

19 March 2020

May God help us and be with us in our struggles

Vice-President of the Methodist Conference, Professor Clive Marsh, reflects on where God is during the coronavirus pandemic.

My hunch is that if someone were to do a check across the Internet of uses of the word 'virus' in recent years, a large number (the majority?) might have referred to computer viruses. Now we are struggling collectively, across the world, with a virus for real. Of course, there have been plenty of real viruses around before now. But of late they've largely been under control, at least in the West. The dominant theme in many of the faith-related comments I've seen about Covid-19, though, is striking: suddenly we realise we are most certainly not in control, 'we' being humanity as a whole. The fragility of life is emphasised, the limitations of knowledge become plain and human hubris is challenged.

We may quickly then want to remind ourselves that 'God is in control' in response. True though this will prove, the tricky thing is that it might imply that God somehow caused the virus. I suggest we don't waste any time with such apportioning of blame, or on some need to locate a cause. Yes, there will be scientific explanations for where the virus came from, and there are scientific endeavours happening as we speak to fight it, and we should be thankful for all that work. God is in the midst of those efforts. But as for handling and responding to the situation which the God-given freedom of the natural world has thrown up, Jesus' response to the blind man is decisive (John 9.3): don't ask about sin here, just concentrate on what happens in response to the situation we're in. Even if there may be a sense in which God is 'responsible for everything', don't press for detail, ask where God is being revealed **now**, as people cope, adjust, show compassion, help neighbours, find new ways of connecting, stop their busyness, support the weak, learn the value of rest.

The feeding of the 5000 (Mark 6.30-44, and other versions) is a story which works on so many levels, though connects directly with the calls from leaders of supermarket chains urging people 'just to take what they need, so that others can get what they need too'. The disciples' exasperation at how all could possibly be fed is being dealt with in the present. I wonder whether the repeated emphasis that 'there is enough food to go round' will keep on being repeated, on a global scale, after coronavirus has abated. And thinking of the petition in the Lord's Prayer to 'give us this day our daily bread' (Matt 6.11), the reminder to live simply so that others may simply live has never seemed more pressing.

The coronavirus is here to stay, as part of life, and will take its place alongside others which are already known and tamed. There will be other viruses yet to come. God's world remains wonderful and fragile, and God has entrusted so much to us, as human beings, to be involved in its care (Gen 1.26-27), not because of any particular merit, but just because this is how humans are to be understood (Ps 8.4-8). May God help us and be with us in our struggles.