The COVID Cross

Pandemic. It is not a word that falls easily from the lips. In a highly scientific and technological society it may strike one as a bit odd, like something from a more primitive past. That is the power of nature and a sobering reminder that while we have come to control many things in it, nature still can transcend our power and understanding, even with fatal results. This pandemic has reminded us all too clearly how limited human power is. It also brings into clear focus how thin and vulnerable human society is when the whole world can be turned upside down in a matter of weeks. In such a world being ravaged by an “invisible enemy,” where is one to turn? The fact that one cannot see it or easily trace it places in the heart a fear and anxiety not unfamiliar from the Middle Ages. The existential experience is the same. We are left with a feeling of vulnerability against an unknown power greater than ourselves and for which we as yet do not have any strong defenses. Evolutionary biology crashes into human society. To “shelter in place” and “social distance” are pretty basic but limited responses, ones not unfamiliar from centuries ago. We have been driven back to the most elemental of human responses, isolation. Where, then, is God in the midst of pandemic? Here incarnation meets the deepest of human needs, affirming God’s identification with and understanding of our suffering and anxiety on the COVID Cross.

When there is no obvious ultimate cause or reason, perhaps the only possible source is God. But, if God, then why would a good God do such a thing? For divisive theological dualists the next step is natural, God must be mad at us for something we have done and is punishing us. Since it cannot be our fault, the search is then on for a scapegoat, whether it be ‘gays’ with the AIDS crisis, New Orleans’ perceived licentiousness for hurricane Katrina, or America’s secularism for 9/11. For some today the source must be China, the LGBTQ community, or environmentalists. It is theodicy at its most simplistic, and it must be challenged. A free creation and human greed combine to make an international disaster, not divine intervention. It is here that the cross confronts the COVID-19 virus, not with platitudes or panaceas, with naming and blaming, but with the affirmation that God is with us.

The first century world of Jesus was a time of disease and death such that much of Jesus’ ministry was spent in healing from disease and disabilities. It was not unfamiliar to him. Such is the nature of enfleshment. If one takes enfleshment with all biological seriousness, as Niels Gregersen does in his concept of “deep incarnation,” (see The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World), we can understand that God identifies with human suffering at the most basic of biological levels. The suffering of the COVID virus is not foreign to God and therefore we are not left alone within it. It means that God is with us in all the biological suffering of an evolutionary world. While the source of the virus is not definitively confirmed, currently it is believed to have originated in bats (as a number of other coronaviruses have), which perhaps bit a pangolin (a sort of plated anteater), which, as an endangered species, was illegally captured and sold at an illegal wild animal market in Wuhan, China. The source of the pandemic? Human greed. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, “Never have so few done such harm to so many.” Theologically we would call this a result of human sin. It requires human capacity to take something biologically derived and place it on the world market. Had the pangolin been left alone, perhaps this would not have happened.

At such a time of anxiety and isolation, there is a deep longing for hope, meaning, and perhaps forgiveness. To understand the enfleshment of God as deep incarnation, connecting throughout all biological creation, means that no creature, including the human, is truly separated from God, especially those who are dying alone from the virus. If God is truly present to us at the most intimate levels of our existence, then so too is the divine promise. This takes Immanuel, “God with us,” to a whole new level and connects the present suffering from the COVID-19 virus to the cross of Christ. It affirms that even if our cognitive faculties or awareness are not functioning well (or at all) that God is still with us. It is not our awareness of God that makes God’s grace effective in our lives but God’s awareness of us! That is the ground of our hope, not our own reason or strength, even as we pray that a medical solution may soon be found.

As Creator to creation one might metaphorically say that God is “entangled” (non-local, relational holism) with creation, ourselves included, at the foundational levels of material existence analogous to entangled subatomic particles (see Simmons, The Entangled Trinity: Quantum Physics and Theology). Deep incarnation is a way of thinking Christologically about the redemptive entanglement of the Creator with the whole of creation, giving us hope and release from fear and anxiety as this is carried up into and transformed.
by God. This foundational relationality then grounds divine presence in a suffering world and provides a connectivity for accompaniment and hope in the midst of decline and loss. It is the COVID Cross. Such accompaniment is also expressed through the medical professionals and others who are working tirelessly, and with some personal risk, to help everyone survive throughout the world. This too is an expression of God’s care and love within an entangled creation. Transcending one’s self-interest for the sake of the ill other can certainly be understood as a gift of the Spirit. *Pandemic reminds us that we too are part of that same entangled creation and that we are also our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers for we are all in this together.* Perhaps this may be one of the most hopeful outcomes from such a horrible pandemic.

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