

On Praying in a Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic brings into sharp relief the interdependence of all humankind. We in the western capitalist democracies are being confronted with the illusory nature of our claims to autonomy, individualism and progress. Suddenly, everything is in flux, the habitual routines and rituals of everyday life have been suspended, and we wonder with some justification if things will ever be the same again. We find ourselves in limbo, suspended between a past that may have disappeared forever, and a future that nobody can predict.

In this time of social isolation, it's not surprising that Christians are taking to social media with what is becoming a daily deluge of prayers and blessings, holy pictures and homespun rituals, livestreamed Masses and virtual devotions. There are many reasons for such intensity of prayer. There is the anguish of those living with illness, death and bereavement; the exhaustion of health workers daily risking their lives to help others; the loneliness of those who are cut off from society and have no one to turn to; the abandonment of those who are poor and homeless, of migrants and refugees, of all who already inhabit the desolate margins of our consumerist societies and whose meager sources of care and support have suddenly vanished. Yet it's unsettling to notice how Christian social media is focusing more on different ways and means of praying through Holy Week and Easter than on ways of responding to our neighbours in need and forming communities of care and support for those who are most vulnerable.

I'm not denying the importance of prayer and worship, particularly during this holiest time of the Christian year, nor am I denying that many Christians are doing everything they can to provide a safety net for those most in need, but still I'm uneasy about the frenetic activity of online liturgical life right now. Sometimes it can seem as if the greatest impact of coronavirus is its disruption of the church-going activities of western citizens. It has pushed into oblivion the most desperate and despairing people on our planet, and a widespread preoccupation with our own struggles and deprivations is distracting us from the plight of those who must now add coronavirus to a long

catalogue of misery and marginalization. Is the problem that deep down, we expect God to behave like some capitalist overlord who keeps rich white people safe from the scourges of disease and social and economic chaos that happen every day in every way to the poorest of the poor?

Theodicy rears its ugly head in times like these, as theologians leap into action to tackle the problem. Why does God allow these things to happen? What explanation can theology offer to help people to reconcile their faith in the goodness of God with disease, suffering and death? But there is no new theological challenge about coronavirus. Pandemics are as old as humankind, and faith must always grapple with the challenges posed by tragedy, trauma and catastrophe.

Coronavirus belongs within a natural order that includes disease and death, but the challenges it presents are surely not so much about God as about ourselves. The rapid spread of the disease was made possible by globalization. We know today that the globetrotting consumerist lifestyles that many of us in the West have come to expect are not sustainable. We have also discovered that, faced with an unprecedented crisis, we can respond with remarkable urgency in bringing about a radical change in the way we live. Yet there is increasing evidence that, unless we willingly make some of these changes as a long-term commitment to sustainable development, we are likely to be overtaken by an environmental catastrophe that will dwarf this present crisis.

Even the worst pandemics eventually pass, but the environmental crisis will not pass. That is why this may be a moment of epochal significance for all life on earth. While many of us long for the restoration of our social interactions, for reunion with family and friends, for a return to normal, we must also ask what 'normal' might be after this. How can we embed the more positive aspects of this strange time of suspended animation into our institutions and lifestyles?

Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'* reclaims the forgotten wisdom of the Catholic tradition with regard to the interconnectedness of all God's creation and the graced capacity of every form of life to reveal something of the trinitarian mystery. As modern western culture surged ahead with its confidence in science, reason and progress, our relationship with the natural world – including our

own bodies – became infected with dualism. The earth's riches became commodities to be exploited rather than wonders to be marvelled at. Humankind became divided between the tourists and travellers who treat the earth as a vast theme park, and the refugees, migrants and exploited workers who constitute the shadow side of the capitalist jamboree. Other species became instrumentalized, valued only for their usefulness to humans. Yet today we are rediscovering what our pre-modern forebears knew all along – that we are part of a delicate and wondrous symphony of life played out through all the diverse species and forms of nature. We humans have an awesome responsibility for how our behavior impacts on this graced harmony of being.

I live on a houseboat on the River Thames in London. Every day during this crisis, I kayak across the river to the nature reserve on the other side for my daily walk, and I wonder anew at how the sounds of nature are emerging against the unfamiliar silence of this vast city. Flights to and from Heathrow have dwindled to a few a day. Traffic noise has faded into insignificance apart from the occasional wail of an ambulance bringing a stark reminder of the times we are living through. The birds are singing in the full-throated exuberance of spring, and May shrubs flower in snowy abundance along the near-deserted paths beside the river. I sit on the bank and watch the water turn to gold in the setting sun, and I imagine that the earth is rejoicing in this brief respite from the wanton destructiveness of human activity. We may even find in the end that fewer people overall will die this year, because the air we breathe is cleaner than it has been for a very long time.

The World Health Organization estimates that about 7 million people die prematurely every year as a result of air pollution. Children living in polluted cities are likely to suffer damage to their lungs, stunted growth and impaired brain development. Even if we face several more months of coronavirus, the impact is unlikely to come anywhere near to these figures. The environmental crisis is a more deadly and stealthy pandemic than any disease, and yet it has created barely a ripple in terms of bringing about the kind changes we need to make.

There is growing evidence that the reduction in human activity of the last few weeks is dramatically reducing air pollution. The question is, what happens when this crisis is over? To ensure that this is

not just a brief respite in our headlong dive towards an annihilating catastrophe, we need to insist that our governments make radical changes in policy, economics and law. This will mean an end to the neoliberal globefest that has lined the pockets of the rich and pushed the poor to the margins of survival. It will mean embracing as part of our normal lives some of the extreme measures that we have proven we can live with during this pandemic – and we may find that we are happier for it.

I have recently been reading Catholic philosopher Josef Pieper's book, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, first published in 1952. It is a searing criticism of how the exaggerated work ethos of modernity induces a collective amnesia with regard to our capacity for contemplation, silence and the enjoyment of creation. Pieper calls his readers to rediscover the essence of our humanity in recognizing leisure as a form of worship, because it invites a letting go of all our preoccupations and anxieties and a reclamation of our capacity for wonder beyond the boredom and distractedness of modern life.

The word 'crisis' derives from the Greek '*krisis*,' but the biblical Greek has richer meanings than its English derivation. It refers to a time of judgment and decision-making, a time of separation and discrimination when we must choose between life and death, good and bad. We might associate it with the biblical concept of '*kairos*,' referring to a time out of time that constitutes a rare moment of opportunity and the potential for transformation. This time of *krisis* is a *kairos* moment. It may never be repeated. In all the dark mystery of suffering and death, coronavirus might yet prove to be the wakeup call that saved the planet. 'See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction.' (Deut. 30:15). This may be our very last opportunity to choose life and prosperity for future generations. I hope and pray that we choose well.

Tina Beattie is professor of Catholic Studies, University of Roehampton, London