



Going "Viral": Lessons from History for Missions

By Rev Dr Andrew Peh

It was in early December 2019 that the first cases of a new zoonotic disease were reported in China and, to date, the virus, named Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2), which causes COVID-19, has infected more than 60 million worldwide with a death toll of more than 1.4 million. According to virologists and medical experts, "all available evidence to date suggests that the virus has a natural animal origin and is not a manipulated or constructed virus". The interconnectedness of our modern world facilitated the rapid spread of the pandemic and forced the world to be reacquainted with the eerie "sound of silence" ("Hello, darkness my old friend") in a desperate attempt to stem the contagion.

Over the months, many in the various faith traditions have sought to adapt to what is perceived as "the new normal". But Christians living out our faith and piety amidst a pandemic is indeed normal and there is perhaps nothing new about it. The early Christians were well acquainted with the darkness of their times, whether as persecutions or pandemics.

Notably two pandemics shook the Roman world. The first was the Antonine Plague of the 2nd century, presumably caused by a strain of smallpox, which persisted between 165-189 AD, waxed and waned for a generation, peaking in the year 189 AD. It was estimated to have decimated a quarter of the Roman Empire. But, as Lyman Stone rightly noted, this provided the context that "led to the spread of Christianity, as Christians cared for the sick and offered a spiritual model whereby

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plagues were not the work of angry and capricious deities but the product of a broken creation in revolt against a loving God".

The second and more serious pandemic was the Plague of Cyprian, a zoonotic pandemic (similar to Ebola) which arose in Ethiopia and spread to various parts of the Roman Empire, lasting almost two decades. It was so named after the bishop, Cyprian, for his first-hand observations about the illness through his sermons and in his work, *De Mortalitate (On Mortality)*. Cyprian's admonition to Christians was that they were to care for those afflicted. Cyprian wrote: "Although this mortality has contributed nothing else, it has especially accomplished this for Christians and servants of God, that we have begun gladly to seek martyrdom while we are learning not to fear death."

His fellow bishop, Dionysius of Alexandria, wrote of the witness of Christians: "Most of our Christian brothers and sisters showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbours and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead."

At a time where the high death rates terrified everyone, Dionysius noted that Christians understood the times as one of "schooling and testing". At a time where many questioned their faith, Christianity provided comfort as well as purpose, and "Christian doctrine provided a prescription for action."

This self-giving would again be evident in the witness of Martin Luther amidst another pandemic. The Black Death, which had wiped out a third of Europe's population in between 1347 and 1351, had resurfaced in Luther's hometown of Wittenberg. Luther refused calls to flee the city to protect himself, choosing instead to minister to the sick. It was a costly decision that Luther paid with the life of his infant daughter. Yet it underscores the high cost of discipleship in following Christ. Luther produced a tract, *Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague*, where he articulated a clear Christian response in the face of a pandemic: we die at our posts.

In more recent history, for fear of infection, the government in Hawaii quarantined and deposited those suffering from Hansen's disease (leprosy) on a triangular piece of land called Kalaupapa in Molokai. Those who were

infected with the disease were transported to the island and left to fend for themselves: They were made "pariahs" of society. Yet Joseph De Veuster (Father Damien) chose to go to Molokai, with the specific intention of ministering to the pariahs. He immersed himself in their world, dressing sores, hugging children and burying the dead. When he referred to the congregation, he did not say "my brothers and sisters" but "we lepers". Literally becoming one of them when he later contracted the disease, Father Damien lived, ministered and ultimately died among a people he loved on 15 Apr 1889.

In the history of plagues and pandemics, the Christian witness of sacrificial care is a recurring theme. Cyprian, Dionysius, Martin Luther, Father Damien all sought to live out Christlikeness - following Christ's example of walking the path of death in order to give life.

Undoubtedly, many churches are seeking to make sense of the way forward where missions and ministry are concerned. Before adopting new practices and adapting to the "new normal", perhaps we need to examine the ways the Lord has helped to align the mission of the church with His mission, in the history of the church. Essentially, we have to ask what Christlikeness looks like in our times. Amidst a new abnormal, the mission of the church (*missio ecclesiae*) must be modulated afresh, aligned to the mission of God (*missio Dei*). Just as God sent his Son, similarly he sends us to live (and to die) in witness of the sacrificial love of Jesus, who, on that first Christmas, tabernacled amongst us. The miracle of

Christ's incarnation tells us that we cannot simply love from a distance.

'Contagious', 'infectious' and 'viral' are probably three words that will make the taboo list in view of the current coronavirus pandemic. In following Jesus' example in his incarnation, however, the church's mission in this day and age is to demonstrate contagious compassion, infectious influence and viral vicarious living.

On behalf of the principal, staff and faculty of Trinity Theological College, allow me to wish you all a blessed Christmas and may you go viral with Jesus this season and always. ❖



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