

Faith in a Time of COVID-19
By C. Andrew Doyle

Last week I received the following beautiful, vulnerable, and bold letter from one of our long time Episcopal lay pastoral care givers. She is a good person, a truly faithful person, and a deeply spiritual person. She has been a part of the Episcopal Church for a very long time. She has a true servant's heart. Her daring honesty reveals her search for the truth. Her courage reveals her desire to help others. Her longing for an answer to her question divulges the questions many are asking right now at this very moment.

Allow me to disclose a portion of her letter to me for context,

“As Christians, we are told frequently, by pastors and fellow Christians, that we are to be faithful, have faith, believe that God/Christ is with us. I really don't know, any more, what that means. Consequently, I am unable to share this advice with anyone else. The following questions are ones my friends and family are asking, questions for which I have no ready answer: In what are we to have faith? How do we know God is here, walking alongside us through our trials? We certainly can't have faith that we will be spared from illness or hardship. And, if God is walking with us, why doesn't God pull us out of the way when disaster comes? 'Have faith' has become an empty expression. By no means am I fearful. I have always been a calm, non-anxious person... This is undoubtedly an issue with which all people who believe in a living God are struggling. What does it mean to have faith, now more than ever? Is it only faith in the resurrection, or is it more?

In writing my response I found hope and faith too. It was a gift to be in conversation over several emails with this parishioner. Like many things in ministry sometimes it is the minister who also receives grace from the interaction. This was certainly one of those moments. I am grateful for her note to me and her questions. After all, it is in engaging the questions that sometimes we find what we were looking for all along. Here is my response to her:

Dear _____,

I have not forgotten you. Thank you for your patience. Your thoughts have been with me for the last week. I am so grateful to share this conversation with you. Though, I will not share your name, I think the questions you ask and our conversation would be so very helpful to others. So, I encourage us both to share what we can glean from this email exchange. I do hope you will take a bit of time and answer me with your own thoughts and what has brought you comfort in these last days as well.

Your questions remind me of C. S. Lewis' similar correspondence with a fellow Christian. The question was: How are we to live in this age?

We are to live as “you would have lived in the sixteenth century when the plague visited London almost every year, or as you would have lived in a Viking age when raiders from Scandinavia might land and cut your throat any night; or indeed, as you are already living in an age of cancer, an age of syphilis, an age of paralysis, an age of air raids, an age of railway accidents, an age of motor accidents,” writes C. S. Lewis. (1948 in *Present Concerns: Journalistic Essays*)

Christians have lived under occupation, oppression, slavery, fear of the atomic bomb, civil war, and a host of other trials. There is some comfort in this notion that I am not the first Christian to have suffered in a time of trial. The knowledge of their life and suffering adds meaning to the Lord's prayer, "deliver me from evil" and "save me from a time of trial" – depending on your translation.

I think part of what grieves us is that for most of our life we put our hope and trust in other things – worldly things. This is not unusual for it is part of the modern society we live in. It is imbedded in our psyche and our outlook. In times of trial such hope and trust in the wider cultural norms can still be manifest. For instance, I do have faith that doctors, nurses, and scientists are working on a cure. I have faith and hope in a vaccine, in immune systems that will fight the virus, and in therapeutics that will ease suffering and heal the sick. I have faith that our economy will go up and down but that we have a strong economy that actually withstand (and in the past has grown) following crisis whether it be war, earthquakes, storms, or depressions and recessions. I have faith in our government because I have faith in people and people are trying to help resource states and figure out creative ways to meet the health needs of our population. So, I do have faith in our life together now.

I have faith too that if we follow protocols, "stay at home – work safe," and engage in helping decrease the community spread of the virus I am doing good. I am saving lives. I am even saving my life and those of my family.

God has given us wisdom and creativity to deal with times such as these. I have faith in God's gifts to humanity to co-create with God solutions to our times.

