# The Church, the Coronavirus, and the Exile

A virus only a few nanometres across has taken thousands of precious lives, reduced the economy to dire recession and impacted personal freedom in a way that many have not seen before. This short article will look at the impact on church life. Christians are no longer allowed to gather in churches and normal sacramental life is suspended. Since church means the assembly of the people, and, for many, as Henri de Lubac put it, “the Eucharist makes the Church”, this is a major blow. It brings to mind the Babylonian exile. The people had based their worship around the presence of God in the temple, in the City of God. It was there that the scribes and the priests preached, and sacrifices were offered to reconcile the people with God. Then it was all taken away as the people were led off in chains. And yet the faith survived, adapted, and reinvented itself with the changes living on after the exile to enrich the people.

Firstly, they took a new interest in what God had been saying to them. They took the oral traditions and what writings they had and asked with a new urgency: what has the Lord been saying? They listened anew to Jeremiah and other rejected prophets as well as to new prophetic voices arising from amongst the people. Secondly, they invented the synagogue. This was no substitute for the temple but allowed the people to meet locally and more informally. There, a mere carpenter’s son could be invited to read the scriptures and even give the teaching. Thirdly, they invented Rabbis, who did not need to come from a priestly tribe or family but nevertheless had gifts of inspiring teaching.

These developments did not die out with the return from exile but became an integral and necessary part of the faith from which the infant church was born. Much of what we find in the Old Testament, whilst rooted in earlier traditions, was definitively penned in exile. The synagogue was from the start a key place from which the Way spread. Jesus started off a rabbi with disciples: a model his followers could easily relate to.

Today we need a new sense of the Word along with the new expressions of synagogue and rabbi. Now that we find ourselves exiled from the sacraments, necessity calls us to reinvent and rebalance our Christian lives. Vatican II stated that “it is not only through the sacraments and the ministrations of the Church that the Holy Spirit makes holy the People” (Lumen Gentium 12). It is time to get close to Scripture and to ask what God has been saying prophetically. In a nutshell, the prophetic words that I have heard coming from various churches, traditions and expressions, converge into a few key messages. Revival / renewal is coming. It will be big – a global grace in a time of global challenges - but will come in a special way out of England, we are told. God will do a new thing and He will do it suddenly. Now is a time for drawing close to Him with humility, repentance, and a listening ear. “Sanctify yourselves today, for tomorrow I will work wonders” (Josh 3:5). There will be surprises for everyone: the revival belongs to the Lord and is not the work of any church leader.

Now, as in the exile, the adoption of new ways is essential. Jesus’ call to “feed my sheep” is emphatic in its repetition, building up to what can almost be translated as “If you really love me at all, feed my sheep” (Jn :15-17). It is an overriding imperative: for the love of Jesus, do whatever it takes, but feed the sheep. The New Testament blossomed and spread thanks to the communication advances of the time: the Greek language and the Roman roads. Today, we cannot physically get to church but are just a click away from meeting via Zoom: the new synagogue. Information technology is the key enabler, but it was probably not much taught in seminary. Yet today a webcam is a vital part of ministry. The web, digital video, mobiles, tablets and laptops make ministry and mission so much easier than St Paul had it, even without modern transportation.

The virus also necessitates, and the technology enables, a new kind of leadership. Rabbis were not priests nor were they approved to minister in the temple. Today there are new opportunities for new leaders who are not ordained – just people with a closeness to Jesus and with the Holy Spirit’s call.

So where does this leave the established churches? "Therefore, every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old" (Mt 15:32). The old and the new must blossom together as we come out of lockdown. Television did not replace the cinema but complemented it, so the new ways will continue alongside the old, in a new balance. To be apostolic we must be apostle-like. The apostles were not bound by precedent but free to invent and create: making it up as they went along, living life in the Holy Spirit.

A prophetess was asked at the start of the year to paint what she felt the Lord was saying of the coming year. She produced a painting of Jesus’ head crowned with thorns. “Corona” comes from the Latin for crown. We have seen suffering, agony, and loss the like of which most of us have not seen before in our lives. Thousands have lost loved ones with little time or opportunity to grieve or to do love’s memory justice. A tiny virus has brought a suffering that humiliates the mighty human race. Like the crown of thorns, it is not sent by God but has been allowed by Him. But the crown of thorns is also his crown of victory. Our privilege is that we live out our lives in fellowship with Him in these extraordinary times. God has never deserted His people and will use this time to draw the world to himself, starting with us, if we can open ourselves to the graces of the day. “Renew your wonders in this our day, as by a new Pentecost” prayed good Pope John XXIII. God is working His purpose out for a people of renewed power, love, and hope.

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