

HOW SHOULD CHRISTIANS RESPOND TO COVID-19?

by David Holloway

Practical responses

According to one poll of Christian people during the lock down period, 48% have responded to Covid-19 by being more prayerful; 61% more neighbourly; 44% more fatigued; 38% more anxious; and 57% more thankful. And with regard to how they think about the disease many will be trusting in God not knowing what to think but can, with the Psalmist say,

“God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way,
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea.
though its waters roar and foam
though the mountains tremble at its swell.”

How you can begin to think about the pandemic

Some distinguish between “moral” and “natural” evil. Take, for example, the terrible tragedy in Lebanon on 4th August 2020, when 2,750 tonnes of ammonium nitrate exploded. Having been stored unsafely since 2013, it killed at least 137 people and injured about 5000 others. This seems to be a “moral evil”, because many are saying it was due to government negligence. That means human agency was a major contributing factor.

Similarly, the tragedy in New York on the 9th September 2001 was also a “moral evil”. That was when the twin towers of the World Trade Centre collapsed killing 2,606 people plus the 157 people on board the two Boeing 767 jet aircraft that Islamist Al-Qaeda terrorists were flying into the towers. Human agency, certainly, was clear in that event.

But what about more “natural” events such as diseases like Covid-19 and other diseases, and, then, environmental events like lightning strikes, floods and earthquakes? These are classed as “natural (not moral) evils”. So how should we respond to these evils? Answer: with care.

Being careful

Care has to be taken. For we know that certainly with regard to disease or health conditions you cannot say that all sickness is due to the sick person’s sin. Jesus made that clear in John 9 when he healed a man blind from birth. For he was asked, “who sinned?” And, verse 3,

“Jesus answered, ‘it was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.’”

Also, in the Old Testament we read that Job’s sickness was not due to his own sin, but to Satan! And the Apostle Paul wrote this about his illness:

“a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’” (2 Cor 12.7-9).

Luke 13.1-5

But Jesus’ teaching on suffering is found in Luke 13.1-5:

“There were some present at that very time who told him [*Jesus*] about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices [*a state-inflicted atrocity (so moral evil)*]. ²And he answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? ³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. ⁴Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell [*an accident (so natural evil)*] and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in

Jerusalem? ⁵ No, I tell you; *but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.*"

In one sense all diseases and disasters are a result sin. So the whole created order is "groaning" due to the rejection of God's word by our first parents (Rom 8.22) - thus there is a corporate as well as an individual dimension to sin. But note: Jesus does not say that these sufferers under Pilate or in the Siloam accident were sinless. Rather Jesus is telling *those with him* that *unless they repent they too will perish*. Jesus is clear: no one can assume that those who were killed were more sinful than those escaping such killings.

"The assumption seems to be," to quote Don Carson on Luke 13, "that all deserve to die. If some die under a barbarous governor, and others in a tragic accident, it is no more than they deserve. But that does not mean that others deserve any less. Rather, the implication is that it is only God's mercy that has kept them alive ... Jesus treats wars and natural disasters not as agenda items in a discussion of the mysterious ways of God, but as incentives to repentance. It is as if he [Jesus] is saying that God used disaster as a megaphone to call attention to *our* guilt ... to the imminence of his righteous judgment if he sees no repentance ... Jesus might have added (as he does elsewhere) that peace and tranquility, which we do not deserve, show us God's goodness and forbearance."

God's Judgement

The Old Testament is so clear. When people, particularly his own people, forsake the one true God, they suffer – in those days not least by military defeat and exile. And Jesus is teaching that such a principle has not been suspended with his coming. So, the response to God's "megaphone" is not to deny the reality of sin and judgment, nor to blame others, but to examine ourselves and ask where we have gone wrong

But can the modern world believe in such divine acts of "judgment"? I was in York for the General Synod on Monday morning 9th July 1984 when, in the early hours, the south transept of York Minster caught fire

causing millions of pounds worth of damage. This was three days after the then Archbishop of York had consecrated a man as Bishop of Durham who publicly denied the Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ and cast doubt on his Empty Tomb. The fire was caused by freak lightning. But was it *just* freak lightning? Because I had been involved in the protest about the consecration, a very senior churchman said to me, while waiting for breakfast, "it makes you think doesn't it?" Archbishop Michael Ramsey, once wrote:

"When men and nations turn away from God's laws and prefer the courses dictated by pride and selfishness to the courses dictated by conscience, calamitous results follow. God ... is present in judgement through catastrophes which follow human willfulness ... [But] as the judgment of God is accepted and felt, so in the same moment may his lovingkindness and mercy be found ... Let it however be remembered 'judgement begins at the house of God' (1 Peter 4.17). The Church shows the message of divine judgement to the world as she sees judgement upon herself and begins to mend her ways."

Covid-19

A controversial clergyman said, on American TV, the very evening of that fateful day, 9th September 2001, that the country's atheistic secularists, together with their resulting morality, had contributed to the murderous event at the World Trade Centre that day. I am sure that was very unwise without first self-examination.

So, we too should be careful but, nevertheless, treat Covid-19 as God's "megaphone" to us in the UK and examine ourselves. We too may see the social havoc godless progressive secularism is wreaking on our society in the UK and also around the world through globalization. But we should examine ourselves as individuals and Churches as to where we are failing so that such secularism is able to thrive.

And if nothing else, are we not failing to pray – not just for the sick and hospitals but for our society and for revival and for a positive end to the pandemic? And whatever happened to national days of prayer?