

Covid-19 and Beyond

Where do we go from here? Chaos or Community?"

This was the fascinating title of a book written in 1967, by Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. Earlier that year he had isolated himself from the demands of the civil rights movement, rented a house in Jamaica, and laboured over his final manuscript. It was to be the final year of his life before his assassination.

In his book, he laid out his thoughts, plans, and dreams for America's future, the need for better jobs, higher wages, decent housing, and quality education. Dr King demanded an end to global suffering. He asserted that 'Humankind', for the first time, had the right resources and technology to eradicate its deepest problems, a bold statement.

Over 50 years later, it seems from afar that America is more divided, in terms of race and poverty, than at any time since the American Civil War. "Humankind" has so far been unable to solve its deepest problems. The sort of problems which led to the 1960's uprising and has been seen again in recent months on the back of the "Black Lives Matter" or BLM movement.

But the same question Dr King asked in 1960's America, can be asked in 2020's UK. In the aftermath of its first wave, it is now evident that Covid-19 has also divided and exposed our society deeply.



The Aftermath

Few would argue that the UK, and the world as a whole, has been hit by the biggest crisis since the outbreak of the Second World War. No other crisis since 1939 has affected so many countries (188 currently) and had such a dramatic effect on society, our families, on individuals, and on the way we live.

Some 6 months since lockdown was first announced in the UK, we are seeing a regular flow of academic research and news items exposing many of the

hidden impacts, above and beyond the illness itself and many consequential deaths. Impacts we heard anecdotally are now writ large.

As a Pastor in Bedford, I increasingly hear and see in our locality, the scale and breadth that the societal impacts of Covid-19 and lockdown have had upon our nation. There will likely be more to come.

The Heart of the Issue

It is a growing and sobering catalogue of issues that are coming to light. The UK government, relevant charities, businesses, and churches are seeing these issues first-hand.

Initially at least, lockdown disguised certain underlying problems. Some turned to gardening and home baking. Others spoke of the benefits of homeworking, time with the family, time-out, no commuting and lower pollution. But this was only papering over the cracks.

The Bible uniquely explains that '*the issue of the heart is the heart of the issue*'. This is the central issue facing all of humanity, and has been ever since our Fall into sin. It is also the problem that governments and civil rights movements won't and can't deal with.

The issues we face now are not new. But in our arrogance, as human beings just like Dr King, we proudly assume we will be able to overcome them.

The Issues

Here is a depressing summary of just 5 of the current issues, some old some new, that are now coming to light at scale, as we come through Covid-19:

1. **Relationships** – Lockdown forced people to live together, with limited freedoms, sometimes in the confinement of overcrowded homes. The result is a shocking growth of domestic abuse and a surge in relationship breakdowns.
2. **Alcohol** – With relationships at breaking point, as a nation it appears that we have turned again to alcohol to try to drown our sorrows. A recent Public Health England report states that 8.4m people are now drinking at high-risk levels up from 4.8m in February 2020. It concludes that "*Soaring alcohol misuse could overwhelm public services*". Our own experience in Bedford is that the streets and park

benches are testimony to the growing number of damaged lives, all no doubt with a story to tell.

3. Mental Health – Numerous reports tell us that anxiety levels and the mental health of the nation is at a very low ebb. This is not surprising as we are social beings; this is the way the Lord God made us. If we are cut off from God and then mostly cut-off from each other, or worse pent-up with each other, it is unsurprising that many are now fearful to go out, stressed and anxious about their lives.

4. Elderly/Care Homes – Perhaps one of the saddest impacts has been on those coming to the end of their earthly lives. Given the nature of Covid-19, our elderly have had to endure the longest and most restrictive of lockdowns. With limited contact outside, residents and staff have carried many burdens. Some we have spoken to, as we have given Bibles and gifts to residents and staff in nearly every Care Home in Bedford, are shattered and traumatised by the ordeal they have been through.



5. Authority Ignored – Like the USA, in the UK we have long championed democracy as the panacea for all societal ills. It is somewhat ironic then that an issue the UK faces is a growing disrespect for authority of all kinds. A natural consequence perhaps of a largely post-Christian society, which has mostly rejected the ultimate authority, our Maker and the authority of His word, the Bible.

We are seeing a blatant disregard for the Covid-19 rules and laws the government has asked us to follow. This seems to stem from i) a diminishing respect for politicians ii) the inevitable and inherent inconsistency in the rules we are being asked to follow changing regularly and iii) a lack of neighbourly concern and awareness.

Where do we go from here?

The challenge we now face is that these problems are rearing up when the country is more indebted than ever before. Not helped by the historical fact that

most governments, regardless of hue, tend to focus mostly on the effects of the problems not the underlying causes.

Looking forward it is clear that no amount of money will solve the issue of the human heart. What is needed is a permanent systemic and wholesale personal change in many lives. One that comes from the reality of knowing and experiencing new life in the Lord Jesus Christ, which is revealed in and through the Word of God.

In Defence of Christianity

Christianity is indestructible and needs no defence. CH Spurgeon, the 19th century Baptist preacher, once said “*Defend the Bible! I would rather defend a lion!*”

However, strangely a defence has started to mount from a most unlikely quarter. A number of recent books and articles have started to defend the merits of Christianity, philosophically speaking at least. Authors and commentators on society like Jordan Peterson, Tom Holland, Douglas Murray, and even Richard Dawkins (to an extent) are part of a growing lobby of what some are calling “Christian-Atheists”.

Their argument runs something like this:

You may not like Christianity, but i) when you look at all the alternatives it is so much better; and ii) when you look at what it has achieved over thousands of years it has some strong credentials, namely:

1. Its **Values** – Christianity and the Bible put the highest possible value on human life and its preservation – who can argue with that?

2. Its **Laws** – Unlike the changing Covid-19 rules “*The law of the Lord is perfect (complete and consistent) converting the soul.*” Psalm 19:7

3. Its promotion of **Human Rights** – These were the creation of God. He enshrined hundreds of them in the Bible, to protect humanity from humanity.

4. **Anti-Slavery** – Who abolished it? Wilberforce and other leading Christians were the ones that fought and succeeded in defeating this inhumane practice.

5. **Anti-Racism** – Who first stood against it? The Bible teaches that God is “*no respecter of persons*” and that we should never make decisions and discriminate based on the appearance of the face.

6. **Healthy Loyal Marriages** – Christianity put necessary constraints on men and women, defining marriage around commitment and faithfulness and prohibiting abuse or rape of any kind.

The Only Answer

The unchanging and timeless message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the salvation from sin it offers, through Christ's perfect life and atonement, needs no defending. It has transformed the lives of millions and continues to do so.

But perhaps some, in the aftermath of Covid-19, can be open-minded enough to see that it is the only answer to the underlying problems and deep questions of life. Governments, Civil Rights movements, technology, money will not sustainably solve the problem of the human heart.

The problems we now face in the aftermath of Covid-19, are in fact the same problems which have always been there and ever will be, until this earth is no more. They have just been exposed at the same time on a scale we have not seen for many decades.

Pastor Oliver Wyncoll

September 2020

pastor@providencechapel.org.uk

www.providencechapel.org.uk

www.providencechapel.org.uk/youtube