

## Christians Responding to the Pandemic Moderator's Comments Posted 14 April 2020

By Rev Dr Peter Barnes

It seems that there is but one topic of conversation these days: COVID-19. If we are not suffering from the virus, we must be suffering from fatigue as a result of news about the virus. Nevertheless, it might be worthwhile for us to make some points about the Christian response to the threat of plague.

### **(1) WE OUGHT TO OBEY NECESSARY LAWS FOR THE GOOD OF SOCIETY.**

In exceptional circumstances, exceptional measures are called for. In Leviticus 13 there are 59 verses that deal with the isolation of any person with leprosy, and in Leviticus 14 there are 57 verses that deal with any possible restoration to normal society. This should not be regarded as something primitive and lacking in compassion. Isolation was needed because leprosy is contagious, and could have devastating effects on any community. The Son of God could touch a leper and cleanse him (Matt.8:3), but if anybody else tried it, he would be likely to catch the disease. There is nothing intrinsically evil or unchristian about isolation and quarantine.

Nor should we resist to the death any special exercise of power by the civil authorities. In order to combat a coming seven years of famine in Egypt, Joseph was installed as second in command to the Pharaoh who considered himself the incarnation of the sun god. In fact, it was Pharaoh who told the people: 'Go to Joseph; whatever he says to you, do' (Gen.41:55). For the next seven years, Joseph stored up food and supplies for the approaching famine, and in so doing, entrenched the state with great power. Are there dangers in the present accumulation of civil power by the authorities? Yes, there certainly are, and we ought to be very wary of them. A government's definition of 'interim measures' is somewhat akin to a pastor's definition of the word 'Finally'.

Those in power are rarely keen on relinquishing it. Ronald Reagan once quipped that a temporary government program was the closest thing we have on earth to everlasting life.

Each side needs to listen to the other. Government powers regarding quarantine and isolation are most unwelcome and could well be prone to abuse. A former British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, has already called for a global government to combat the disease – an indication of the ever-present readiness of many to look to the civil powers, whether national or international, to solve all problems. At the moment, however, sensible extensions of government power in certain circumstances are surely necessary. Although not without controversy and opposition, most Australians accepted restrictions during the Spanish 'flu of 1918-1919.

### **(2) THESE TIMES SHOULD HELP US TO FOCUS ON THE LORD OF THE TEMPLE RATHER THAN THE TEMPLE OF THE LORD.**

The people of Judah in Jeremiah's day trusted in lying words: 'This is the temple of the Lord' (Jer.7:1-4), little realizing that it would soon be destroyed, and God would teach them that His glory was not trapped inside the temple (Ezek. chapters 1 & 10). At one time the Psalmist lamented: 'These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival' (Ps.42:4). A skipped meal makes the next one that much more enjoyable, and the absence of corporate worship for a time can be used by the Lord to enhance our appreciation of why David joyed when people urged him to join in worship with them (Psalm 122).

When Arians (those who rejected the full deity of Christ) took

over many of the churches in the fourth century, Athanasius of Alexandria responded: 'they hold the places, but you the Apostolic Faith ... Let us consider what is the greater - the place or the Faith.' His answer was: 'Clearly the true Faith.' We need the same perspective. The second temple was something of a disappointment to many who had seen the glory of the first temple (Ezra 3:12-13). Nevertheless, God's message to Joshua (the high priest) and Zerubbabel (the governor) was to be strong, not to fear, to realise the Spirit was with them, and to get on with the Lord's work (Haggai 2:1-5). The ideal and the necessary ought not to be mistaken for one another; and we can be thankful that God works through both.

### **(3) GOD'S WORD AND SPIRIT ARE STILL AT WORK.**

The word of God is not bound (2 Tim.2:9), and the Spirit goes where He wills (John 3:8). When the Italian fascist army invaded Abyssinia (Ethiopia) in 1935 the Protestant missionaries were

evicted. By the time that they returned after the war, the Church had not declined but grown. Something similar happened after the Maoist takeover of China in 1949. Christianity barely had a toehold in the country – perhaps a million or so – but today there may be 80-100 million Chinese identifying as Christians. God's kingdom will not collapse because our programmes have suffered some disorder.

God's kingdom is in God's hands. That should give us both peace and energy. 'Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love' (1 Cor.16:13-14).

And for prayer, here is John McClean's most helpful article, to be found at: <http://gsandc.org.au/prayer-during-the-pandemic/>

*Rev Dr Peter Barnes is the Moderator-General of the  
Presbyterian Church of Australia*