

LESSONS FROM
THE PANDEMIC

A TIME FOR RENEWAL

This has to be a time of *metanoia*, of moral and spiritual renewal. There can be no return to the world as it was before the appearance of the virulent coronavirus that caused the disease Covid-19, leaving virtually no corner of the inhabited world untouched. There may eventually be a vaccine; there may even be a cure. But whether there is or not, civilisation has been tested and found wanting, and the pieces cannot be reassembled exactly as they were. Three-quarters of a million people have lost their lives directly from Covid 19; countless more will suffer and die from the economic depression that is bound to follow. There are profound lessons to be learnt, some of them still only half understood.

Yet this is the right time to take the measure of the challenge ahead and to prepare to rise to it. Prominent among the forces available to do so stand the Christian Churches, and the Catholic Church in particular. It has the largest membership of any single organisation on the planet and, though its credibility may have suffered a severe blow when its handling of the scandal of clerical abuse was exposed, it retains greater moral power than any single government. Its promise, in the stirring words of the Second Vatican Council's final decree *Gaudium et Spes*, that "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ" may be imperfectly realised, but remains its lodestar.

The Church immerses itself fully in humanity's struggles against dangers both internal and external. Some, such as war, are man-made – for once the gendered noun is appropriate; some are the product of nature, such as Covid-19; and some are a combination of each, such as global warming, where industrial progress is destroying biodiversity and poisoning the planet's atmosphere to the point where life itself is threatened.

Christians gaze upon the broken and tortured figure of a man hung from a cross, and see divinity in him; every other broken and tortured body is thereby sanctified. In Christ's words, those whom the pagan world despises – the poor, the hungry, the naked, the unborn, the old, the sick, the migrant, the asylum seeker – are not human detritus, mere garbage fit for the rubbish heap, but belong to him and deserve the same reverence. "Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." Christ stood the worldly values of his time on their head. "The last will be first ..."; "He has pulled the mighty down from their thrones ..." And the Christian faith elevates these disturbing and disruptive words above all others, calling them the Word of God. There is nothing more powerful on Earth than this.

In the post-pandemic era the Church, acknowledging its sins and its failures, must refocus on its core message, the reason it exists: to show the world the face of Christ. The natural drift is in the opposite direction, towards the state described by

Thomas Hobbes as a "war of all against all", where human life becomes "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short". Never before has its central teaching been so threatened and so needed: every human life, no matter how vulnerable or impaired, is sacred; every life is to be protected and celebrated. The Church must resist to the bitter end the "throwaway culture", the tendency to reduce life to the status of a disposable commodity.

The obligation under Church law to attend weekly Mass having been suspended, Catholics are presented with the question usually only faced by converts – what is the point of being Catholic? Why go to Mass? Why be part of this whole thing, which bears such obvious marks of sin and disgrace on its own body? And the question also presents itself in reverse: would anybody have heard of Christ and his Gospel had the Church not existed to proclaim the message? What kind of civilisation, if any, would have existed without its insistence on the preciousness of human life, on the equal rights and dignity of all?

This is a time for conversion, for reawakening. If the Church is to evangelise, it must first evangelise itself. Many Catholics have never before had to question their habit of Sunday Mass attendance. The Christ who calls them back home is not some remote mystic wrapped in archaic mysteries, even less an unforgiving moral policeman, but that Christ who declares the poor to be his brothers and sisters, and who threatens with vengeance from Heaven those who exploit them. He is that Son of God who ennobled humanity by becoming part of it, even sharing to the full its most gruesome injustices.

So those whom the epidemic has so far spared must set about making the best future they can for themselves and their descendants. The Church can help to define and shape what that future should look like: a community of persons all of equal worth, committed to each other's flourishing, bound together in *koinonia*. Karl Marx popularised the definition of social justice as "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs". Catholic Social Teaching shows the way; St John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have deepened and expanded its scope, but it is still the original Gospel. The Catholic ideas of solidarity, of equality of human worth and dignity, offer a charted course towards the renewal of faith in the common good, by which "all are responsible for all". This means preserving independence of judgement amid the clamour, not assuming that the grain is always wrong but being willing to go against it; not fearing unpopularity, being prepared to take risks and to challenge powerful interests wherever they obstruct the common good.

The foundations are laid. It is time to build on them. The Church needs outstanding leaders, locally and nationally as much as internationally. *The Tablet*, now in its 181st year, renews its commitment to serve the Church in its pursuit of truth and justice, even when, on occasion, its voice may be an unwelcome one.