

## COVID-19 and God's Protection

Cantalamesa, the apostolic preacher, or preacher to the papal household, preaching during the liturgy of the passion at the Vatican said, "noting that scripture teaches us that during difficult times, the first thing we should do is "cry out to God." Seeing the coffin boxes lined up in the churches for the funeral, the dead bodies packed in polyethylene bags, mass graves, the TV channels cautioning us that we are living in an extremely dangerous time ...; as victims of COVID-19, the world could only "cry out to God."

Covid-19 has caught the world by utter surprise. The microscopic virus could infect over 2.6 million across the globe in just three months and kill as many as 3 lakh. The Global fight against the pandemic, the world's most extensive lockdown, social distancing, the global hunt for a vaccine ... Do we see it as a TV comic serial, or is it real chaos in the world?

The pandemic that spread around the world in the season of Lent is not ending miraculously as Good Friday gives way to Easter Sunday. The liturgical calendar has rolled out, but the churches remain empty, yet, hoping that the long Lent imposed by the coronavirus Lockdown 1.0 will end by the 14th of April. Our pastors are eagerly planning to celebrate Easter, at least on the 19<sup>th</sup> of April, a week later. To their great dismay, Lockdown 2.0 was proclaimed to be continued till the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May. But it looks that it may continue for many more months to come.

The striking words of Martyn Lloyd-Jones, in an article written by Mark McIntyre, though it was published in 1953, it addresses the present crisis brought by COVID-19.

*"Let us not, therefore, be stumbled when we see surprising things happening in the world. Rather let us ask, 'What is the relevance of this event to the kingdom of God?' Or, if strange things are happening to you personally, do not complain, but say, 'What is God teaching me through this? What is there in me that needs to be corrected? Where have I gone wrong, and why is God allowing these things?' There is a meaning in them if only we can see it. We need not become bewildered and doubt the love or the justice of God. If God were unkind enough to answer some of our prayers at once, and in our way, we should be very impoverished Christians. Fortunately, God sometimes delays his answer to deal with selfishness or things in our lives which should not be there. He is concerned about us and intends to fit us for a fuller place in his kingdom. We should, therefore, judge every event in the light of God's great, eternal, and glorious purpose."*

There is so much to observe in these words. There could be nothing more surprising than COVID-19 pandemic in many of our lifetime. The Lockdown extension has brought us time to ponder and reflect personally and as a family to share within our fellowships and prayer meetings online or over telephonic conversation with our friends, what Lloyd-Jones has offered us to critically and prayerfully and silently ponder. (salah)

While we may lose many lives to this virus, we must not lose our humanity because of its fear. During this season of Easter, we should follow the women and the disciples, to the tomb, who were caught in something that it is too large for us to understand. Yet, the Holy Saturday and the Easter teach us the limits of words and the limitlessness of faith. The lockdown should enable us to bring before us with gratitude to God, the healthcare professionals – the Doctors, nurses, the paramedics and the service personals for their dedication and courage, engaging untiringly and risking their lives to save the lives of those caught to this deadly pandemic unaware and us from it. Let us show our gratitude to them and pray for them and their families, God's protection and care. We are proud that many of our Lutheran Doctors, nurses, paramedics are engaged in such noble services, and our Hospitals and medical centres are open for any emergencies.

The United Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India expresses its gratitude to Health care professionals – Doctors, Nurses, paramedics, service staff, police personals, sanitary workers, and affirms its solidarity with them as they lead the fight against COVID-19. We mourn the loss of doctors who sacrificed their lives in this pandemic. We grieve the death of Dr Simon Hercules, a 55-year-old neurosurgeon in Chennai, Dr John L Sailo Rynthiang, a distinguished doctor and the Director of the Bethany Hospitals in Shillong, Meghalaya, a Doctor from Nellore in Andhra Pradesh and the Government Doctor from Coimbatore and many more who died serving the victims of COVID-19. We regret and feel ashamed that they were denied the respectful funeral for all the sacrifices they made to humanity. The United Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India condemn such inhuman acts of violence, which breaks our hearts. These incidences in several places indicate the fear that is currently spreading more than the threat of the virus itself. The churches – the pastors have responsibilities in bringing awareness to dispel the fear from the minds of the people.

We immensely appreciate and thank the Central Government for enacting an ordinance to protect health workers from safeguarding their dignity and honour and also to several State Governments proposing to give State honours and instituting Insurances for the Medical professionals.

Our Honourable Prime Minister Narendra Modi needs all our prayers for his leadership in this time of crisis to restrict the spread of the pandemic in India. Our prayers also for the State Governments that work on a war footing to bring the calamity down on the one hand and the support to the suffering poor and daily labourers and the migrant workers.

The Lutheran churches are joining hands with the Governmental and Non-Governmental Organisation in several welfare programmes and awareness-building programmes to the people. We are also taking steps to support the migrant workers, the daily labourers and the poor who are facing challenges for their survival. While thanking the bishops and church leaders for their support, UELCI also appeals to all the churches to continue their dedicated service with the compassionate heart to suffering people. Let us pray to our God Almighty to help overcome the financial constraints that the Churches are facing due to the lockdown that curbs them to pay the monthly salaries to the Church workers.

UELCI appeals to all the member churches to observe the Sunday after the Lockdown 2.0 (10<sup>th</sup> of May 2020, if it is called off) as a “Thanksgiving Sunday of Deliverance from COVID-19”. It will be a day to pray for all those who help us – Health care professionals, police and security professionals and Sanitary workers, etc. We will also thank God for our Leaders, Prime Minister, Cabinet Ministers, Chief Ministers of the States and pray for God’s guidance in rebuilding the nations and the world, and revive the economy and the efforts of the Research teams in finding the vaccine for the virus.

Life will never be the same. The threat and fear of the virus will continue for some more time on the one hand, and the other hand, the economic impact of the virus, is something the world has not seen before. Each day, it becomes more apparent that this is a once-in-a-lifetime chance to consider a fundamental question about the spirit and morality of our way of living: Having emptied ourselves, what do we want to fill our world with once it is time to rebuild?

Martin Luther’s famous hymn, “The Mighty Fortress, is our God, A bulwark never failing,” comes out of Psalm 46, read at times of our need for protection amid dangers and tribulations. Pope Benedict, in his Theology of Holy Saturday, says, “After the two World Wars, the lagers and the gulags, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, our era has ever increasingly become a Holy Saturday. This day’s darkness challenges all those who question life, and it challenges us believers in particular.” And he concludes that God’s guiding light and saving love will never leave us.

Let us take a pledge to support and be part of the Governmental initiatives to combat the virus. Stay home and keep physical distancing, use the time to pray for the victims of COVID-19 and all those dedicated workers. While keeping the social distancing, follow closer contact with your loved ones and well-wishers and those who are in fear of the virus by calling them and speaking to them and encouraging them and praying with them. Pastors are busy doing online streaming services; it is time to get personally in contact with the members of our congregation, praying with them and assuring them of your prayers for them. May the Risen Christ’s presence fill our hearts and families and our churches, with his peace. Amen.

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