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Learning from the pandemic

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ABSTRACT
This reflection on the church during the recent lockdown and pandemic begins and ends in the incarnaton and the actual presence among us of Jesus Christ. We are called to engage with the theological task of interpreting God's work in both the pandemic and in the healing ministry of the church. That is also a caring ministry which entails risk and an awareness of the basic human need for contact at the physical level. Such actual presence is also at the heart of the church's sacramental and worshipping life in baptism and eucharist as they take place within the sacred spaces of church buildings set in the midst of the community.

KEYWORDS
Incarnation; theology; healing; caring; risk; sacrament; sacred space

Introduction

The worldwide covid virus and the measures taken by governments to control it have presented challenges to the church on many fronts. In Scotland a great deal has been done practically to enable the church's life and worship to proceed in some way and we should be grateful for all those whose organisational and technological skills have enabled us, in some way, to maintain our life of prayer and worship in the Church. But the work of theological reflection has not so far kept pace with this (notwithstanding the excellent recent issue of the *SEI Journal* on this topic). This essay is only a beginning, intended to promote further thought and discussion. The Committee itself may well decide to develop its reflections further. Until the present, such theological discussion as there has been has focussed on the immediate demands of the emergency situation and how to make the best of it. But now, as we begin to emerge from the lockdown, there is a wider task ahead of us. There is need to reflect on what has been lost, to establish priorities for recovery, and to accept that lessons must be learned against any future emergency. A case in the High Court has already established grounds on which the regulation of worship in an emergency would need to be thought about differently. The church needs to be theologically well equipped to participate in wider discussions about future policy.

At the centre of our thoughts is an affirmation of the doctrine of the incarnation that lies at the very heart of the Christian faith, acknowledging the necessary presence of God in Christ in sacrament and the Christian community. John Henry Newman says of the church in such changing circumstances, that 'it changes with them in order to remain the same. In a higher

*All three authors are priests of the Scottish Episcopal Church.
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world it is otherwise, but here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.'[1] Society has changed in the practical nature of the demands made upon us since the Middle Ages, but the gospel and our response to it remains the same. Theological reflection has to address both the life of the church and its message. In the sections that follow we have taken the church's message about the emergency first – not because what the church says is essentially more important than how the church lives, but because it offers an understanding against which the church's life can be measured.

Interpreting God's work

At a moment of crisis people ask, 'what is God doing?' and 'what is God saying?' The very urgency of the need to make sense of what is happening can often result in the danger of our making *premature* sense, seizing on supposed connections between tragedy and moral desert that are too short in perspective and too limited in their understanding of God. But our capacity to find meaning in the experiences we undergo, and to reflect on the connections between them and the way we live, is not an illusion. It is God's gift to humankind that we should understand the divine meaning through the world and its events, a gift we may experience as we meditate on God's word and seek in prayer to discern the divine will for us. And while carefully deflecting inadequate answers, the church must not give the impression that the questions themselves are inappropriate or that they cannot be thought about fruitfully.

Jesus advised those who wondered what God had meant by the disaster at the tower of Siloam to see it as the reminder of a larger reality, God's consistent judgement upon human sin, as spoken of in every generation by prophets. 'Crisis' means 'judgment'. And the crisis we experience as sharply focused upon a particular moment should point us back to the real and continuing crisis of the human situation: that is, our indifference to God's meaning. If what God is saying through the pandemic is that we need seriously new approaches to our occupation of the physical world and our treatment of all our fellow-creatures, it is not the first time that God has said it. But it may be the first time that *we* – in our generation, at least – have had the occasion to hear it and take it seriously. If these events have a *particular* moral meaning, it is because they form a particular moral moment in our experience, an occasion for self-awareness in which we may wake up as a human race to what is wrong with what we are and how we behave.

