

Turn to the scriptures for inspiration in times of trouble

I write amidst the ever-increasing number of people being infected and affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and the collective impact it is having upon all of us.

Our hospitals are full – not of people in need of surgery or other medical care – but beds reserved for the surge in numbers afflicted by Covid-19.

What does the Church of God say to people whose lives and regular rhythm of work, rest and prayer has been disrupted by an invisible enemy such as the corona virus?

The impact is exacerbated by so many uncertainties, not least of which being the way we make provision for the present and the future.

The loss of personal income precipitates having to prioritise our regular monthly expenditure.

Reaching out to family and neighbours has lost its spontaneity because of social distancing.

Going out to buy essential foodstuff must be planned with some military precision: remember my mask, spend as little time as possible in the queue and shop, and no trying-on of clothes.

What more can we do as Christians in such a tumultuous time in our metro, country, and the world?

There are two major issues which require our attention – the pandemic and the highlighting of racism in our social discourse too.

I recently encountered the expression, "Lockdown Syndrome".

It describes the fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on our collective psyche.

An urban definition proffered is this, "...the feeling of depression and sadness because there is a mandatory 'stay at home' mandate from the government".

In a single moment, the declaration by our president, Mr Ramaphosa, of a national state of emergency on the 23rd March 2020 changed our social context forever.

So many things we have taken-for-granted suddenly ended abruptly: no schooling, no work, no cigarettes and alcohol sales and no church, mosque, temple, or synagogue attendance!

All these closures precipitated positive and negative manifestations.

Positively, the benevolence of human beings resulted in a rallying around feeding the hungry and going the extra mile for the indigent.

I am privileged to have witnessed this magnanimity first-hand as I have gone around visiting various feeding schemes run from churches.

The most heart-warming aspect was that each house or church fed the wider community from the soup kitchens.

The people who came had their immediate need for a meal met. It brought to mind Jesus' teaching in Matthew 25:35-40, [Jesus continued], "...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink...Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?' and Jesus responded, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

The pandemic has gifted ecumenism a wonderful opportunity to cooperate in a united witness to feeding the hungry in our midst.

We must give thanks to God for bringing us together in this most gracious manner that strengthens our incarnation of the Gospel. After all, this is what Jesus prayed for in the High Priestly prayer in the Gospel of John 17, "...that they may become completely one so that the world may know that you have sent me..."

It is an indictment upon us as a society that the minute the president moved the lockdown from level 5 to levels 4 and 3 respectively, the public outcry was not for food for all but rather the individual need to purchase alcohol and tobacco products.

What is more lamentable are the legal battles being fought contesting the lockdown level or the need to lift restrictions on cigarettes.

Really? If ever there was a waste of valuable resources that could be spent altruistically, then that time is now.

This is only superseded by citizens who wilfully continue to break the rules such as holding memorial "services" at the beachfront. The list of transgressions knows no boundaries.

Negatively, we have also witnessed the race issue being moved to the centre from the margins of our common life together. The death of George Floyd at the hands of the Minnesota police department has flooded out television and social media screens.

How are Christians to respond at a time such as this?

We need to turn to the Scriptures. The psalmist, David, was equally perplexed during a period of moral and social upheaval.

This led him to ask, "If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?" (Psalm 11:3).

His response was to find solace in God. After all, we proclaim that God is our refuge and strength!

In Isaiah 49:23 we are assured that "...those who wait for me shall not be put to shame".

Therefore, we must not yield to fear or hopelessness.

We must reset our lives; God first, cling to Jesus, maintain respect for the God-image all people are endowed with and strive to be continuously filled with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18).

Doing so puts us in the best position to be used by God as salt and light in a dark and decaying world.

We belong to a single human race. The church needs to influence the discourse on race by safeguarding the rights of all people irrespective of race, ethnicity, social standing, gender, or religion.

We are a diverse people, and consequently we should stand against any cultural imperialism and actively celebrate the riches of every culture.

The Apostle Paul reminds us at a time such as this that, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus". (Gal. 3:28).

I implore each person to commit to combating the viruses of racism and corona by observing the protocols we have been given and not allow ourselves to become complacent.

Let us build hope and commit to sustaining the connections of community.

Please adhere to government and provincial guidelines in each context.

Sustain practical care through looking out for the most vulnerable.

Keep in mind those made more vulnerable through the situation, including those losing income and social support.

Let us support government initiatives in seeking to keep us safe at this time.

Please, let us never forget those on the frontlines, our health workers. We dare not tire in our encouragement of them.

Remember, as the church of God, we are called to be a voice of calm and reassurance, affirming that God is with us.

May God continue to bless Africa and turn His face kindly towards all of us.

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