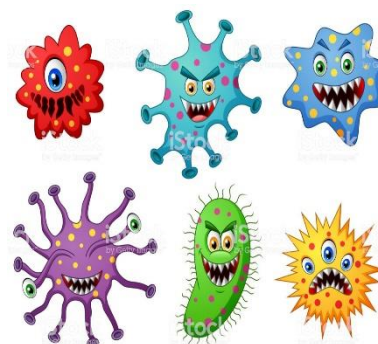


# The Corona Chronicles

Reviewing the Church through a time of crisis

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These reflections come about after being approached by an interesting range of people asking me to provide some thoughts for our fellow disciples of Christ to ponder through what is shaping up to be a time of challenge, threat and possibility. How odd it seems to have our churches closed, especially when we think back to previous worldwide pandemics, disasters, wars and crises. During those times of great human need, the Christians were known for being out among the people, burying the dead, comforting the dying and holding the world together for the time beyond the catastrophes. Now, for some unfathomable reason, we now find so many of church doors closed, unwelcoming to those who may well be in need of spiritual solace. It is opportune to be able to ask ourselves about the place God has in the present situation and how this may challenge us to rethink prayerfully the place of the Church in the world.

For some it may appear to be an obvious thing to say, but it is in moments such as these, we are forced to go back to the “basics” – the basics of our faith and the basics for the Church. *Question: For what, to what are we being called by God?*

## **Spirituality is growing but Church affiliation is slumping**

Has anyone seen the YouTube video – *Why I Hate Religion but love Jesus!-?...<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1IAhDGYlpqY>*. It has more than fifty million views and has spawned an equally impressive number of followers around the world who are able to articulate, along With *Jefferson Bethke* (the author), a major difference between the way we in the Church understand ourselves, and the onlooking world experience us. Many of my own friends would agree with Jefferson: *I hate religion but love Jesus.*

It is the kind of assessment that could so easily sent us into a spiral of disappointment and confusion. It is equally tempting to see the problem as being one thriving in the world around us. We live in a world where the secular reigns, individualism is a way of life and Christians struggle to connect with a sceptical and unbelieving humanity.

Therein we find one of our great weaknesses – looking out instead of looking in. It should not be about what is wrong with the world that we cannot connect and communicate the Gospel to them, but what is it in our way of living the faith that makes it next to impossible to speak of Jesus, salvation and the faith community. Perhaps the first question should be: *are there things we could be doing in a different manner that would better enable us to feed a spiritually hungry world?*

There are many great lines in Jefferson Bethke's rap but one series that sticks out and is often quoted are these lines:

*But now that I know Jesus, I boast in my weakness  
If grace is water, then the church should be an ocean,  
Cuz it's not a museum for good people  
It's a hospital for the broken*

**Pope Francis** used equally memorable phrases as he spoke about the Church in the world today. He spoke of it as being *a field hospital after battle*. He used this language as he spoke of the greatest ministry of the Church being that of healing the wounds of humanity, warming the hearts of the faithful. A doctor tending to those suffering serious and life-threatening injuries after a fire would be a fool if the first thing he did was check the warrior's cholesterol levels. It is not that those levels are not important in overall health. Rather, what is needed is a healing of the open and painful wounds.

The challenge is clear: as faith communities we need to be healers of wounds and be presenting the world with the fundamentals of the Kingdom of God instead of worrying about some of the petty and smallminded rules that seem to make it harder for sinners to find the living Lord in Church gatherings. Here is a measure for our words and our actions: are we reassuring and offering healing to the world through the basic message of the Scriptures: *Jesus Christ has saved you*

### **There are many saints outside of the Church**

We all know many people, friends and workmates who do not go to Church, who maybe great critics of the Church we love. But they are good, hardworking, moral and socially engaged men and women. Not going to Church does not mean they are sinners destined for an eternity of suffering. Many of those were at one time in the past, loyal and faithful members of church communities. They are not working against God and still have a sense of God in their lives. They are, in the words of Jefferson – *spiritual people and not religious people*.

*Healing wounds is  
the first step in  
evangelisation*

It is always difficult for those who have an intimate and invigorating relationship with Jesus Christ to understand this separation. We like to believe we are spiritual and religious. We see involvement in the Church a great source of strength, grace and hope. We find the laws and expectations reassuring and benefit from following the laws of God. Some of us may have even sought alternative ways of finding meaning and purpose in life only to return to Christ disappointed and sure how there is no better hope for humanity than the hope that springs from Christ.

