THE NEXT PANDEMIC

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If we keep destroying habitats at the rate we are doing, we will inevitably come into contact with more animals carrying viruses that are potentially harmful to us and it is not impossible that we will encounter something that can be transmitted as easily as Covid-19, but with the mortality rate of Ebola.
Category: Observations

This may seem an odd subject for a blog post when we are in the middle of the Covid-19 outbreak and I apologise if it appears to be insensitive. What I want to share in this post is something which I've mentioned in passing in a few webinars that I've taken part in and although it doesn't touch directly on the subject of Christian mission it is actually of key importance.

My initial training was as a biologist; I spent three years studying one enzyme in the broad bean plant. However, I've always had an interest in microbiology and epidemiology. I've read more books on viral diseases and epidemics than most. I'm far from an expert, but I am an interested and informed amateur.

Broadly speaking, there are two ways that pandemics can break out. The first is caused by the evolution of an existing disease causing agent. The virus which causes seasonal flu mutates and changes very rapidly and every now and then, it turns into a form which is highly contagious and deadly. The now famous 1918 flu epidemic is an example of this. The second method is due to human beings encountering a disease causing agent (usually a virus) for the first time. Because we've never met this microbe before, we have no immunity to it and it can spread through the population. There are millions of different viruses in the world, many of which have the capacity to infect human beings and some of which could potentially cause serious diseases. Many of these viruses live quite happily within animals, but can be transferred to people through close contact, for example by butchering for meat or by the animal biting someone. This process is sometimes called Spillover or more technically *zoonosis*.

A well known example of a zoonotic disease is rabies; an invariably fatal disease transmitted by animal bites. However, by a process of vaccination and animal quarantine, rabies has been kept in check in many parts of the world.

Rabies has been around a long time and we have eventually got on top of it. However, as we expand our range, moving into areas where people have never lived before, we are coming into contact with new populations of animals and these animals are potentially carrying disease causing vectors that we have not met before.

In my lifetime, we have encountered a number of new zoonotic diseases, some of which are famous, others less so. These are simply the ones that I remember (I've linked to the older, lesser-known ones):

- Lassa fever
- Marburg fever
- HIV/Aids
- Ebola
- SARS
- MERS
- SARS-COV2 (Covid 19)

Lassa, Marburg, HIV and Ebola are all extremely dangerous. In the absence of a vaccine or efficient treatment, their fatality rate is over 50%. Thankfully, they are not particularly contagious, with only HIV causing a worldwide problem. By contrast, Covid-19 is highly contagious and has spread around the world in a very short time, but while it can cause severe long term problems its fatality rate is much lower than, say Ebola.

So, here's the thing. If we keep destroying habitats at the rate we are doing, we will inevitably come into contact with more animals carrying viruses that are potentially harmful to us and it is not impossible that we will encounter something that can be transmitted as easily as Covid-19, but with the mortality rate of Ebola. Unless we change the way we are treating the planet, there will be other pandemics within the lifetime of people living today and they have the potential to be far more serious than the one we are living through.

Our demand for palm oil, tropical hardwoods and beef are not only endangering the rainforests and their ecology, they pose an existential risk to human civilisation as we know it. Our current situation is an alarm call; the question is whether we are listening.

Now, I realise that some Christians will say that we should simply trust God and that everything will be all right. I don't have the space to answer this, but I'd refer you to this post to get my views on that position.

God gave us the responsibility to care for the planet that he placed us on. We neglect that responsibility at our peril.

If you are interested in understanding more about zoonotic diseases, I cannot recommend the book Spillover highly enough.

Edit: I am grateful to my friend Timothy Halls for pointing me to this vide which tells the same story

in a more interesting way!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2cEXfJc6_d0&feature=youtu.be