Pope Francis wrote this:

The storm exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities. It shows us how we have allowed to become dull and feeble the very things that nourish, sustain and strengthen our lives and our communities. The tempest lays bare all our prepackaged ideas and forgetfulness of what nourishes our people's souls; all those attempts that anesthetize us with ways of thinking and acting that supposedly "save" us, but instead prove incapable of putting us in touch with our roots and keeping alive the memory of those who have gone before us. We deprive ourselves of the antibodies we need to confront adversity. ([You can read the Papal address here.](#))

I imagine you are not the only one wrestling with the emptiness of meaning around "have faith." What I think that you sense with every pastoral bone in your body up is that it is a time when *passages of scripture* and a sense of *blessing* may not be as comforting as they were over the last decade. Something more on faith may be needed.

You have already remarked on the faith that is in you. The faith that death will have no victory. You speak of the faith that is beyond a faith in human love and care. You speak of a faith beyond science and the mechanisms of society. You shared that you have the Easter faith of resurrection and that death and darkness will not have the last word on life in this world. This certainly is the beginning to the rest.

You ask, "In what are we to have faith? How do we know God is here, walking alongside us through our trials? We certainly can't have faith that we will be spared from illness or hardship." These are great questions each rooted in deeper questions about pain and suffering and God. They are about faith in God's goodness and presence.

Theologian and Episcopal priest Marilyn McCord Adams spent her lifetime of research and thinking on the problem of evil and how it shapes your question. What she so well points out that we humans typically start with the bad stuff and not God's goodness. So, we ask how can God allow this to happen? There is certainly a lot you can read about the answers to that question. A lot of popular Christian thinking on that answer is not particularly helpful. She says the better question is to ask what is God going to do with God's creation now that humans experience pain and suffering in it? What I think she is pointing out is that God is so very good. God has brought about creation and walks in God's garden – to use a metaphor from Genesis. God is active in it bringing good out of terrible situations. God experiences it. Adams says so eloquently in this video, "God does not ask of humans anything God has not experienced." This is the goodness of the Christian God. Finally, she points out that Medieval theologians like Anselm, who lived in the midst of terrible death, plague, war, and famine understood the greatness of God's goodness to bring the story round to a fantastic ending! God is so good that we cannot think of anything greater in goodness than this God. St. Julian of Norwich echoed similar sentiments that, "all will be well in the end and if it is not well, then it is not the end." You can find a [short video by Adam's](#) here by clicking this link. Let us turn though to these theological ideas and think about them some more as I think that Adam's notion helps us to understand the kind of faith we are invited into by God at just such a time as this.

First, I would say that we have faith in a God who raised Jesus after first having raised the Israelites out of Egypt. This is a favorite saying of a friend of mine. It rings true for me. One of the first and key pieces of our faith that we often never consider is that the story of scripture is God's narrative that we are invited into. It is not our narrative we invite God into. This means that we are - by our very creation:

to dwell in God's creation

to dwell with God who moves in creation and has done so since the beginning of time

that our faith ancestors have born witness to God's presence in their lives

People have born witness to God's presence in the world and God's redeeming acts

God promises to be with us until the end of the age

So there is a deep faith that begins with something like, this is God's world and I am part of it. The God I believe in is present with me as God has been present with generations of people who witness to him.

In part faith is not simply understanding that God is present with us or that the world will fall short in its capacity to bring us comfort. Faith is instead coming to understand we need God's presence. We must seek it and find it. We must send the email, pick up the phone, open the scripture so that we are reminded that God saves us. God comes in the dark of the night by fiery cloud. God comes to us in the voice while we sleep. God comes to us through the words of friends. God comes and heals us. God weeps with us. God saves us, as God did with generations before.

Secondly, when we think of who God is then we are mindful of the God who knows our trials. In Jesus, we see God who suffers and is victimized by the world, its powers. God knows our sufferings because God in the person of Jesus Christ suffers as we do. In Jesus God experiences victimization, powerlessness (for he does not respond with might), silence in the face of great calamity, and a complete death. So human is Jesus' suffering that he asks where is God. Jesus on the cross, in the midst of his own experience of human suffering, asks the very question you and so many others ask: Where is God? So what we believe is that God is present and God experienced our fear, anxiety, grief, horror, pain, suffering even unto death. We are an Easter people and have empty crosses in most of our churches. This means sometimes we have to work a bit harder to remember God's suffering.

