

Lenten talk – 5th Week in Lent

Attempted moral and theological response to the coronavirus pandemic.

How do we make sense of the crisis, and whom do we blame? Trending on social media is the idea that humans are the true viruses that exploit nature. The evidence is that pollution is clearing.

Romans 8 – Apostle Paul writes that creation is longing like a woman with birth pains for the revelation of the sons and daughters of God. In the text is an indication of a moral hierarchy and value stratification.

The doctrine of original sin affirms this notion that humans are tainted. Calvin develops this concept further by referring to humans as living in a spiritual state of total depravity. Luther also says that the will is bent toward evil, making it impossible to choose God, unless He elects/predestines one for salvation. This, according to Luther, is the definition of grace where no works can afford you salvation.

Intentionality is important for determining criminality, yet unintentionally humans appear to be sinning. That could also be as a result of systemic ignorance, such as systems of production and industry. There is an obvious plea and attempted policies for humans to return to living in greater balance with nature. As humans migrate to urban centres, perhaps out of economic necessity, population density and pressure on nature may be causing the evolution and easy contraction of diseases.

The global impact is raising questions about eschatology and apocalyptic references. When the End is evoked, it seems at least from a pre-millennial eschatological perspective, that humans will cause its inevitable self-destruction and that of the environment in which they live.

What is God's role in this? Is he allowing this; it is punishment; is he controlling nature to convey a message to humanity? While humans have a propensity towards evil, the irony is that they are also very critical of themselves, and aware of their contributory roles in the destruction of the environment. There is though a fundamental desire for the preservation of the human species, therefore alternatives are constantly sought to ensure the continuation of humans; if not on earth somewhere else. The value placed on human life in many instances, especially in our moral legal system, supersedes that of nature and animals.

Is Covid-19 nature's way of self-correction? During other times in history, such as in the middle ages, the Black plague decimated the European population, while they were living in greater harmony with nature than the current earth generation. Was that simply bad luck?

Caution should therefore be applied to personify nature. If we should seek to do so though, we could speak of a metaphysical presence of evil operational in the world. N. T. Wright has a very good response to this.

Will human nature change after Covid-19? In the immediate aftermath probably, but long term humans may revert back to their typical characteristics. Saying that, humans are arguably more morally conscious than ever before in the course of history, thanks to global liberal democracies and developmental institutions.

Yet, currently global systems are very fragile – health care systems and economics systems are fragile. That may indicate the heightened and wrong sense of competition of our markets. But governments are taking the moral decision to sacrifice their economies for the sake of the vulnerable of society, while Covid-19 may actually only have an average mortality rate of less than 1%. Bearing in mind that large volumes of deaths may cause social disruption and perhaps even anarchic behaviour among the populace.

We need the Gospel. It contains within it all the right elements, that of concepts of new life, new ethics, and new creation. In the course of church history, humans have disproportionately elevated its value above nature, but in God's salvation plan, his intention has always been for the Edenic restoration and redemption of all creation. That is the balance that God is seeking, while honouring humans with his image.

In Jeremiah 31:31, God says that he wants to enter into a new covenant with his people. At the time of the prophecy, Israel and Judea had all their civil systems destroyed by the Babylonian invaders. Their economy, cultural and religious systems all crashed.

For us trying to equate this to our context and making sense of the drama of our salvific pilgrimage – God can save the worst of sinners. St Paul writes about this in his dense theological discourse on law vs. grace. It is dense for offer a new philosophical hermeneutic to the Judaic religious constructs. God is seemingly justified for allowing evil because of the institution/metaphysical reality of the law. The punitive measures are the natural consequences that humanity brings onto itself (read the letter to the Romans).

The law of sin and death is however undone by the gospel of grace. The Spirit of God frees us from the law and gives us new life in Christ Jesus. It is not without controversy, and it actually welcomes it as Wisdom calls out and says, "Come prove me wrong." The Gospel proclamation though coincides with persecution as evil seeks to flourish in ignorance.

At this time, we need to do three things: believe, live and proclaim the Gospel of grace through Jesus Christ, in order for an alternative lifestyle to emerge.