April 10, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

When, Robert Oppenheimer, the head of the US effort to develop the atomic bomb, witnessed the first nuclear test, he quoted the *Bhagavad-Gita*, saying: *“Now I have become death, the destroyer of worlds.”* What this rather depressing quote expressed was his awakening to the changed world that was born in that cataclysmic event. Since then we have, as a society, pondered our own destruction, whether by nuclear warfare, planet-killer asteroids, or climate change. However, the present pandemic has brought the world to an awareness of what scientists have long known; that the single biggest threat to continued human dominance on this planet is among the smallest of things.

Viruses are the perfect predators of human beings and pose an existential threat. To be sure, there are other viruses more deadly than COVID 19, and the extraordinary social-distancing measures to date have successfully blunted its death toll. But we dare not lapse back into complacency because there is no reason to believe that its inevitable successor will not be even more contagious or lethal. Like Oppenheimer, we have collectively come to the uncomfortable realization that our world has irrevocably changed.

To visualize this, imagine you are in a small boat far from shore when a surprise storm capsizes your vessel and throws you into the sea. Somehow, you make it to the boat’s flimsy, yet still floating, life raft and clamber in. Once the immediate danger has passed, you try to think about what to do next, but find that thinking clearly is really hard to do after nearly drowning. [[1]](#footnote-1)

Ultimately, you manage to notice two things. First, that flimsy raft is saving your life and you need to stay in it until you get a better plan. Second, that flimsy raft saving you is not a good long-term option – you need to get to dry land.

The novel coronavirus pandemic is that storm, and the response of our world to it is the flimsy life raft that has kept us from drowning. But we are all painfully aware of this viral storm’s cost and that the flimsy raft is filled with suffering, bereavement, and loss of livelihoods. We are therefore understandably desperate to return to the dry land of “normal.”

In this, we are not unlike Jesus’ followers on the last day of Lent, which is known as “Holy” (or sometimes “Black”) Saturday. This is the day when the dull ache of reality set in for them that, not only was Jesus dead and gone, but their hopes and aspirations were laid in the tomb with him. The bedrock of their beliefs had become, as the old hymn says, nothing more than “sinking sand.”

Perhaps our tradition has not tended to emphasize Holy Saturday because, unlike Jesus’ disciples, we have the benefit of hindsight in knowing that Jesus will rise from the tomb on Easter Sunday. Yet, when tragedy strikes us, we can identify with their feelings at least a little bit. And with the novel coronavirus pandemic still raging around us, we suddenly find ourselves thrust into the old, old story in a shocking new way.

But just as the disciples could not retrace their steps from the shock of Holy Saturday to the triumph of Palm Sunday, neither can we go back to what was. As a very insightful Hong Kong graffiti artist spray-painted on a wall: *“We can’t return to normal because the normal we had was precisely the problem.”* It is in the midst of our own Holy Saturday feelings of discomfort, confusion, and fear, that we need recall the words of the ever-quotable Winston Churchill who once said: *“Never let a good crisis go to waste.”*

This statement is filled with hope rather than despair, and recognizes that although we may be sailing in uncharted waters, our ship is neither rudderless nor without a desired destination in mind. Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday remind us that God’s loving purposes will not be thwarted. Although the doors of the church may be closed, Easter cannot be cancelled.

Soon, and very soon, the darkness will all be past. What Jesus did with his own grave, he promises to do with ours: empty it. [[2]](#footnote-2) And because our hope is alive and well, we can join with Julian of Norwich who, in another time of plague, affirmed that: “*All shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.”* In the meantime, we have an unprecedented opportunity to wisely use our enforced confinement to steer toward a new and better post-pandemic shore.

Grace and Peace to You,

Dr. Bob

1. Marc Lipsitch, Yonatan Grad, <https://www.statnews.com/2020/04/01/navigating-covid-19-pandemic/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Max Lucado [↑](#footnote-ref-2)