

## ***Responding with faith at the dawn of the Coronavirus: Stay Home***

---

Almost every picture taken at Bishops Diocesan College shows either the Brooke or the Memorial Chapel as a background. Both chapels are positioned somewhat at the centre of our school and this speaks volumes to both current and old boys. Every week, we assemble and worship three times in the same space that has now been portrayed as one of the spaces that could spread the coronavirus.

If the walls of both chapels could speak, different sounds of joy, pain and confusion would emerge because we gather in both spaces for peace and solitude amongst other things. Both chapels provide hope amid confusion and pain.

But what happens when both chapels which I shall refer to as the church, are seen or described as part of the danger?

With the novel coronavirus spreading rapidly, this is not simply a question for individuals. The pandemic forces the “church” as an institution to consider its role during a time of crisis. Many religious communities are suspending their typical operations. Many schools and churches have suspended their large or group gatherings. The Catholic Church in Rome has shuttered its doors temporarily. Some of the churches in South Africa have done the same. What should we think about this? Are Christians abandoning their responsibility to the sick and suffering? Are schools abandoning their call to teach and instil hope?

Many would be tempted to look back on their history of remaining physically present during times of distress. Starting around 250 A.D., A.D., a plague that at its height was said to kill 5,000 people a day ravaged the Roman empire. Many believers stood out in their service to the infirm. Because they believed that God was sovereign over death, they were willing to minister to the sick even at the cost of their lives. This witness won many to the Christian cause. Should we follow their example and gather to celebrate in word and ritual, in the sermon as well as the bread and the wine?

Doctors and nurses of faith can indeed draw upon this story today to inspire them to tend to those sickened by the pandemic. What about the rest of us? This remains certain in the ever-shifting narrative of Covid-19: the most effective ways of stopping the spread of the virus is by social distancing (avoiding large gatherings) and good personal hygiene (washing our hands). The data suggests that what the world needs now is not our physical presence, but our absence.

This does not seem like the stuff of legend. What did the church do in the year of our Lord 2020 when sickness swept our land? We met in smaller groups, washed our hands and prayed. Unglamorous as this is, it may be the shape of faithfulness in our time.

There is a lesson here for a diminished church. It is not that the church should go away forever, but that heroic virtue comes in small actions as much as in large ones. We live in an age of self-assertion, where everyone is yelling, “Pay attention to me because I am the only one who can help.” But part of the Christian message is that God comes to us in ways that defy our expectations. The all-powerful empties himself of power to become a child. Jesus as king does not conquer His enemies through violence, He converts them to His cause by meeting violence with sacrificial love.

The church’s absence, its literal emptying, can function as a symbol of its trust in God’s ability to meet us regardless of the location. The church remains the church whether gathered or scattered. It might also indirectly remind us of the gift of gathering that we too often take for granted.

Regardless of our beliefs, the one experience common to all humanity is that we die. In that we share a kinship. But believers can, through their actions and faith, lodge their protest against this great enemy, not as a shaking of one’s fist at the wind, but as testimony to the greater hope of the eventual defeat of death itself. The thing we must always struggle to discern is the proper shape of that testimony.

When I was younger, I had an aunt stay with us for a few days who was afflicted with H.I.V. I was only a child and the information was hazy and jumbled in my developing mind. I do remember vividly sitting at our dinner table eating fries with a little too much ketchup. She came and sat next to me and asked if she could have some. I was afraid. What if she had a cut on her lip and bled into the fries and I wouldn’t be able to tell? Could it be spread through saliva? I was terrified, but I loved my aunt more than I feared her disease. So, we ate fries together and I swallowed my terror. That hasty communion is my lasting memory of her.

During the AIDS epidemic, many schools and churches showed their solidarity by sharing the bread and the wine with the infected to show that there was nothing to fear. Today, it may be that we show our solidarity by not sharing.

The Gospel of John recounts Jesus' words to His disciples in the upper room before His death. During this final discourse, He tells them that it is better that He goes away so that the comforter (the Holy Spirit) would come. The point is that the loss of His physical presence through His death, resurrection and ascension would lead to an even deeper communion with God. It is possible that, strangely enough, the absence of the church will be a great testimony to the presence of God in our care for our neighbours and our families.

Fr Monwabisi Peter  
Bishops Chaplain

18 March 2020