If we can learn to hear the voice of God's judgement in these events, we shall learn to hear it also as a call to renewed life, summoning us to live more effectively. These two aspects of God's word always go together. It is another reason why the questions 'What is God doing?' and 'What is God saying?' should not be quickly dismissed or ignored, for they open the way to discovering God's promise of hope. Dismissing the question of his disciples about who was to blame for a beggar's congenital blindness, Jesus replied that it was 'that the works of God might be displayed in him'. The moment of our need, which is, we must remember, moral as well as physical, is the moment of God's readiness to act on our behalf in physical as well as moral ways.

[1]Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 100.

Talk of what God is doing may sometimes seem out of place in relation to events that may be explained by the immanent regularities of biological and indeed sociological laws. But the two levels of explanation are not mutually exclusive. This the church must never forget. Just as the physiological laws that govern the operations of the human nervous system do not make any less real the fact of responsible human decision and action, so natural laws governing a large-scale biological event do not make divine action any less real. Believers hold that God is in control of these events. God governs the world through the immanent rational patterns and laws (of many kinds and operating at many levels) on which it has been constructed, and these include the laws that determine the conditions of human life and death. It is on this natural foundation that God governs the world – not as a closed system of inexorable quasi-mechanical necessity, but as a sphere of personal engagement and responsibility. By actively engaging with his creatures, God liberates us to engage effectively with him and with one another.

Effective engagement implies, of course, the proper recognition of the natural conditions on which God has made the world to live. It is not wrong to say that the pandemic should force us to be more realistic about our mortality, which is, after all, a necessary condition for the balance of the ecosystem. To die of Covid-19 is to die one and the same death which it has been inevitable from the day of our birth that we would die at some point and by some means. If death from Covid comes to us sooner (though usually not that much sooner) than we might have expected, it is only sensible to remember that our expectation has been massively inflated by technological advances of the last generation. These observations have their place; they help us to bring a sense of proportion to bear on what is happening around us, and a sense of proportion is very necessary in confronting death. It is absolutely fitting that the church should say them with a proper and honest sense of their reality. Yet its theology does not stop there and they can only be a preliminary to saying something further.

God has placed 'eternity' in our hearts, an interest 'in excess of the world', an abundant concern for life that refuses to be limited or extinguished by death. The inexhaustible and insuppressible desire to live, and to live effectively, though it may seem a simple absurdity within the immanent regularities of the biological system, is a sign and a promise of God's intention to make the world new. Our instinctive concern for our own lives and for the lives of those nearly or distantly connected with us, a concern extended by the virtue of charity to embrace all fellow-humans in peril of death, is a concern that is authorised by the ultimate purposes of God. The struggle to 'defeat' the pandemic should not be written off as a struggle simply to postpone the inevitable or overcome the inexorable laws of biological life. It is a response to a greater hope that God has placed within us. Jesus' work of healing as recorded in the gospels, the raising of Lazarus, the resurrection of Jesus himself, are not merely illustrative metaphors for something quite different. They are 'signs' that promise a reality of life beyond the terms with which we are familiar and according to which death must always has the last word. The healer, not the undertaker, is the privileged ambassador of God's message of hope. This task the church must never abandon, ever seeking new ways of expressing it.

The Gospel proclaims the Incarnate Son of God as the Risen One. In the Incarnation God has drawn near and participated in our griefs and our anxieties, our sense of loss and our sense of danger, and hallowed such experiences as ways in which we may and must wait upon his unfolding purposes. He has 'borne our griefs and carried our sorrows'. But

God has not done so merely to demonstrate sympathy. It is far greater than that. God in Christ has borne them in order to bear them away. The Incarnation is not simply the humiliation or emptying of God; it is also the exaltation of mankind, and therefore an announcement of his sovereign power. He became like us in order that we might become like him. And that is how in tragic experiences of death we are given faith to claim the promise of Christ's resurrection for our mortal human nature.