We need to restore the world's trust in organised religion, a religion debased and degraded by a priority given to preaching and teaching and law over compassion, mercy and love.

Religion is just one part of our identity as Christians and it is not experienced as a weighty obligation. But therein is one of our difficulties: how do we help others to find in Christian beliefs, teachings, practices and laws, the abundance of the blessings we have experienced? Pope Francis again: *by becoming ministers of mercy above all else.*

### **Believing as the source of evangelism**

That English word “belief” is problematic. We believe or do not believe in a variety of things: I believe in ghosts. I do not believe in fairies. I believe this, or that. However, what we say in the Creed is a very different reality.

The Latin *credo* can mean to *believe in* but also *trust in*. It is made up of two separate words – *heart* and *do* as in *put or place*. Thus, when we say *Credo – I believe*, what we are confessing is how ***our hearts are placed in God***. This is important because it is not first of all a profession a set of beliefs or truths. The proclamation begins with us committing to live our lives with *our hearts set in God*. The remainder of the Creed teases out what follows on from having our hearts located in the life of God. We are pledging to live our each and every day with God as our source of life. We are defining ourselves in terms of God and therefore view the world from the throne of God.

### **Evangelism: what is it?**

Evangelism demands that we enter into the experiences of another person. It means walking alongside of them into whatever it is the future holds for them. It is always ministry of the service of people in their greatest needs and deepest aspirations. Evangelisation is less about imparting knowledge and teaching dogmas and more about being interested in others and caring for them in the world in which they struggle.

We can trace this understanding back to Jesus himself. He had spoken of his own ministry in a threefold way: *Jesus went around to all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom and curing every disease and illness (Matthew 9:35)*. In other words – He healed, he proclaimed, and he taught.

This line is of great importance because it spells out the way Jesus responds to the local circumstances and realities. The message he preaches in the Galilean outback is not the same as the one he presents in the Synagogue. To those worshipping on the Sabbath in the religious institutions he urged them to grow in their spiritual lives and not just observe the Law. Those in the countryside (the crowds) were urged to take to heart his announcement about the arrival of the Kingdom of God. He did these things in words as well as by the way he lived among them.

Jesus responds to the <u>needs</u> before him and ministers according to those needs
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Permeating all of his teaching, preaching and daily living was the a very simple message of the infinite love God has for them. It was a love calling out for a response.

## Step one: The healing of wounds

Evangelisation begins with an appreciation of the woundedness of others, the pain they carry in their hearts, pain that needs to be brought before the Divine Healer who was himself wounded for our sakes. This is not going to be as easy as we think because the bestowing of mercy requires that we look beyond our own desires for protection and fears of losing what we have. We see this in the methods employed by Jesus when he called his first disciples.

Before someone can truly believe, they must first experience a transformation of heart and mind. With that transformation comes the recognition that we are loved by God and will do everything we can to love God back. The doctrines and teachings help us to love God, but they only make sense when built upon that firm foundation of love.

When he first met them, they were fishermen who were struggling to fill their nets. They had fished all night but had come ashore with empty nets.

Jesus appeared and told them to cast their nets back out into what they had thought were empty waters.

Their nets were filled to bursting with many fish.

**Note:** Jesus did not begin by offering them a teaching session. He met them in their pain, and it was this encounter with Jesus that led them to

leaving all and following after him without hearing a single teaching.

The woman at the well in Samaria was similar. Jesus spoke to her most painful source of guilt, shame and sin and confronted these head on. What she found in Jesus was not judgment but loving mercy. Her conversion was born out of that healing encounter.

### For reflection:

- The healing Jesus provided through his ministry, and the Church in imitation of Christ herself provides, is not some kind of medicine that takes away all pain. In some cases the pain never goes away. What we do is lead others to the source of our own personal healing and strength – the Lord Jesus Christ. It is through compassion we offer a healing touch, a merciful presence to those who are hurting. We become the wounded healers (*Jared Dees*).
- ...it is not that we do not care about the poor. It's that we Christians do not know the poor...*Shane Claiborne*.
- When God chose to enter the world, it was not in some ethereal generic manner but in a particular family, in a particular town, in a particular country with particular soci-religious practices. Just as Christ *became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood (John 1:14 – the Message)*. So also, the people who comprise the local church in the parish are meant to be tangible expressions of God's love in the everyday reality of life (*Paul Sparks*)