

A Reflection at Easter, April 2020 – the language around COVID-19

By Hugh Bryant



Hugh Bryant is a marine underwriter and Church of England Reader who lives in Surrey. This is a reflection inspired by comments made by Emily Maitlis the British-Canadian journalist, documentary-maker, and newsreader for the BBC. It can be found at: <https://hughdbryant.co.uk>

'The language around COVID-19 has sometimes felt trite and misleading. You do not survive the illness through fortitude and strength of character, whatever the Prime Minister's colleagues'll tell us. And the disease is not a great leveller, the consequences of which everyone, rich or poor, suffers the same. This is a myth which needs debunking. Those serving on the front line right now, bus drivers and shelf stackers; nurses, care home workers, hospital staff and shopkeepers, are disproportionately the lower-paid members of our workforce. They are more likely to catch the disease because they are more exposed. Those who live in tower blocks and small flats will find the lock-down tougher; those in manual jobs will be unable to work from home. This is a health issue with huge ramifications for social welfare, and it's a welfare issue with huge ramifications for public health. Tonight, as France goes into recession, and the World Trade Organisation warns the pandemic could provoke the deepest economic downturn of our lifetimes, we ask what kind of social settlement might need to be put in place to stop the inequality becoming even more stark.' (Emily Maitlis, introducing 'Newsnight', BBC Two, 8th April 2020.)

That was such a grown-up and eloquent comment on the COVID-19 plague, that my first reaction was to scratch around to see whether Emily Maitlis had been quoting some eminent philosopher or grand old man or a woman of world affairs when she introduced 'Newsnight' on BBC2 on Wednesday night. But my instinct was unworthy. She is a very talented journalist in her own right and those are her words.

Her words are among the most apt and most challenging words in the torrent of verbiage, which the first week of lockdown has produced. 'I can't really get excited by this procession of metropolitan sophisticates discovering the joys of birdsong and blue-skies-without-aeroplanes, empty roads and silence.

I'm sure there is a place for all those good things, but somehow I don't think that, when this is all over, historians will look back and celebrate stumbling prose about the unaccustomed joys of birdsong. Instead our generation will be judged on how we dealt with this 'health issue with huge ramifications for social welfare, [or] ...welfare issue with huge ramifications for public health', as Emily Maitlis so eloquently put it.

It seems extraordinarily apt that Emily Maitlis said what she did on the eve of Maundy Thursday. For Christians, Maundy Thursday is the day when they remember Jesus washing the disciples' feet. The son of God, arguably the most important man who has ever lived, doing the same sort of thing that a care home worker does, washing the dirty bits, becoming a servant. As we have seen in this COVID-19 plague, the sort of thing that Jesus was doing can become very dangerous. So dangerous that only people who don't matter are put in the line of risk. Only the expendable ones, although nobody spells this out. As Emily Maitlis said, the bus drivers, the shelf stackers, nurses, care home workers, hospital staff and shopkeepers. The government has advertised jobs in the new Nightingale Hospital at the Excel Centre including receptionists at £37,500 per annum, when at the same time nurses and doctors, after years of training, start at less than £25,000.

Somebody will say that the market justifies this, that there are fewer people willing to be receptionists in the Nightingale hospital than there are willing to be doctors and nurses in that dangerous place. Therefore by the inexorable laws of supply and demand the willing, the brave, are worth less than those in short supply. Put that way, the proposition looks quite indefensible. How could the market, even if it is correct in identifying shortages in that way, be the only guide to the value of these vital people's work?

But wait a minute. How does the market account for the fact that there is a shortage of doctors and nurses, tens of thousands of doctors and nurses? Either the market is not functioning properly, as their value is not rising to reflect their scarcity, in which case all these political statements based on "realism" and "the market" are not true, or the market as an index of value is not actually accurate. Either way there is a glaring injustice. As Emily Maitlis put it, '... what kind of social settlement might need to be put in place to stop the inequality becoming even more stark?' How are people to be valued in future?

Christians have a number of pointers in front of them, particularly at this time in and back-to-front. Before he was born, when an angel announced to Mary that she would be the mother of the Messiah, what she said, “My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my saviour...”: this speech, this aria, this canticle, is one of the most subversive, even one of the most revolutionary, passages in the whole of literature. ‘For he hath regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden’. God chose an ordinary young girl; he selected her knowing that she was one of the little people. ‘He that is mighty hath magnified me’. The omnipotent, the divine, the greatest power, has chosen me, small and insignificant, and made me great.

‘He hath put down the mighty from their seat: and hath exalted the humble and meek.

He hath filled the hungry with good things: and the rich he hath sent empty away.’