The Gospel proclaims the Spirit as the Lord and giver of life. The life that is offered to us is life lived 'in' the Spirit of God, life lived more effectively than we are used to living it. That, too, must be the churches message and teaching. That is the real connexion between the meaning of calamitous events and the responsibility to live well. So far as is generally known, it is not the case that the Covid-19 virus arose from any form of human wickedness or irresponsibility. Some people have felt the need to insist that it must have done, which is one instance of being tempted to make 'premature sense' and attribute blame. Yet there is a grain of truth to be recovered from that mistake. The chaotic confusion to which the virus has reduced societies throughout the world is part and parcel of a social chaos in which we find our human race, and ourselves as individuals, deeply complicit. Abuse of the resources of the world, abuse of our own biological nature, indifference to our spiritual vocation to discover and tell one another the truth – these are mirrored in the social confusion that prevails around us. In claiming God's promise of life we may not simply wish to go on living as we have lived. We can only claim the divine power to *live differently*, wherever change in our ambitions and practices are clearly required of us. In conceiving of the promise of life, we learn what it means to repent. In short, we should be careful of expressing a hope that things will eventually go back to 'normal'. Rather, it is to be hoped that we shall have learnt to 'live differently', and have listened to what God is teaching us.

Anxiety and distress are experiences in which the present time weighs heavily upon us and passes slowly. The immediate response to a time of distress must be one of patience, of 'continuing' in whatever humble ways of doing well are open to us. But to find the resources for patience, we need a horizon of hope in the future, and such a horizon cannot be discerned without a promise that keeps the future as a reality before our eyes: and we find that 'hope' is not always easy to grasp in its fulness. 'Back to normal!' is not a sufficient horizon, even if it were possible, which it is not. The promise we need is life 'more abundant', life transformed and given new effectiveness in community with God and with his people.

The caring church

But for the daily life of the church to be enriched and given new effectiveness, some things that have been lost need to be recovered. This, perhaps, is especially evident in the spheres of pastoral care and worship. Clergy and all who are concerned for the pastoral ministry of the church have felt frustrations that direct contact with people within their care has been rendered difficult, at times almost impossible, and these frustrations have been especially grievous in the case of the sick and the dying. There will be few clergy who have not felt the pain of not being with a fellow Christian in the event of death. These

frustrations may amount to a sense of guilt, that the ministry of the church has failed those in greatest need. As we begin to emerge from the initial shock of lockdown, it is now time to reflect on how we might channel these frustrations for future good.

A reflection on the church in past ages may provide an interesting comparison. Writing only months before the pandemic broke upon the world, Timothy Radcliffe recalls how the Christian church responded when, in 260AD, a terrible plague raged in North Africa, killing a third of the population there. He cites the testimony of Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria at the time, concerning the characteristic action of Christians in his diocese, many of whom, 'heedless of danger, . . . took charge of the sick attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, . . . drawing upon themselves the sickness of their neighbours' and dying alongside them or in their stead.[2] Dionysius contrasts such behaviour starkly with that of the wider public, many of whom, at the first sign of the disease, pushed its victims aside (even members of their own families) and left them to die alone or in colonies of disease, leaving corpses without proper burial, in order to protect themselves from infection. Other instances of a similar sort might be called to mind, such as the continuation of home visits by priests to grant the dying solace and access to the sacraments during the Black Death of 1347, a policy resulting in mortality rates among clergy significantly higher than those in the population at large.[3] It is apparent from contemporary accounts that in neither circumstance was such action undertaken naively or unaware of the risks involved; rather, Christians eschewed the opportunity to protect themselves, choosing instead to be present with the dying while 'knowing that they faced an unseen enemy that very likely would kill them shortly'.[4] In other words, they deliberately risked their own lives 'to give hope and comfort for those to those in pain and fear'.[5]

The churches' response to Covid-19 has been so different from this that such accounts make for uncomfortable reading. Caught on the back foot by the emergency, the church has had to function in a public environment in which the importance of personal contact and pastoral care has been largely ignored. The churches, for their part, have mostly complied obediently with government instructions to 'stay home, stay safe'. Questions must certainly be asked about the authenticity or sufficiency of an ordained 'priesthood' that not only obediently withdraws its immediate presence and closes the church doors but does not then involve itself (suitably protected like doctors and social workers) in going out to people to be with them as an 'incarnational' presence where they are. The assumption can only be drawn that such 'presence' is not necessary, at least as that is understood when it comes to ambulance crews or care workers. Those Christians who, in earlier generations, risked their lives in order to tend the sick and the dying did so because they took this to be the most authentic expression of 'godliness', or, as we might say nowadays, the distinctive 'identity' of disciples called and set apart to follow a Master who himself touched lepers and embraced the ritually unclean. Now is the time when the damage done to the ministry of pastoral care must be acknowledged and discussed with a thought for the future.

