LESSONS FROM A PANDEMIC

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Category: Observations

Last week, I listened to a fascinating lecture by Jerry PillayÂ who is professor in Church History and Dean of the Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, South Africa. His subject was the impact of the Covid pandemic on the Church. You can do yourself a favour by reading the paper on which the lecture was based here. However, assuming that quite a few people won't do that, I'll give a brief summary.

The abstract of the paper gives the overall pattern.

> *The COVID-19 challenge is unprecedented. It has caused enormous trauma, disrupted economies, social life, mass transportation, work and employment, supply chains, leisure, sport, international relations, academic programmes; literally everything. Churches and religious communities have not been spared; they have been severely affected and, in all likelihood, permanently transformed by the pandemic. The pre-COVID-19 world is gone, replaced by a â€˜new normalâ€™. The new landscape calls for both resilience and adaptation, embracing new ways of doing things and of being church. Churches have to adapt; they have to ask themselves questions about the implications for being church in this â€˜new normalâ€™ context. This article aims to explore the impact of the coronavirus on the mission and theology of the church.*

Pilay argues that the church has undergone a number of major shifts over its history, including the Great Schism and the Protestant Reformation. He also suggests that we are living through a time when various pressures on the church are pushing us to another similar shift. However, the Covid pandemic has accelerated things and we have seen significant changes already.

He identifies a number of areas in which change has occurred:

Worship Shift

Pilay highlights a number of effects of moving church services online; in the context of this blog, perhaps the most significant is this one.

> *The electronic platforms also open new doors to Christian worshippers from different cultures and backgrounds worldwide. Worship of the triune God will always be contextual. But*

> *drawing on the rich tapestry that is the body of Christ around the globe, vibrant worship also transcends, utilises and challenges the expectations, resources and preferences of any one â€˜cultureâ€™ to receive and respond to the good news of the Saviour.*

Missional Shift

The pandemic has opened up new opportunities for mission, but these have involved a significant reorientation in thinking.

> *The COVID-19 experience draws us into a more appropriate understanding of Christian mission with the focus not being on the Church but on the reign of God. How do we see and understand Godâ€™s presence in the midst of a pandemic in which millions of people are infected, hundreds of thousands are dying and human lives and communities are disrupted and devastated? The pandemic helps us to see the state of the world rather than to focus on the inside of the church.*

Theological Shifts

Pilay outlines ways in which the pandemic has caused a rethinking of church, church leadership and the sacraments.

I've picked out a few highlights, but I would encourage you to go and read the paper, there is much more in it than I have mentioned. I don't agree with everything in the paper, but there is a good deal to reflect on and learn from.

I suspect that some in the UK might be bemused by the paper, because they have not seen any of the sorts of changes that the paper outlines. They may even see it as a point of pride that they have more or less been able to carry on with business as usual through the upheaval of the last year.

It is important that we realise that the church in the UK is not representative of the church across the world. Our wealth and our relative ease have allowed us to weather the pandemic in a way that is simply not open to many of our brothers and sisters. However, this also means that we may have missed the opportunity to learn and adapt. One phrase in the lecture stood out to me as encapsulating the realities of the time we are living through:

> *If all the church has learnt during this time of COVID-19 is how to live-stream sermons, worship songs, religious rites and requests for tithes, we have lost the Kairos moment. The moment of truth to know what exactly is the mission of the church and how we can embrace theologies that are life-affirming and transforming to reflect and mirror the reign of God, it is now with us. COVID-19 has reaffirmed that the church does not live within walls it is the people of God who, in the power of the Holy Spirit, live and long for Godâ€™s reign in the world. The kingdom or reign of God is the primary missional perspective of the church as we continue to pray for, and work towards, Godâ€™s justice, peace, right- eousness and love on earth. The church is a sign, symbol and pointer to that kingdom as it is called out of the world and sent into the world to be the presence of God.*

Now go away and read the full paper.