

Who would have thought that something so small it is invisible to the naked eye, could cause so much death and illness, and such a life-style change in the human population? Corona virus, more powerful than the many different ways humans have devised to kill each other over the centuries. I have heard people calling the virus, nature fighting back, but I do not think we can avoid the human actions that have caused the virus to spread so very fast. Food practices at wild meat markets seem to have been the epicentre for the virus. However, without the travel we enjoy so easily, it would have stayed in Wuhan, a local devastation. Over a period of time the virus might have spread to the rest of China. It would never have spread across the world in a few months without airplanes, holidays that mix us together, like skiing, business travel and the very human capacity to deny reality.

Even in a culture that is used to obeying the state it took a lockdown with surveillance to bring the virus under control. We are social creatures, used to meeting people when we wish, gathering in coffee bars and pubs for some pleasant social interaction. Where I live Cannock Chase is a beauty spot, so the first weekend of our distancing and lockdown, the children's play area near a closed restaurant was full of families, meeting and chatting and having picnics. The Chase is twenty miles long so plenty of room for everyone to spread out, but there and elsewhere, people gathered outside. The reality we now need to live with just hadn't sunk in.

We are grieving, in our different ways, the freedoms and life we have lost. All the emotions that go with grief are around. The fear, the anger, the bright positivity that everything is fine, and the sadness. For me the aching sadness of not hugging family, of not being free to go where I choose, and the fear that someone I love will die of the virus have been the hardest to bare. All I know of grief from my work in ministry and my own experience, mean that I know it is better to engage with it than avoid it; to own it and give grief some space, rather than ignore it and then find it is behind everything I am doing. God is with us in our reality, not our fantasy. It is in our reality that God comforts and strengthens us.

So I allow the sadness some space with God. I also restrict the amount of news I hear as I find too much overwhelming, and on my fridge is a reality check of the numbers of people with the virus in various places, that I update once a week. Then to get on with the life I can live now. This has had some interesting new explorations of social media encounters on the web. My birthday party was a zoom party, which meant I saw all our children and my brother and sister. Worship on the web is a new exploration and how we encounter God there. I find myself disagreeing with the Anglican bishops who have forbidden their clergy to celebrate communion on the web. There are differences I think, between an open space on YouTube and an enclosed space like Zoom. It will be interesting to see how this develops as time passes. Then where I live, there is gardening. Its spring and plenty of vegetables to sow, plants to pot on, and the perennial weeding. I will not be short of things to do, there are all the things I meant to sew and haven't, and who knows, I might even get my study in some kind of order.

It is easy to be busy, we are a society good at being busy and there were plenty of suggestions to distract us in the first few days of the lockdown. Learn a language,

read books, watch TV, get creative, as just a few. I am left wondering however, if this enforced isolation and distancing holds an invitation to us. Perhaps we are being invited to slow down, to go deeper into being, to befriend ourselves in the deeper places of life. The hermit's cell on Iona belongs to a tradition still followed today, to take time on your own to be, and to be with God. Monks and nuns have followed this practice for centuries, and some still do, to learn to love yourself. It can be hard to be with yourself, you can no longer hide from your inadequacies, your smallness, your fears. So, on your own God invites you to love yourself, to be kind and compassionate to yourself, and to receive God's love, just receive it as a child receives love from a parent. How else can you love others if you cannot love yourself, have compassion on others and all the rest if you beat yourself up, judge yourself harshly, and expect perfection? Isolation invites us to this very real journey of the soul, for our benefit and the benefit of those around us, to grow in love, compassion and kindness. Keeping a journal while doing this is a helpful practice, as is plenty of sleep. In my own prayer time I spend time mentally sitting on a hill overlooking a lake with Jesus beside me. We just sit together, being.

All the spiritual practices we have, but particularly meditation and contemplation, are just for the kind of experience we are in. So that we can look the fears and anxieties we have in the face and find within ourselves the resources to grow through them. Fear has its place, it helps us to avoid danger, anxiety can help us work out a new way to manage, but if spiralling through our being, they can freeze us and keep us dependent needy people. In the current situation fear and anxiety have plenty to work on, and our imagination can make them worse. They are bad guides to live by. Perfect love casts out all fear, (1John 4v18). So, perhaps even the very fear and anxiety that we are experiencing in this time of crisis, are themselves inviting us to grow in love.

St. Patrick's breastplate has the beautiful verse,

Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me; Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

Christ be with you in these new times we live in,

Chris Polhill