

## COVID-19, suffering, and Christ

The COVID-19 pandemic has been described as a once in one hundred year event.<sup>1</sup> And while in Australia we've been spared the large numbers of deaths that have happened overseas, the impact on people here is still significant.

For one, we're being exposed to much more death than we're used to seeing, if only on our TV screens and news feeds. At the peak, 800 people were dying each day in Italy, 700 a day in the UK, and 2,000 a day in the US. There have now been more deaths in the US from COVID-19 than in the whole of the Vietnam war.

Moreover, our health professionals (who are used to seeing death more than most people) are being exposed to the possibility of catching a deadly virus more than even they are used to. Currently 1 in 72 people who've contracted COVID-19 in Australia have died;<sup>2</sup> that may not sound like a lot, but I suspect that statistic would seem pretty scary if you're the one being exposed. In countries where the outbreak has been much worse than here, health care workers have made up a significant proportion of infections e.g. 9% in Italy.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, those with pre-existing medical conditions, especially respiratory conditions (like my wife) are suddenly faced with the possibility of dying much sooner than anticipated. It's a strange feeling to have it dawn on you that if this thing goes south you might not be on this earth for very much longer.

And then there are the economic impacts. I was talking to one of the owners of my local coffee shop in late April and asked him how he was going. "Stressed" was the reply. JobKeeper is great, but he's had to pay all their staff the \$1,500 per fortnight for the first month before JobKeeper kicks in, while not having work for most of them to do. He & his wife also still have to pay full rent on their premises. All while smiling and serving takeaway coffee to people like me.

While the suffering caused by this pandemic could have been much worse, we're not used to being exposed to suffering on a scale like this.

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<sup>1</sup> "This is a once-in-100 year type event, we haven't seen this sort of thing in Australia since the end of the first World War, but together we are of course up to this challenge." [Australian PM Scott Morrison]  
<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/18/australia/coronavirus-covid-19-update-australia-intl-hnk/index.html> (All articles accessed 13 May 2020)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert/coronavirus-covid-19-current-situation-and-case-numbers>

<sup>3</sup> The International Council of Nurses reports that in Italy, health care workers make up 9% of COVID-19 cases.  
<https://www.icn.ch/news/high-proportion-healthcare-workers-covid-19-italy-stark-warning-world-protecting-nurses-and>

## Suffering and Aussie culture<sup>4</sup>

What compounds the impact for us though is that as a culture, we're not as well equipped for dealing with suffering as perhaps we should be.

Tim Keller puts it this way: 'we are more shocked and undone by suffering than were our ancestors. Westerners are peculiarly traumatised by suffering.'<sup>5</sup> Most cultures over time have accepted suffering as painful yet meaningful in light of life beyond death.

The common non-religious view in our culture though, says that there is no greater story that extends beyond our lives, nor any information available from outside humanity about the significance of life and suffering. There is no sense of living in awe before a god of some kind. The only reality is the material world, and life is mostly about finding health, safety, happiness and fulfilment in this life. Indeed, forty years ago anthropologist Phillip Reiff observed that Western culture was morphing into a 'therapeutic society' in which, in the absence of any greater spiritual context, the highest goal of life is to maximise pleasure and minimise pain.<sup>6</sup>

This means that for many people in our Aussie culture, there is no purpose in suffering. It is not an opportunity, or a test, or a step on a path, and it carries no meaning within a greater story of our lives.

## Dying and Aussie culture

Moreover, in our Aussie culture death is so terrifying that we typically do everything we can to avoid being confronted by it.

We rarely see people die. In modern Australia, death usually happens in hospitals and nursing homes rather than at home, and it is generally professionals who see and touch the body. Funerals too are more and more becoming upbeat (and sometimes coffin-less) memorials or celebrations in which talk of death and eternity has been replaced by a sharing of memories.

However, for many in our community, the *process* of dying has come to hold even greater fear than death itself. We fear the pointless suffering of death even more than we fear death itself.

The suffering faced by people on account of COVID-19 demands our compassion – both to do what we can to relieve it *and* gently to point people to a better way of coping with it, a way shaped by the gospel.

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<sup>4</sup> Note what follows in this and the next section borrows heavily from GiST's issues paper 'The Gospel and Voluntary Assisted Dying'. You can find this on the GiST website at <http://www.gist.org.au/the-gospel-and-voluntary-assisted-dying/>

<sup>5</sup> Tim Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, Riverhead Books: USA, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Philip Reiff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, University of Chicago Press, 1987.

## Jesus and suffering

Jesus shows us that suffering *can* be meaningful and full of hope, if our story is connected to God's bigger story.

On the night before he was to suffer at the hands of the Roman authorities and be crucified, Jesus confronted his heavenly Father in prayer about his suffering. In famous words he prayed: "Father, all things are possible for you. Take this cup [of suffering] away from me!" (Mark 14:36) It was an anguished prayer from one who had no desire to suffer as he was about to.

Yet Jesus also knew that the story of his life was intimately connected to God's bigger story (or plan) for the world, and that God's plan was good. And so he finished his prayer with the words, "Yet not what I will, but what you will." Trusting that God's plan is good allowed Jesus to take comfort that his suffering was not meaningless; in fact, Jesus' suffering was the most meaningful act in history.

Jesus' death holds such meaning because it deals with the root cause of suffering. How Jesus' death deals with suffering is a story on its own, a story about how through his death Jesus assuaged God's rightful anger at human sin and made possible the renewal of both human beings and the created world (universe) we live in, a renewal which will eliminate suffering in that renewed world forever.

The point is that Jesus was able to submit to his heavenly Father in the Garden of Gethsemane because he was connected to, and trusted in the goodness of, that 'bigger story' his heavenly Father was weaving. And so his suffering was still painful, but it was anything but meaningless.

## Suffering and us

The apostle Paul tells us that same logic applies to us who follow Jesus. He says, in a verse that's almost as famous as Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him." Why? Because, "those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son." (Romans 8:28 & 29)

Just before these verses Paul has been talking about the bigger story: of how Jesus' death makes possible the renewal of human beings and all creation (8:1-17), and how the creation itself 'groans' as in the pains of childbirth while it waits for this renewal, a groaning that's matched inwardly in those who follow Jesus. (v.22-23)

What Paul is saying then (v.28-29) is that those who follow Jesus have their lives connected to that bigger story. Because the renewal he's been talking about starts now, with God using everything that happens to Christians (even their sufferings) to renew them in their character; or as Paul puts it, to 'conform [them] to the image of his Son'.

And that means that all of life, even our suffering, *can* be meaningful if we trust in Jesus. Because all of life, even our suffering, contributes to the story God is weaving in our lives

to renew us into the image of Christ. And to the bigger story of the world God is weaving our smaller stories into.

To be sure, suffering for Christians is still painful. But it's no longer meaningless.

### **Back to the coffee shop**

That's great for me as I follow Jesus. But what about my local coffee shop owners?

To be honest, explaining all that to them in the context of a short conversation in my local coffee shop is almost impossible!

But I hope that in the context of a developing friendship outside that context, they get to see the hope and stability that being connected to God's bigger story brings, not only in my life but in the lives of other Christians they know as well. And that when the time comes for me to give them an answer for the hope that's within me (1 Peter 3:15), knowing God's bigger story will give me a story to tell that's better than the one they've been living by.