The third aspect of faith is the comforter and the Holy Spirit. I have a sense that people like you help people like me, your family, and others know God's love and presence. Certainly the scripture reveals that we, apostles – those sent by God, are in fact bringers of the Holy Spirit into the lives of God's people who may be suffering or in need. This Holy Spirit also is working to bring wisdom to our leaders and doctors, nurses and scientists. The Holy Spirit is also brooding over the creation as it groans with this virus. The Holy Spirit is gathering us in like a hen with her chicks. We cannot see it at all times, that is why we need the encouragers among us to help. My ability or inability to see God's hand at work in the world about us does not mean God is not already working. For surely God is always present, bidden and not bidden, in the world for it is God's. God is working God's purposes out even as we seek to discern them.

It is this then that helps with my unbelief at times like this. God is present out of virtue of being the creator. God is present in God's creation and with God's creatures in suffering. God is present in healing people and at death. God is also present in death and the hope of resurrection. Finally, God is present in through the Holy Spirit in our prayers when we open ourselves up to God and listen, through wisdom, and through the words of friends.

Here is the most ancient of all questions: "if God is walking with us, why doesn't God pull us out of the way when disaster comes?" Your question dips into the notion of God's goodness.

God's narrative in scripture reveals that we cannot look at our experience of the world (this virus for instance) and claim God's intentions from it. This is a truth that ancient church theologians, prophets and rabbis have offered to God's people for centuries. It's difficult because we live in a world where what I see and how I perceive the world is the arbiter of all truth. That is, simply put, "the way it is" and it is why faith is a struggle. People living life today don't have much room for a stumbling block to their perception or things unseen. It was true for the Greeks (as Paul reminds us) it is true for us. For the Christian, like the Jew and Muslim, we understand that God is greater than what we experience or see. God and God's purposes are much more hidden from the naked eye. Our hope is in things unseen and what is for many a stumbling block.

Yet to us comes the very reality of a world that is literally filled with what will soon be millions of sick people many of whom will die; all while we wait for help, a vaccine, and for our immune systems to build up.

N. T. Wright, and Anglican theologian [said to a reporter once](#), "We live in a world where you can't simply look at the evidence and say, 'There you are, there is a good God, everything's OK.' That's why the good news of Jesus is that in the middle of this confusing world, with so much beauty but also so much sorrow, what God has done in Jesus launches a project, which says 'Yes, the sorrow is real, but God has dealt with it and is dealing with it. The beauty and power of creation are real. God is going to do the new thing, for which those are signposts.'"

The point here is that we acknowledge we are in a big mess. But that big mess doesn't mean God is any less good. In fact, the Christian message is that God's goodness is so great that it is bigger than this mess.

What we must then say is that God does not desire suffering or even that death be final. Yet the virus is part of God's creation too. Not a deformed part of it, just part of it like a hurricane, tornado or fire are part of God's creation. What happens though, is that because we are not truly freed from the idea of the law – judgment, we cannot see that we are free from the virus being judgment – which it is not. We hope for some kind of life lived as some kind of minor myth with demi gods whereby if I am the hero the gods

and fates will save me. This is a kind of Theodicy and that is soundly rejected by our faith. Instead we connect the virus and suffering it brings with the crucifixion itself. We remember that God's final answer is that though we suffer here suffering will not have the last word. Fear and anxiety is a real emotion but faith assuages such with a word of hope about what God is doing, how God is present, and what God will do to bring about God's goodness in the end. We proclaim that the whole creation is made new. We and it are restored in the end.

These are the thoughts that give me courage and remind me of where my faith comes from. So, I think there are many things we can say from a faithful perspective. I hope this helps you come at it from a different angle. Maybe this gives you some new stories or thoughts to ponder.

You are an encourager— so encourage. Remember to listen most of all. Sometimes in difficult times the only thing you can do is listen. Listen and pray. Be courageous and ask if you can pray for your family and friends. Ask what they need praying for. Only after prayer and listening can we sometimes help the most. Perhaps then, you might remind them of our shared faith that God is working and present in the world. God is comforting and drawing us ever forward into his arms. God knows our pain, our fear, our suffering quite intimately and weeps with us at the side of our cross for he has known his own. God is empowering and giving grace, wisdom, and strength to all those who serve as doctors, nurses, scientists, and health care workers. These are the things to have faith in.

Faithfully yours,
Andy