

THE CHURCH IN OUR POST-COVID WORLD

SALLY NELSON

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Shaped by Jesus, the Christian story integrates pain rather than rejecting it. This means the Church can be a hopeful presence in a traumatised nation, but it needs to be able to listen as well as share, writes Sally Nelson

Never has it been easier to speak to the world than it is right now. Anyone with an internet device can broadcast from home, and Christians have not been slow to make use of this opportunity. Surveys in the UK (such as the recent Tearfund report ¹) suggest that up to a quarter of the population has been accessing online worship and prayer. After the strict lockdown has ended, should churches continue their online activity? Probably we should - but as well as our increasingly competent outputs, can we be good 'receivers'? The Church has a unique opportunity to be a hopeful presence in a traumatised nation, but this needs to include *speaking and listening*.

I have been exploring the idea that lockdown has been an unexpected *liminal* space: an 'in-between' or threshold place², unknown and challenging territory. We know what 'before lockdown' was like and we look forward to 'after'; but lockdown itself was in-between, a time during which we were unsure about a lot of things.

1 See, for example, Tearfund UK research at www.tearfund.org/en/media/press_releases/many_brits_look_to_faith_during_lockdown/

2 S Nelson, *Covid 19: Lazarus or Jesus*, at www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/573086/Covid_19_Lazarus.aspx

In traditional societies, life changes are understood as being such 'in-between' states: so pregnancy is a state between girl and mother, and adolescence, betrothal, dying and bereavement are similar liminal experiences: temporary, but life-changing. The best-known example is probably the experience in many cultures of boys at the threshold of adulthood: they may be sent into the wilderness to undertake a series of challenges, guided by a wise elder (a 'liminal guide') who has gone that way before. Having successfully completed their testing and learned some wisdom, they return to the community as adult men. The liminal space is a time of personal transformation, and the whole society recognises the changed status from boys to men.

In our lockdown liminality, our death-averse western culture has been challenged to its roots by isolation, untreatable illness, and death. Unlike the examples above, no-one has been this way before: we have no national wise elder who has seen it all.

In this space, Jesus can be our liminal guide: the One who knows the way through suffering, death and resurrection. Together we are the Body of Christ, and so we take that role for our wider society: in Christ we, too, have 'been this way before' and we have a great hope that while we cannot avoid death, Jesus has mapped a safe way for us.

Our story, which integrates pain rather than rejecting it, is going to be incredibly important in our post-Covid world, in which people may suffer the effects of suppressed depression, isolation and loss.

The increased interest in faith during lockdown is a natural human response to this need for a guide through a mysterious landscape, and indeed, the Church has always known that individuals in transition (the sick and bereaved etc) are often seekers of God. It may be that, for a while, the Church's 'voice' is a little louder than before the pandemic. Our digital output, the stories we tell, can be words of wisdom and invitation to those in the wilderness.

To be genuinely helpful, the stories that we output must be shaped by the story of Jesus. This doesn't mean that we need to be 'more preachy' than before, so that people hear the story straight; nor do we need to be 'more holy' than before so that people see that the Body is fit to be their 'liminal guide'. All our stories will grow out of local contexts and there is no one-size-fits-all. What we *cannot* avoid is the shape of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, since we really are the Body of Christ – we are not 'a bit like' the Body: we *are* the Body.

This means that our corporate, worldwide, experience as the Church IS like that of Jesus: we teach, preach, heal and minister the good news; we have suffered (and will continue to suffer) persecution for the sake of justice and righteousness; we will die; and we will be raised again to a life that is everlasting. Any individual Christian may not have *all* these experiences; but the Body will experience it all. Jesus died and was raised, and there is a forward and hopeful momentum to the Church's story. We know that we are going somewhere, not nowhere, and this story is unique: it does not reject or rationalise suffering and pain, like our wider culture, but integrates it into the Jesus-shaped journey – Jesus keeps his scars in his resurrected body.

This story, which integrates pain rather than rejecting it, is going to be incredibly important in our post-Covid world, in which people may suffer the effects of suppressed depression, isolation and loss. Western society can be 'reductionist' about the past - we dig up the past for causes and reasons but struggle fully to embrace what we find. For example, currently we are realising painfully that many western countries have built their affluence on the colonial exploitation of others. This past cannot be changed and should not be ignored or rejected: it must be embraced and transformed, as is betrayal, suffering and death in the Jesus story. This integration of suffering is the *only* way that God has shown us to overcome it. We are not given a cause or an explanation – at least, not one on which we can agree.

