

“Comfort in Covidia” – A reflection by J John

I imagine I'm not alone in feeling that I have been mysteriously pushed through the doors of some magical wardrobe and now, in a state of severe bewilderment, find myself gazing around a strange, unwelcoming landscape. It is definitely not C.S. Lewis's Narnia; this hostile desert – which I take the opportunity of naming Covidia – is much more alien and daunting. Yet the door is closed behind us and, to use the old words of the King James Bible, you and I find ourselves 'strangers in a strange land' (Exodus 2:22). What we face is threatening and even frightening. Nevertheless, I'm comforted by the fact that many of the followers of Jesus have trod this path before. Although we find the present COVID-19 pandemic unusual, it's worth remembering that if you look back over history it was a rare generation that didn't have to grapple with such things as the Black Death, plague, cholera or the like. Other men and women of faith have crossed this discouraging landscape before us.

One man who did is the great reformer Martin Luther. In 1527, at a time when bubonic plague was rampaging across Germany with many fatalities, he was asked the question as to whether it was right to run away from it. Never a man to give a short answer when a long one would do, he wrote an entire booklet in response. Originally given the less than cheering title *Whether to Flee From Death*, it was later published under the slightly more positive name *Whether One May Flee From A Deadly Plague*. The full text is found at <https://davenantinstitute.org/whether-one-may-flee-from-a-deadly-plague/> and has much of interest. In one paragraph Luther expresses his own position like this:

'I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance inflict and pollute others and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. If God should wish to take me, he will surely find me and I have done what he has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others. If my neighbour needs me, however, I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely, as stated above. See, this is such a God-fearing faith because it is neither brash nor foolhardy and does not tempt God.'

There's a lot to ponder here and let me offer you three wise principles from it that still hold true.

Principle 1 *Learn wisely*

In fact, for its time there is here a good example of what you might call 'sanitary sanity'. Luther intends adopting a strategy of what we would call self-isolation as much as possible and of avoiding going where he is not needed. His reasoning is, very reasonably, that he knows that he could become infected and therefore pass on the plague to others. His comment about that which might 'tempt God' refers to presumably the sort of situation where someone claims divine protection and then

recklessly runs into a situation demanding God to protect them. Significantly, despite the passing of nearly 500 years, this remains good guidance: we should pay attention to the suggestions of medical experts and think of minimising the spread of the disease to us or to others. COVID-19 has claimed enough victims – try not to give it any more.

Principle 2 *Live faithfully*

We can no doubt identify with Luther praying for God's protection but his comments on his own death probably take us beyond our comfort zone. Luther has a deep, calm and commendable trust that if his heavenly Father does decide to take him in death, then so be it; the key thing is that he has done his duty and not put anybody else at risk. Many of us have a faith that asks nothing more than 'Lord, keep me safe today'. Luther sees his whole life in the hands of God. Indeed, his perspective on death is helpful: he sees it not as an act of bitter tragedy or a demonic victory but simply as an event where God 'takes him'. Underlying all the actions Luther intends to take is his deep faith in Christ.

Principle 3 *Love richly*

The question that Luther was addressing is whether someone in a position of church responsibility should flee from peril. To summarise his answer: if you have no duties you can leave, but if your neighbour – and here, following Jesus, he means anybody we are in contact with – needs you, you should stay. Actually, in days of a global pandemic, fleeing disease makes little sense but the principle of being lovingly concerned for those around us remains completely valid. One of the problems with epidemics is that there is always a temptation to 'look after Number One' and self-isolation heightens it. We tend to make some sort of physical or psychological bunker and go and hide away inside. While this makes medical sense, it brings its own perils. Jesus asked, 'What do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul?' (Matthew 16:26 NLT). In the same vein we might ask, 'What do I benefit if we survive this epidemic but, in the process, harm our eternal soul?' We are to love God with all that we have but also our neighbour.

The bleak landscape of Covidia through which we must travel is very much uncharted territory. Yet we are not the first to travel it; Luther and countless others have gone before us and, if it's any encouragement, the reformer himself outlived the plague and kept going for another 19 years before God finally 'took him'.

With that image of a sterile and ominous landscape before us I am reminded of the first few lines of what is the best known of all Welsh hymns, 'Guide me, O thou great Redeemer, Pilgrim through this barren land; I am weak, but thou art mighty; Hold me with thy powerful hand.' Here we have the greatest of encouragements. As we travel through this difficult time, we, who have put our faith in Christ, know that he travels alongside us. Jesus is Emmanuel, the one who is 'God with us' (Matthew 1:23). And in our harsh new world, that is the greatest comfort of all.

J. John

Reverend Canon