This is what God is doing. This is the implication of his having chosen someone not special, just an ordinary girl; but having chosen that person to be the mother of the divine incarnation, God with us. God in human form. She wasn’t in any way rare or perfect or uniquely suited to this job. She was just an ordinary girl from a humble background. God’s choice implies a direct challenge to the value system that we have had and we have in our world today. The Magnificat shows up and challenges head-on the great divide in our society between the rich and the poor, between the great and the little people.

Holy Week and Easter. So much of what Jesus did and said was counterintuitive

That was before Jesus was born. The Magnificat points to how he is going to operate. It points forward to the Sermon on the Mount, the longest sustained piece of counterintuitive argument that you are ever going to come across. The Beatitudes: ‘blessed are the – poor: blessed are the meek. Not ‘blessed are the people in large houses riding about in Lamborghinis’. (See Matt. 5,6 and 7)

In one sense I disagree with Emily Maitlis. She says, ‘And the disease is not a great leveller, the consequences of which everyone, rich or poor, suffers the

same.' I know – indeed I passionately agree with – what she means. But in one important sense, there is equality. We are all – wherever in the world we come from – we are all creatures of God, made in His image. The virus is not a leveller, as Emily Maitlis rightly says. It affects all humans – and, unfortunately, tigers too.

Where it does not level us is shown by what happens when the virus has struck someone. Then it depends where you are and how wealthy you are, either as an individual or because you belong to a rich society, whether you will get full treatment. Even so, so far we have not yet discovered a cure, so even with the best treatment in an intensive care unit in a European or American or Far Eastern teaching hospital, you may still die – but you will be made as comfortable as possible, and you will have the very best chance of survival.

If on the other hand Coronavirus strikes and you are in a refugee camp on the border of Syria, in Jordan perhaps, or if you live in the slums of Calcutta or Bombay, or in many parts of Africa, there are far fewer doctors, far fewer hospitals, and no money or National Health Service to pay for your treatment. In the USA, except in one or two enlightened states such as Massachusetts, unless you can afford to buy expensive health insurance, no-one will treat you.

But perhaps the reason why this is so wrong, and why this is a 'health issue with huge ramifications for social welfare', is that there is no good reason why some people should be so much better off than others – or rather, that so many people should be so much worse off than the fortunate few. Why should there be any entitlement in an accident of birth? Rich and poor, G7 or Third World, we are all susceptible to COVID-19. But if we are all liable to suffer, should we not all share the means of salvation?

Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, spoke recently about the objective of the Good Life (with a capital G and L) being, not, as theologians and philosophers from Aristotle to Thomas Aquinas have argued, 'human flourishing' (*ευδαιμονία*) but rather, the objective, the objective of the Good Life, is to be safe. Safe. Safe from harm. Safe from disease. Safe from hunger.

Again, Christians can turn to the teaching of Jesus. Think of the Great Judgment in St Matthew chapter 25 (from verse 31), the division of the sheep and the goats, the saved – the ones who are safe – and those condemned to eternal damnation. Hunger. Thirst. Disease. They are at the heart of it. What did you do for them? No suggestion that some hungry people, or thirsty people, or poorly people, might deserve to be safe, to be saved, more than others. Absolutely not. Jesus says that He is in all of us, however lowly.

Again, just as God chose the humble Mary, so ‘the righteous will [say]...
“Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and fed you, or thirsty and gave you drink, a stranger and took you home, or naked and clothed you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and come to visit you?” And the king will answer, “I tell you this: anything you did for one of my brothers here, however humble, you did for me”. (Matt. 25:37-40, NEB). (Jesus would surely have wanted to be explicitly gender-neutral if he had been saying this today, and would surely have said, ‘anything you did for one of my brothers and sisters here, however humble, you did for me.’)

So at this Easter time, when we remember Jesus’ amazing self-abasement, his humbling himself to wash the disciples’ feet, and then his enduring the most terrible torture and death – being the most important man on earth, but beaten and strung up to die with common criminals, as a common criminal, because that was actually his rank, his lowly position in society – and then rising in triumph, leaving the empty tomb: when we reflect on that extraordinary sequence of events, the Triduum, the Three Days, we can realise that there is an alternative. There is an alternative to the dominion of the market. There is an alternative to people who know the price of things but not their value. The fact that Jesus beat death – and that must be about the most counterintuitive thing he ever did – has given us hope: the ‘sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life’. And that is for everyone, for everyone who could possibly catch COVID, wherever they are and whatever flag they fly.

Emily Maitlis concluded, asking ‘what kind of social settlement might need to be put in place to stop the inequality becoming even more stark’. That is the most important thing we have to do when the medical campaign against COVID-19 has been won. It is a huge challenge: but Jesus has given us

hope, hope that we can do it. The Easter message is one of hope, and of salvation, that we can make that Good Life, where all people, everywhere, are safe.