

Covid-19: Where is God? Two religious leaders offer up answers



A wooden carving of Jesus on the cross. "The role of God in the current struggle between humans and this little virus does not make sense." PHOTO | FILE | NATION MEDIA GROUP

Summary

- "The faith of the people is being tested, their deeper connection with God is on line, and the important convictions can surface once again," Archbishop of the Catholic Archdiocese of Nyeri Anthony Muheria says.



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I recall my visit to the renowned catacombs in Rome, where the early Christians were buried underground, and where the first symbolic imagery emerged.

One finds there many expressions of faith in the resurrection and in the eternal life. I was struck by the recurrence of the painting of a bird, a phoenix that was sketched in poor artistic style, but clearly visible in many tombs.

Alongside the tombs, a burning lamp, recaptured in today's candles and the Easter candle. Masses were offered amidst the tombs of these dead in flesh but alive in spirit.

After commemorating the painful and cruel death of Jesus Christ in the hands of Pilate the King, the soldiers, the high priests and the citizens of Jerusalem, one cannot fail to be deeply moved.

Alongside the extent of love that suffers so much to redeem us, is the height of cruelty of men, the abuse of power, the gullibility of the people, and the fleeting loyalty that moves from acclaiming him as Son of David, to condemning him as a criminal, to crucifixion. Evident is the seeming defeat of God-Man, by the powers of evil, the consequences of Sin, and by those who claim to own and control the world and society.

The Covid-19 pandemic seems to crush our very existence. Its dominance of the world at this time is undisputed.

The might of the powerful seems totally silenced and threatened; the high knowledge of medicine seems to grope blindly looking for cures and solutions; society that thrived on welfare and freedom has been reduced to the basics and restricted; even the unbelieving are willing to try a prayer. Sure, one could say, coronavirus seems to be reigning.

On Easter Sunday we celebrate Jesus Christ, who seemed vanquished on the cross, but who now rises victorious.

He has overcome death, and specifically through what seemed a defeat; he has conquered over all evil and ill, suffering and sickness; he has dispelled darkness and filled us all with hope of similar victory.

He is the uncontested king over all earthly elements, and over all creation. He has the last word. Oh, hear this, corona!

The paintings of the phoenix in the catacombs captured this as a sign of hope. Hope of an after-life, but also hope of overcoming evil. This legendary bird in Greek mythology was said to go into its funeral pyre but emerge from the ashes as a new, reborn creature.

Easter bears a message of hope in the victory over this asphyxiating virus and its effects; a hope over the fears of a calamity and death; a hope over a prophesy of a broken society and economy; a hope for those who fear that the Church will be weakened by Covid-19.

No! The Church, like Christ, will arise stronger and victorious than ever. The faith of the people is being tested, their deeper connection with God is on line, and the important convictions can surface once again. God can find more room in our life and society once more.

We may be on the cross in suffering fear and pain. How can we not empathise with those still in isolation, those sick with thoughts of death on their minds, those who are unable to mourn and bury their loved ones, those already paranoid with possible infection? Yes, the pandemic has put us on the cross.

Voices of arrogant and self-glorifying individuals, just like the mockery of the soldiers at the crucifixion, are not lacking.

They use the tragedy for their political benefit and mock God and invitation to pray. And with Judas, we have those who seek financial gain, or wish to bribe to change the truth, just as they did to the soldiers who guarded the tomb of Jesus. Have you not seen the fake masks, fake sanitisers, and fake cures?

God is still in control, even when Christ hangs on the Cross. What we need is to look up to him and nurture hope, not fear; nurse our loved ones, not stigmatise them, and encourage one another not spread panic. After the chilling morning, the sun will rise! We will rise from the ashes... Death where is your sting?

The key is in Easter: Jesus Christ is risen. He who was killed and crushed, has now crushed death and sorrow. Hope! Kenyans, draw your phoenix in your mind, etch the risen Christ deep in your heart! We will rise victorious from the ashes!

Anthony Muheria is the Archbishop of the Catholic Archdiocese of Nyeri.

Humanity is at its low ebb. After over 100 days of relentless effort we are still unable to contain the coronavirus.

Without the freedom to go on with normal life, overcome by the anxiety of the unknown, humanity mourns for itself.

Humanity is in the dark, like a seed that is buried beneath the soil, waiting for the first showers.

