A VIRUS AND A NEW WORLD

Posted on March 16, 2020 by Eddie

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Category: Observations

We live in a world which is dominated by economic, military and cultural power. Nations and individuals who are able to dominate others do so, bending others to their will, imposing their ideologies and opinions left, right and centre. We may convince ourselves that our national ideology is benign and the imposition of our approach is altruistic but those who are dominated may well have a different view!

For much of the last two hundred years, the most powerful countries; those in Europe and North America have also been countries with a strong Christian tradition. It has been all too easy to equate the military and economic clout of our countries with our Christianity. Just as we assume that our countries and our culture will be dominant, so we assume that our form of Christianity, our institutions, our viewpoints and our theology should be normative for the rest of the world. Perhaps we'd never say these things, but it is easy to see them being played out in encounters between Christians from different places and traditions.

Of course, things are changing. China is emerging as a rival to the North Atlantic hegemony on the world stage and, although it has a long history of Christian presence and a growing church, it is not a "Christian country" in the way that the UK or the US might regard themselves as such. Likewise, countries which may lack the military and political power of the European nations, now have much stronger Christian communities than many of their former colonial powers.

The old link between temporal power and a Christian presence has vanished, though the accompanying attitudes may take longer to die.

And then a new virus turned up. Epidemics are nothing new and as we continue to encroach on nature, we can expect that more viruses will spillover from animal hosts to human beings. By the nature of things, there will be the odd rare event when a virus is both able to spread rapidly through the human population and causes a serious disease. We are living through one of those events, today.

The thing is, viruses are unimpressed by military power, money or political clout. We've seen Italy, one of the richest and most powerful countries in the world, suffer dreadfully from the pandemic and, in all probability, other countries will follow a similar trajectory. What I find fascinating in all of this is the way in which some "underdeveloped" countries seem to be coping better with the virus than their richer and more powerful cousins.

https://twitter.com/cobbo3/status/1238492138209492995?s=20

Of course, things may change over the coming weeks and months.

Whatever does happen, this pandemic should cause those of us living in the West, to rethink our view of life. The fact that the world seems to be slipping out control should wake us up to the fact that we never had it under control it in the first place. This is, perhaps, particularly important for Western Christians. The fact that we have been used to a relatively comfortable life and have been able to marginalise suffering and death has been very nice, but it has also impacted our faith and trust in God's provision. We don't look to him to meet our needs, because, frankly, we don't need him. Our society, our wealth and our economic power provide almost everything that we need. Except that a virus has proved this to be a lie.

At this point in history, we need to be listening to the voices of our brothers and sisters around the world for whom coronavirus is not an earth-shaking, one-off event but yet another in a series of trials that threaten their lives and test their faith. In the absence of the political and economic safety net that we enjoy, they have often had to develop a degree of trust in God and an understanding of his providence that puts us to shame - even if it is not wrapped up in theological language.

No one knows what the next year or so is going to bring. However, for Christians living in the West, it provides us with an opportunity to reconsider what power looks like and to place less trust in money and influence and to learn from others how to live in a fragile world.

> *3 Donâ€™t put your confidence in powerful people;*
>
> *there is no help for you there.*
>
> *4 When they breathe their last, they return to the earth,*
>
> *and all their plans die with them.*
>
> *5 But joyful are those who have the God of Israel as their helper,*
>
> *whose hope is in the Lord their God.*
>
> *Pslam 146*