[2]Dionysius of Alexandria, Festal Letter, Easter 260AD, cited in Radcliffe, *Alive in God*, 63–64.
[3]Kelly, *The Great Mortality: An Intimate History of the Black Death*, 224, estimates 42-45% for clergy, whereas 30% is generally accepted for the general population.
[4]Cybulskie, 'Priests and the Black Death'.
[5]Ibid.

To begin with the church must represent this issue forcibly to government, in the context of a growing awareness of the damage done to mental and spiritual well-being by the conditions of lockdown. Then careful thought must be given to a responsible pastoral strategy in any future similar situation. How can we responsibly sustain our pastoral care alongside other front-line workers in a situation that has shown us the terrible consequences of long-term isolation? How does the church begin to transform a society that has become overwhelmed by fear, into a society of hope? Is not the spiritual and mental well-being of people as necessary as their physical well-being, so that clergy and pastoral care workers are perceived as every bit as essential as medical doctors and carers?

Of course, there are questions of prudence to be taken into consideration. Martyrs were rightly venerated in Dionysius's day; but this was offset by an insistence that death should not be deliberately sought. As a precious gift from God, life should never be squandered recklessly, even though, in the course of following Christ, it might have to be offered back 'cheerfully' to the giver sooner rather than later. Protection of one's life is reasonable enough, unless and until it compromises the performance of those Christ-like acts that speak of the kingdom's dawning presence in the world, and of a God who has himself 'healed our diseases' by touching us, 'bearing our infirmities', making his own life vulnerable to suffering and death in order to love us and hold us through dying and death, without letting us go.

'Risk' is a word that we hear often at the moment, but we should not forget that being a Christian has always been a risky business, and perhaps inevitably so. Our theology ought, we dare say, to have taught us a few things about the nature of risk – to ourselves and indeed in general. Life is a complex and fragile thing in which 'things visible and invisible' are both to be reckoned with, and concern with risk cannot (even in the case of a biological virus) be reduced to the level of our bodily health alone. Apart from physical risks here are also risks, – arguably far more significant ones in terms of long term personal and social well-being – at the level of those realities which theology has typically spoken of in terms of 'soul' (*psyche*), 'spirit', and 'personhood'. There is more than one way in which human persons can be 'infected', suffer and die in a circumstance of plague or in its wake, and it is only in our own publicly materialist culture that offering appropriate comfort and care to the dying has come to be supposed to consist in largely impersonal medical procedures designed to prolong biological life.

Yet the body is not immaterial. If we are more than our bodies alone, we are nonetheless one with them, and it is in bodily presence that the life of persons finds its fullest expression and meaning. Christian affirmation of the 'enfleshing' of the Word and professed hope in 'the resurrection of the body' both contradict any reduction of our bodies to the level of temporary housing for an essentially 'spiritual' or virtual self, insisting instead that it is precisely in our embodiment that we are the object of God's creative and redeeming action. Our bodies embed our humanity in the material cosmos and enable us to extend ourselves into that world both physically and socially. Bodies are vital to the maintenance of the bonds of personal community in and for which we were created. To be robbed of all bodily contact is, therefore, arguably more threatening to our sense of our shared humanity (the very humanity that God assumed and made his own in Christ) than other forms of deprivation. One of the more distressing aspects of the pandemic has been the way the vulnerable and the sick have been isolated from ordinary human contact, and the dying often compelled to die in circumstances where, for fear of

infection, not just the physical presence of loved ones but even the ordinary touch of human hands has been denied them. Physical distancing, and the prophylactic gauntlet and face mask of PPE may reduce the risk of bodily infection, but such measures may also actively starve us of much that is vital for the health of body, mind and soul as a whole. In keeping away we reduce one sort of risk only by recklessly exposing ourselves and our communities to another far more frightening one – a pandemic of mental, emotional and spiritual sickness on an unprecedented scale. Arguably, too, in the moment of their deaths we withhold from the dying the very comfort that matters most: not just the passive acknowledgement but the active affirmation of their humanity.