For those of us who take religion and God seriously, the spiritual questions still linger over our heads. The role of God in the current struggle between humans and this little virus does not make sense.

After all, do we not believe that humans are expected to subdue every other creature? And for us Christians, in these holy days of the year, we are not even able to worship God as we ought to. Where is God here? What is he up to? God seems absent. He seems far away. He is silent.

About 2,000 years ago, in the Jewish month of Nisan, on a Friday afternoon, as Christians believe, the Son of God was hanging on a cross.

Spiritually, uncertain of his own identity, feeling the absence of God whom he referred to as his Father, Jesus cries out: "Oh God, my God, why have you abandoned me!"

Psychologically, being condemned by the colonialist Romans, rejected by his close friends, and derided by his own religious leaders, he says: “Forgive them, Father!”

Physically, struggling for breath and totally dehydrated, unable to cling on any more to life, he just gives up his spirit: “It is finished.”

Apparently, God had done nothing to protect this just man. Silence hung in the valley as they buried him in a hurry before the sabbath. God seemed absent. Far away. Silent.

Yet, on the third day the miracle of miracles happened. The Father raised his Son from the dead. God vindicated the just. He had executed a comprehensive plan for Jesus and for humanity.

Today Christians across the globe celebrate this great event. Easter marks the key tenet of the Christian faith: that Jesus suffered, was killed, and was raised from the dead. This is our story. This is the story of humanity, even today.

We see history in piecemeal. Individual episodes don't make sense. God invites us to see history as He sees it; meaningful whole! When we focus our attention on a little piece of a tile in the mural, it makes no sense.

But within the larger mosaic it is beautiful. It has a purpose within the meaningful whole.

In my opinion piece published by this newspaper on April 4, 2020 (Coronavirus spread puts religion in a tight spot), I suggested silence and contemplation as a way of responding spiritually to the crisis. Silence and contemplation do not entail passive resignation. They give birth to a considered response in the form of meaning and purpose.

In contemplation, the story of Jesus becomes our story too. Out of the ashes of Covid-19, humanity will be raised again. Our forefathers have survived adverse conditions for hundreds of millennia. Humanity will rise again.

What does not kill us makes us strong. We are bound to emerge stronger as a species, having powerfully recognised the interconnectedness of our world. Collectively we have learnt many a lesson.

Take the impact of Covid-19 on the environment, for instance. Seismologists are reporting that earth is free of vibrations since the reduction of criss-crossing aircraft and trains.

Environmentalists have observed that in several cities, air is becoming cleaner. According to estimates, in China alone, two months of reduced pollution have saved about 77,000 lives. Maybe out of this forced self-regulation we might adapt a long-term behaviour that will serve the good of planet earth.

Despite the increase in reported cases of domestic violence, family members have been forced to get in touch with each other. Could some of these behaviours be

part of our lifestyle even during the post-Covid era? Perhaps we all need to appreciate the spirit of the sabbath even when the rush resumes.

Definitely, Covid-19 has invited us to redefine work. It is only for the past 100 years or so that working outside our homes has become a global norm. In the pre-industrial world, most of humanity worked around their homes. Even the village blacksmith had his workshop around his home. This allowed spending more time with the family.

Industrialisation forced people move out of their homes to market their labour as a commodity, sometimes far in growing cities. This meant their children had to be put in day-care centres. The baby-sitting industry got prolonged to schools and universities that served to produce workforce for the expanding manufacturing and service industry.

Could the systematic use of information technology and the Internet today help us balance our family life with our work life?

On an individual level, despite inconveniences, we are sleeping more, perhaps. We are spending more time indoors getting to know people around us. Maybe we are reading and reflecting more too.

I am not trying to be over-optimistic about the current pandemic. Our hearts go out to those who are infected and are currently gasping for breath. Our hearts go out to the medical personnel who are risking their own lives in their call of duty.

Our hearts go out to all those whose daily income has been drastically reduced by the current restrictions. Even these situations can be eased by means of our collective compassion.

It is the effort of the butterfly as it pushes its way out of the chrysalis that makes it strong enough to fly. It is the struggle of the young chick cracking out of the shell that helps it see the light of day. This is law of nature.

So is resurrection! Humanity will break its way through the present predicament. God will see us through. We will rise again. We will be stronger because of this our collective crisis. The seed will sprout when the showers finally come down.

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