

The Rev'd Professor Trevor Hart, St Andrew's, St Andrews, reflects on our Christian calling in the Covid Pandemic

I've been reading a book by Timothy Radcliffe entitled *Alive in God: A Christian Imagination*. And it has raised some troubling questions for me about Christian response to the pandemic. But in one chapter he cites the third century Bishop of Alexandria, Dionysius, writing in the midst of a terrible plague in North Africa in 260AD which killed a third of the population there. In an Easter letter Dionysius writes as follows:

Most of our fellow Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbours and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead. The best of our brothers and sisters lost their lives in this manner, a number of priests, deacons and laymen and women winning high commendation so that death in this form, the result of great piety and strong faith, seems in every way the equal of martyrdom.

Dionysius, Radcliffe notes, contrasted such behaviour 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.

It's hard to read stuff like this in the current climate. Despite the very real differences between our situation and that described by Dionysius, there are just too many resonances. If parallels are sought, then it is not, in our case, Christians who are known and lauded for their willing self-exposure to risk, but NHS staff and many other (easily forgotten) 'frontline workers' who are doing so daily, because the demands of their work and their sense of duty respectively compel them to.

Why should the parallel be drawn at all, you may ask? And why should Christians even reckon with the possibility (unless, of course, they are already frontline workers) of making themselves available to be put at risk? What good would that do? What use could it possibly serve? That's a comforting set of questions to ask, perhaps, for those of us doing as we are told by our political leaders and remaining for the most part behind closed doors. But what is troubling me is the growing suspicion that there are some perfectly good answers to them; answers that ought at least to be reckoned with rather than conveniently swept aside in a rush to social conformism.

Dionysius refers to his fellow-Christians' bravery as 'the result of great piety and strong faith', and it is hugely significant, of course, that he writes his account of their behaviour precisely in an *Easter* letter to his diocese – Easter, the same season in which we find ourselves today. What, then, was the substance of this 'strong faith' and the driver for their 'piety'? Not, I think, the wrong-headed (and finally selfish) lack of respect for life that thinks it can and will 'earn heaven' by stepping up and volunteering for an early exit strategy. But rather two convictions in particular: First, the conviction that, in the resurrection of Jesus

from death, God has shown and promised us that death is, however unwelcome and unpleasant, nonetheless not something to be *afraid of*, for it has no final hold on us. And, second, the conviction that in Jesus God defines 'godliness' ('piety') for us not in terms of cold showers and clean thoughts, but in the willingness to face even suffering and death in order to extend God's love to others by meeting their needs.

You can probably see where this is heading, and I don't like it any more than you do. And you can rest assured that I'm not headed towards any firm conclusion—just sharing an uncomfortable question or two for those of us profess an Easter faith. Because I suspect that there *are* things that those who, while being frightened of suffering and dying (who isn't?), refuse finally to be *afraid of death*, and who are called to place the lives and well-being of others (especially the most vulnerable and disadvantaged) before any attempts to secure our own, might in fact be able to do, and to do without being socially irresponsible.

There have already been calls for volunteers to assist with various public tasks, and so provide vital support for key workers. As the unpicking of lock-down gradually begins there are likely to be many more such opportunities as lots of people, we are already being told, are fearful of venturing out until they can know that they are 'secure from the risk of infection and death'. Christians, it seems to me, cannot in good faith demand that security for themselves, and might be in an ideal position to respond to such calls, no matter what is involved. Of course, lots of others are likely to respond too. My point is simply that Christians have no excuse not to.

But let me be more radical still! One of the more distressing aspects of the pandemic so far has been the way 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 presence of loved ones but even the ordinary touch of human hands has been denied them. Of course they are cared for with skill and compassion. But the sterile environment of barrier nursing cannot help robbing them of the sort of contact which matters so much to our basic sense of humanity. In Jesus' day, too, sickness tended to result in the isolation of its victims from ordinary social contexts and ways of behaving. That's why, when Jesus *touched* lepers in healing them he not only breached all manner of social and religious regulations, but gave them back their humanity in the process – refusing to leave them treated as though they were 'untouchables' and less than fully human.

Touch, being held, matters to us as human beings from birth all the way to death. And no one, if possible, should die with the indignity of being refused the touch of another human hand the opportunity to be held in their moment of dying. That Covid-19 victims are not currently permitted that comfort is of course, a sensible strategy to avoid the needless infection of doctors, nurses and other NHS staff.

But what if there were people who, without placing undue strain on our health services, were willing to make themselves available simply to sit with the dying, doing nothing for them other than extending that last unprotected human presence and contact – a gauntlet-less hand and an unmasked face? People able to do this because, although they, too, longed to carry on living, they had no good reason to fear death, and so no good excuse for not offering. People *summoned* to do so, in fact, by a God who has himself 'healed our diseases'

not by remote *fiat* or from behind a sanitary prophylactic barrier, but 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. Loving us all the way into that new creation where neither suffering nor death will have any place. What if there were a people like that?