The church at worship

Already a great deal has been written concerning the worship of the church, and in particular the matter of the sacraments during a time when a great deal of worship has been via digital and electronic means. Excellent discussions relating to on-line worship, and the celebration of Holy Communion in particular, are to be found in the essays by John Davies and Merete Thomassen in the issue of the *SEI Journal* for Summer, 2020. Our remarks here pick up, in the first instance, from Dr. Thomassen's comments on 'physical presence and materiality' (pp. 94–96).

We 'gather together' while yet remaining physically in the isolation of our own rooms and homes. We thus seem to 'celebrate' the Eucharist while we should remember that the Latin verb *celebrare* means to gather together in one place in numbers.[6] One cannot 'celebrate' in the singular or in isolation, even as that lonely condition is somewhat dulled by a pixillated image on a computer screen. In the many voices speaking to us in this pandemic, the voice of God above all must be given our fullest and most devout attention. We may recall the familiar and much-loved Prayer of St. Chrysostom from the daily office in the Book of Common Prayer: 'Almighty God, who hast given us grace at this time with one accord to make our common supplications unto thee; and dost promise, that when two or three are gathered together in thy Name thou wilt grant their requests . . ..'

The Prayer Book Catechism offers the familiar definition of a sacrament as 'an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.' A more secular source suggests that the sacrament (as symbol), 'while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that Unity, of which it is the representative.'[7] In short, the sacrament is a material presence, bound up with bodily action, a living part of a greater whole, participated in by all those who come together to 'celebrate'. Furthermore, at the heart of the sacramental presence is the theological trope of the 'body', St. Paul using the image of the human body of flesh and blood to describe the whole community of Christians as the body of Christ (I Corinthians 12: 12–27; Romans 12: 5), its physicality a necessary model for the life of the church.

[6]Paul Bradshaw, 'Celebration', in Jasper, *The Eucharist Today*, 130-41.
[7]Coleridge, *The Statesman's Manual*.

The great Prayer of Thanksgiving that begins with the *Sursum Corda* is an affirmation that the 'true Eucharist can only be celebrated where the Spirit of God is *present*.'[8] Thus the spiritual presence is precisely that, a *presence* in the drawing together of heaven and earth. Such a presence cannot be replicated in the *virtuality* of the internet. It is *actual*. Throughout the Prayer of Thanksgiving the physical presence of those who participate is affirmed, linking the gathered community (though it be only of two or three people) on earth with the heavenly company of angels and archangels in the singing of the *Sanctus* and *Benedictus*, in the corporate obedience to Christ's demand in the anamnesis and oblation, and in the call for the Holy Spirit upon us and upon the elements of bread and wine in the epiclesis.[9] None of this can be possible in a 'virtual reality' as it demands the material presence of the gathered congregation which, in the words of John Davies, 'is the celebrant, on whose behalf the presiding priest, representing the universal Church, speaks and performs the appointed manual acts.'[10]

God is present without being present in a body; angels and archangels are present with us in the hymn of praise without being present in bodies. Nevertheless, we are physical beings, and can only be fully present to one another when we are present in the body. When the risen Jesus shared a meal with his disciples, it tells us nothing about the nature of his risen body, but everything about the communicative needs of the disciples' bodies. They could not meet as risen otherwise. We cannot imagine one another except as bodies, more than any mere images. The image on the screen is, in the end, only a semi-presence lacking in spatial location. Without such location, the sign and symbol of the sacraments, given precisely in order to meet the needs of our physical nature, are especially maimed. We have, in effect, reverted by default to a non-communicating attendance at the eucharist, that which previous generations struggled so hard to free the church from.

