of prisoners and a more generous offer to the left behind. We may dare imagine with David that the final word is not pestilence; it is mercy.²¹

In Chapter Three – ‘*Until the dancing begins again*’ (Jeremiah) – Brueggemann notes that ‘Jeremiah leans most deeply and most honestly into the disaster of his people’.²² Notwithstanding this, he anticipates that in this place of waste, disaster and devastation, the sounds of festive celebration will again be heard:

God’s ‘restoration’ is characteristically towards a new historical possibility through the giving of new gifts... This is the *God of homecoming* after there was displacement. This is the *God of Easter* who has not quit, not even on that dread Friday or that misery-lasting Saturday. It is no wonder that the older son in the parable heard ‘singing and dancing’ (Luke 15:25)... God’s ‘restoration’ is, perforce, rendered in song and parable because it is a newness that accommodates none of the categories or explanations known in the past.²³

Brueggemann identifies two elements of ministry in a time of suffering: the first is ‘to engage in relentless, uncompromising hope’ based on the conviction that God will not quit until God has arrived at God’s good intention. The second is to be witnesses to the abiding *hesed* (tenacious solidarity) of God that persists amid pestilence.²⁴

Chapter Four, ‘*Praying amid the virus*’ is an exegesis of the prayer of Solomon at the dedication of the Jerusalem temple (1 Kings 8:23-53). Brueggemann observes that the texts of the prayer ‘neither linger to describe the disasters nor do they spend much energy on YHWH’s affirmative answer:

Rather, the accent is on faithfulness in uttering the prayer and readiness to trust that it will be heard. That is, the accent is on the effectiveness and reliability of the relationship that re-contextualises the disaster.²⁵

20 Ibid., p. 21.

21 Ibid., p. 26.

22 Ibid., p. 29.

23 Ibid., pp. 30-31.

24 Ibid., p. 32.

25 Ibid., p. 42.

BIBLICAL RESOURCES FOR THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In Chapter Seven, *'the matrix of groan'* – an exegesis of Isaiah 42:14-15 – Brueggemann writes:

I have taken this along with these texts that belong to the same semantic field as the groan of Romans 8, because I want to consider the groan of pain and the shout of hope that belong to the coming of the new creation. The future, so claims biblical faith, is not an easy, convenient gift ... It is rather a mystery-shrouded gift of God that all the creatures are invited to receive in deep cost. Thus, the theological-liturgical-pastoral question of the groan of newness looms large and permits no easy solution.²⁶

Brueggemann argues that there are two models in Scripture of the groan that will break despair and the cry that will override denial. Exile, 'the brokenness of things past' is the context of hope. In the New Testament it is the cry of abandonment of psalm 22:1 on the lips of Jesus from the Cross:

[It] is the narrative-liturgical acknowledgement that even Messiah, the bodied hope for newness, must receive newness in the exile. Only when we, hoppers for new creation, disown our present dysfunction in its deathliness and dare to voice a groan that matches God's birthing of newness, only then will God give.²⁷

Each chapter of this book ends with a beautifully crafted prayer. These prayers add to the riches of the work. The prayer attached to this final chapter includes the following passage:

So now, God who hears, helps and saves, hear, act and make new!

Give us courage and patience;

End the virus,

Let us be rich in soul and poor in things,

Ordered for neighbourliness,

Generous with goods,

Free of fear,

But mostly: end the virus!

We pray this in the name of Jesus who defeated the powers of death, overcame the forces of evil, ended the unbearable leprosy for some, and became the Lord of the Dance.

26 'For a long time I have held my peace, I have kept still and restrained myself/ now I will cry out like a woman in labour, I will gasp and pant/ I will lay waste mountains and hills, and dry up all their herbage'.

27 Ibid., p. 69.

THE FURROW

So we pray
So we trust,
So we hope ... in you! Amen.²⁸

CONCLUSION

These slight but powerful volumes were written in the depth of the first lockdown. They represent the struggle of two teachers of faith to broach questions stimulated by the Covid 19 pandemic and to find sources of inspiration and wisdom in the Christian scriptures that may help us at a critical time.

28 Ibid., pp.69-70.

A Prophetic Woman. In 2015 Pope Francis wrote a letter on Consecrated Life, entitled *Keep Watch*. He highlighted how the prophetic person is called to ‘search the horizons of our life and our times, in watchful prayer; to peer into the night in order to recognise the fire that illuminates and guides ... to keep awake and watch ...’ Nano Nagle was a prophetic woman: the passionate love of God beckoned to her and she responded heroically. In that spirit she set her face against the oppressive system of her day. Resolute in the conviction that she was being sent by God to the poor, she dared to risk all, unafraid of the consequences. She pioneered a socioreligious movement that drew her into communion with the shunned and poorest in society. She took her place alongside them in a ministry of service. Here she would encounter the broken body of Christ. Her mission was clear: to bind up their wounds, to heal the broken-hearted, to restore their sense of dignity, so that they could come to know they were the beloved of God. For Nano, nothing was more certain than that God was on the side of the poor and vulnerable: in God’s eyes they were the important ones.

– ANNE LYONS, PBVM, *The Story of Nano Nagle, A Life Lived on the Razor’s Edge*. 2021. (Dublin: Messenger Publications) p. 50.