

Thought for the Day 30th April - John Thew

Profit and Loss in Isolation

When talk of pandemic first started, I naively felt a bit annoyed. The commentators kept speaking about the financial impact as much as, or more than the health impact. *'Why must everything be measured in financial terms?'* I asked myself.

Slowly it dawned that the virus was bringing not just suffering and mourning to many families and communities worldwide – it was changing the shape of daily community and life, and changing the structure of trade and commerce worldwide.

Some businesses have already gone to the wall. Unnumbered workers worldwide have been laid off, their jobs evaporating like the mist. Others are now working more from home than in the office. Many tenants are suddenly struggling or unable to pay the rent. Some families are now wishing they had been less ambitious with their mortgages and other credit extensions. School kids and uni students are enjoying, or perhaps not enjoying, learning-online – a generational first. Unemployment cues and soup kitchens are full of first-timers. Thousands of homeless are wondering what will happen when their one-month of provided accommodation comes to an end.

Now, if the situation is serious for us who are near the top of the international *'income and asset owner scale'*, think how serious it is for those at the other end. We've seen TV images of mayhem in India, as suddenly unemployed masses head for the dubious safety of their home villages, taking whatever they can carry as well as whatever they have caught. And we keep hearing reports of millions of desperately poor, with nowhere to go, simply shrugging into their cardboard shelters or whatever they have, hungrier than they were the night before.

For me, relatively unaffected by the virus and the fall of the share market and the value of the dollar, I need to rethink my Christian response and responsibility.

For example, in terms of relationships and personal contacts, I guess the answer starts with my established networks: family, friends, neighbours, connections. High on this list are you all, fellow church members. I confess I am missing you all – the common chit chat, the deeper talks, learning and praying together, your facial expressions, the reassuring handshake, the pat on the shoulder. Praise the Lord for technology like email and Zoom. Oh, and the telephone.

And then, my responsibilities outside of that immediate circle: people I know about but cannot personally interact with. For that, there are reputable help agencies we know and trust, working at home and internationally, who are able to do things we cannot do alone, but unable to do those things without help and generosity from me and you. Praise the Lord for means to help and for technology like internet banking and more.

Now, where is God when bad things happen? Dr. Don Carson, comments on Joseph being sold into slavery by his older brothers and ending up as PM in Egypt. He writes: *'In the one event – the selling of Joseph into slavery – there are two parties, and two quite different intentions. On the one hand, Joseph's brothers acted, and their intentions were evil; on the other hand, God acted, and his intentions were good. Both acted to bring about this event, but while the evil in it must be traced back to the brothers and no further, the good in it must be traced back to God.'* (D.A. Carson, *For the Love of God, Vol 1*, IVP 1998)

The same is true for the death of Jesus. *In the one event*, paranoid and over-ambitious religious leaders, with the compliance of Judas, were acting to silence Jesus, *while in the same event*, God was demonstrating his love for the world by giving up his son.

In the present situation, we see the Covid 19 virus spreading across the globe, striking without discrimination and without mercy, the evil of which is traced back to a fallen and broken world. *In this same situation*, though we do not yet see the outcome of God's intentions, we trust him to once again act in character, for good, so we will one day be able to mirror Joseph's words to his brothers: 'You intended to harm me but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.' (Genesis 50.20)

Already, we may be seeing some encouraging signs. Christians worldwide are reporting the start of fresh conversations with neighbours about serious questions of life. The numbers of hits on local church websites indicate more than regular congregations logging in to Sundays online – including people who may well find the unfamiliar culture of church a bit daunting. And some of the church-life gurus tell us that we (local congregations) should prepare ourselves for an increase of first-time attenders when the social distancing rules are relaxed.

Bottom line: We should expect to see this principle of 'dual operatives' continuing until Jesus returns. In every event and every outcome, we see signs of hostile natural causes and sinful human decisions. But in the same event and outcome, we should expect to see the fingerprints of God, at work for his good purposes.

To paraphrase Genesis 50.20, *this was done with evil intent and, humanly speaking, disastrous results. But in the same course of events, God was at work for good, to save many people and bring them to know and understand how much God loves them.*