In the nineteenth century the Anglican theologians of the Oxford Movement (so significant for the Scottish Episcopal Church) wrote of the 'sacramental principle' which 'implies that God performs His works through the *instrumentality* of men [sic] and of material things which He makes the channels of grace in the economy of salvation.'[11] In the Eucharist this requires the *presence* of a gathered congregation who together participate in the communion of the bread and wine. It is essentially the simplest of principles. At supper with his disciples, on the night that he was betrayed, Jesus took bread, offered thanks, broke and gave – shared – the bread and wine with his disciples. When we share a domestic meal at home with our family or friends, we do so together in one room, sharing a single meal. To eat and watch another eating a different meal on the screen of my computer is not at all to share the same meal together, sharing its aroma and ambience as well as its substance. So, it is also with the Eucharist. In the same way, a child is baptised in the midst of the congregation with water that has been blessed in the presence of all – a physical act that is enveloped in the love of the people of God there physically gathered. And for a great festival we may make considerable effort in travelling great distances – simply to be present with our friends and family. The being present is, finally, essential, just as celebration and consecration cannot take place with the priest at a distance.

[8]Jasper and Bradshaw, 214, quoting W C van Unnik. (Emphasis added.)
[9]See Scottish Episcopal Church 1982 Liturgy.
[10]Davies, 'Eucharist, Church, and Judgment,' 74. See also, ARCIC, *Agreed Statement on Ministry and Ordination*, §13.
[11]Härdelin, *The Tractarian Understanding of the Eucharist*, 60.

Nor should we neglect the importance of spaces for the sacred in human life – the sites and buildings that hold within their walls not only the prayers of generations, but the memories of baptisms, weddings and funerals that have marked the history of a community and its spirituality. Once the doors of such sacred spaces are locked shut there is a terrible lack at the very heart of our humanity. Many of our church buildings in the Scottish Episcopal Church date from the middle years of the nineteenth century, reflecting a form of architecture that William Whyte has said 'placed a new premium on the church building itself – and on the need to get people to engage with it, to come into it, to understand it, and to be moved by it.'[12] Church buildings that are closed like cinemas or theatres send a strong signal to a society desperate for solace.

Certainly, the church has much to learn and benefit from the possibilities of technology inasmuch as its wonders can do a great deal to bridge the gap that consigns us to loneliness and solitariness. At the same time the Christian faith celebrates the Saviour who came, taking our flesh upon him, with all the costs that that implies, and who dwelt among us, subjecting himself to all the inevitable joys and pains of earthly being. To believe anything less than this is Docetism, following a Christ who is only seemingly one with us in our humanity. For the church to reduce the sacramental presence to a 'virtual' simulacrum of the material community renders the sacrament a simulation in the 'desert of the real itself.'[13]

If we imagine that there is sacramental presence somehow realised in the virtuality of the internet, we are in grave danger of denying the reality and necessary substance of the very being that the Saviour took upon himself and in doing so, came to us for our salvation.

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The intention of these remarks is not to criticise anything that has been done to meet the emergency so much as to stir our thinking as a church about our priorities in its wake and in anticipation of any possible recurrence. The pandemic caught us suddenly, coming like a thief in the night, and we were not sufficiently prepared. But this is by no means the first pandemic that has struck humankind, and it is certainly not going to be the last. Such times stretch our theology, that can often become too comfortable and even trite. There is a great deal more to be said than we have raised in this brief paper: the question of sacrifice, the relationship we have with other faith traditions who are facing many of the same difficulties, much more to be said on the theology of hope. Nor should we forget that during this period of isolation the sacrament of baptism has vanished. Now, more than ever, is a time for theological thinking to guide us in our pastoral and communal life together in the church.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

[12]Whyte, *Unlocking the Church*, 96.
[13]Baudrillard, 'Simulacra and Simulations,' in *Selected Writings*, 166-84, 166.

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