

Mission Maelstrom

Euryl Howells, Senior Chaplain at Hywel Dda University Health Board, finds himself in a surreal world of masks, gowns, social distancing and fear. He does, however, see God at work through the care and compassion of all those on the front line

In my teens, my best friend enjoyed watching horror movies but they kept me awake. Many suggest that this pandemic is like living through a horror film but Covid-19 is not fictional, it's menacing and frightening. Post-Resurrection, the disciples went behind doors in fear; currently, for us, going to the shops, coughs, sneezes or a healthcare appointment bring anxiety.

The Bible says DO NOT FEAR!! Worry shouldn't rule Christian lives nor take root in our hearts. People of faith and healthcare personnel are expected to be exempt from panic but this microscopic virus causes trepidation.

We've been thrown a hard punch as humans of all ages suffer. Sport, eisteddfodau and end of term proms are postponed. Our Royal Garden Party invitation, my Goddaughter's wedding are now scheduled for 2021. Newly-qualified nurses and medics are on front-line. Emotional pain and frustrations are inevitable. Loss means hurt.

Healthcare has adapted to new styles of working. This killer virus has changed attire – masked faces, consultants and chaplains in identical grey scrubs. Buzzing corridors are eerily quiet, Accident and Emergency has spare seats. Social distancing is practised during breaks. Staff are simultaneously apprehensive and stoic – they feel more exposed off-site. When at the centre of a storm you don't know what's going on at the periphery. As storms subside the wider impact becomes clearer.

Healthcare employees are always bombarded with questions from friends and family. Personally (not professionally) when it transpired that we weren't immune to coronavirus a friend rang; her child has cerebral palsy. She'd been advised if A got the virus there would be no ventilator. The NHS was addressing its resources (personnel and equipment) – she was devastated at this possible death sentence - her child was not a priority. Given the medical needs, isolation couldn't happen. We wept together. She, like many, knows the NHS and that any sickness would have a window for treatment. This, and closed churches, are just the tip of this Covid-19 iceberg.

Last month we lost a valued colleague – not to coronavirus. We were robbed of him. We were purloined of an opportunity for a farewell, a 'cwtch' and cheated from consoling one another. The community improvised. A consultant and I said a few words, to a 'gathering'; observed a moment's silence which led into the weekly 'Clap for Carers'. It's humbling as the nation acknowledges the bravery of NHS staff. Vocationally we've always subscribed to a quiet and competent proficiency – but nothing so life-threatening. Yes, physical attacks and verbal abuse but not an unprecedented virus. We mourn colleagues who gave lives by saving strangers. As staff, unaffected physically, we worry for patients, our families and personal safety. We're petrified when colleagues are diagnosed and rejoice as they return. To feel

down when one's family and friends and colleagues are safe is wrong – how ungrateful!

We applaud public efforts of *Stay at Home; Protect the NHS*, which has meant that intensive care units have not been overwhelmed. We're reminded that global health has become more equitable, for the wrong reason. Millions face the same health contagion: individuals are defined by a health condition which restricts their life-style.

Covid-19 attacks humans but awakens humanity. Lockdown brings unity, strengthens belonging. We extend compassion to protect people we know, also to people we do not know or even care about. Let's remember the scientific, social and cultural learnings from this. Being apart now is about coming together again later. This pandemic affirms that deep down we are spiritual beings and our demeanour should be to sustain collaboration, show compassion and alleviate suffering.

Psalm 23 speaks of 'The valley of the shadow of death'. It looms now as a global Covid-19 pandemic. Shadows are dark, shapes not real, but behind is the presence of light. Our current situation sees God's light manifested by the faithful and dedicated from all walks of life. I pray earnestly that the Holy Spirit sustains me to accompany patients, staff and carers as I go about my daily work.

I thank you for your intercessions and ask you to pray with us daily at mid-day and at 8am and 8pm.

As lockdown eases, let us unanimously offer our ministries, as members of the health board and diocese, to work together to shepherd and marshal those broken by the depravation, avowing "When you go through deep waters I will be with you." (Isaiah 43:2)

Keep us, good Lord, under the shadow of your mercy. Sustain and support the anxious, be with those who care for the sick, and lift up all who are brought low; help them to believe that this pandemic too shall pass through your mighty power. *Amen*

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