

Of cabbages and kings

Lewis Carroll's poem of the Walrus and the Carpenter* is a surreal narrative poem capable of almost endless interpretation, rather like the current 'COVID – 19' crisis.

Whilst cabbages may be immune this is not the case with princes, prime ministers and ordinary people. As yet no prelates have been infected but it is surely only a matter of time. In short this is a global pandemic that has easily crossed borders and cultures uniting the globe in a bizarre commonality almost exactly at the same time as a growing wave of nationalism and popularism has emerged to threaten world stability.

A fascinating plethora of initial response to Coronavirus, from outright denial to online quack remedies has also been accompanied by saner national responses; even if they have often been characterised as being 'too little and too late.' Unfortunately, in some cases even in Western democracies, there has also been a dangerous lurch towards authoritarianism; but as this particular worldwide affliction progresses it will be salutary and no doubt painful to observe the consequences for humanity as a whole.

At this stage it is difficult to categorise what religious response there might be? The Church of England has now closed all places of worship for both public and private activity in a kind of Interdict.** This has precipitated a hasty, often imaginative, but apparently (according to anecdotal evidence) effective online response with clergy celebrating services and Eucharists from the sitting rooms of their rectories and vicarages.

Unsurprisingly, this has in turn raised questions as to how 'holy' and valid 'virtual communion' might be across the ether? Overall a generosity of theological spirit has invoked various Reformation worthies such as Jean Calvin and our own Thomas Cranmer in defence of a valid spiritual communion. Perhaps then a revolution in theological thinking could be at hand in this age of the Internet? For example here is an interesting new prayer of spiritual incorporation offered as below:

A Prayer of Spiritual Communion

In union, O Lord with the faithful at every altar of your Church,
where the Holy Eucharist is being celebrated,
I desire to offer you praise and thanksgiving.
I present to you my soul and body
with the earnest wish that I may always be united to you.
And since I cannot now receive you sacramentally,
I ask you to come spiritually into my heart.
I unite myself to you,
and embrace you with heart and mind and soul.
Let nothing ever separate you from me.
May I live and die in your love. Amen.

Bishop Cherry Van, Diocese of Monmouth, Church in Wales

It's too early to assess such responses as carrying any great significance for Christian thought and theology; although they might herald a profound change in the way the future Church operates. In any case a much anticipated and hoped for vaccine against the virus, which has been mooted for sometime next year, could rapidly return the *status quo ante*.

Nevertheless, the ramifications of this pandemic should be worthy of serious consideration. Will the Church have something useful to say about the wider implications of a world where human interference and greed have exploited the natural world to breaking point? Some have argued that human activity itself is the ultimate source of the present crisis and linked it in turn with another apocalyptic scenario namely climate change. There is some theological thinking taking place, but as yet hardly enough.

In the meantime a very old message of hope is about to be celebrated at Easter. It is aimed universally and equally at those metaphorical cabbages and kings represented by real and often frightened people. Without the hope of resurrection we are in a very dark place indeed and we still need a message that will resonate even if church buildings are firmly locked and closed.

Nicholas Henderson
Easter 2020

** In 'Through the Looking Glass' 1871*

*** Pope Innocent III placed England under a six year long Interdict (1208 – 1214) halting all ecclesiastical services when King John appointed Stephen Langdon Archbishop of Canterbury. This was a major fact in the eventual signing of Magna Carta in 1215. In Anglican canon law bishops in the Anglican Communion in theory still possess the power of Interdict but this has never been exercised in any true sense since the Reformation.*