Does this mean the church has a unique perspective on the suffering that Covid-19 has caused? Well of course, causes are important. Scientists must explore the emergence of the virus and its transmission and infection. Technology and science are good gifts of God. However, in pinning down the cause or the blame for Covid-19 – whether it be an animal sale in Wuhan market or whether the pandemic could have been handled better – these discoveries may bring temporary emotional and intellectual closure, but they cannot reduce our suffering. We have still lost our loved ones,

our jobs and our freedom. If we follow Jesus, our task is to integrate these losses (however painfully and slowly) into the overall story of hope. In short: we could say that while society looks *back* to salve its pain, the Body of Christ looks *forward*. Rather than asking who is responsible, we can ask: how do we now live, and what can we do next? This shifts our focus from *causes* to *possibilities*, although with great pastoral sensitivity for those who are in pain: we do not pass over the suffering.

When I worked as a hospice chaplain, patients often needed to tell their stories, and the process of telling brought a measure of healing in the face of death. This storytelling could take many forms, from simply chatting to something far more elaborate. One charitable project, Rosetta Life³, helps hospice patients to use poetry, film, and song to make records of their lives, sometimes assisted by professional artists.

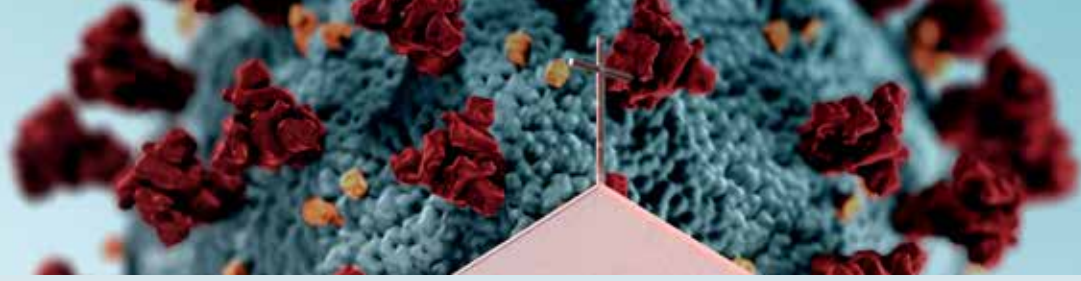
In the Trimar Hospice in Weymouth, patient Maxine had a studio photo taken with her 15-year-old daughter, Jessica. The photo was beautiful and showed mother and daughter laughing together. Through Rosetta Life, the musician Billy Bragg helped Maxine to write lyrics about the photo and set them to music. It became a moving (and briefly best-selling) song entitled *We laughed*, which celebrated life, love and relationship while acknowledging that all were coming to an end⁴. Making this song constituted one example of what we might term 'healing unto death'⁵. It manages to combine sadness and loss with a sense of moving forward without bitterness or anger (though not everyone who is terminally ill is able to find this place of acceptance).



3 Further information on Rosetta Life can be found at www.rosettalife.org

4 Details at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ybkb6Kj6HUI

5 A term used by David Watson about his terminal cancer in his final radio interview with Nick Page in 1984



The theologian Dorothee Sölle suggested that we suffer in three 'movements', which I shall summarise as shock, communication, and change⁶. Sölle says that suffering first arrives as a brutal shock to the system and our voices are 'muted'. Any attempt to 'explore' the suffering is beyond us: we are reeling from the impact. If, later, a person cannot communicate suffering, it 'gets stuck' inside and may cause inner harm – depression, or worse. If it can be told, suffering becomes something known by the community and then change can happen (which might be inner healing, or societal change).

Sadly, there are many reasons why people cannot communicate their suffering. Sometimes we do not want to listen to a painful story; or, worse, hearers can be indifferent to the pain of the teller or even suppress the telling.

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Again, the Black Lives Matter movement is a current example of how a story of suffering seems at last to have breached this final boundary into communication: the voices have been heard, and change may at last be coming.

This liminal and uncertain time has pushed us into places to which we would not have chosen to go, and made us press 'pause', giving an opportunity to reflect. It has also pushed many into a place of pain. Can this also be a permanent transformation of our weary consumerism? The Body *can* hear and hold the pain of the world, because Jesus has already been this way. We have a wonderful and transformational story 'to tell to the nations', yet maybe this is the time not just to tell it, but also to find ways in which we can listen to the cries around us.

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⁶ Dorothee Sölle, *Suffering*, translated by ER Kalin. Fortress Press, 1975

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