

New Era? From BC to AC

It is far too early to speculate on whether the government 'road maps' for a post-Brexit-Britain, and a post-pandemic-UK will be adequate. Time only moves forward, and we have certainly arrived – unprepared, at speed – to a new epoch in our age. Our 21st Century threshold is ushering in a new 'BC' and 'AC' – Before Coronavirus and After Coronavirus. Profound and searching questions are yet to be asked of government, services and institutions during our pandemic crisis. We have found some familiar old heroes of comfort in this crisis. The Queen has newly emerged as the Spiritual Leader of the nation, with her timely and sentient observation on May 8th (75th Anniversary of VE Day) that "our streets are not empty, they are filled with the love and the care that we have for each other". Our beloved, yet all too often beleaguered National Health Service has been a shining beacon of public duty, solidarity and sacrifice, providing us an endless supply of care and compassion, leadership and community service.

For all the talk of phases, however, there is no escaping the recession-phase that is to come. One-in-four citizens in the USA will be unemployed. The UK economy is likely to shrink by 15%, and government borrowing will be at levels not seen since the Second World War. Our post-war era is losing trust and confidence in the new faith of the Developed World: capitalism. The consumerist surges of the early 1950's, 1960's, late 1970's and 1980's onwards created an unchecked culture of aspiration that celebrated individualism and militated against the communal. By upholding the sanctity of the individual (for economically liberal, yet socially conservative ends – an odd combination), we slowly lost the communal.

Margaret Thatcher's political, moral and religious vision lacked a deep vision for social polity. Although widely misunderstood as saying 'there is no such thing as society, only individuals', there was more than a grain of truth in this. True, it was arguably a headline for her politics, but not the real content. Yet what she actually said is this – and it is worth quoting in full – to an interview *Women's Own* magazine, October 31 1987:

“We've been through a period where too many people have been given to understand that if they have a problem, it's the government's job to cope with it. 'If I have a problem, I'll get a grant.' And 'I'm homeless, the government must house me.' [So]...they're casting their problem on society. And, you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first. It's our duty to look after ourselves and then, also to look after our neighbour. People have got entitlements too much in mind, without the obligations. There's no such thing as entitlement, unless someone has first met an obligation.”

I read these words back now in the light of the ‘AC Era’ (After Coronavirus), and ask myself, “what were we thinking of?”. We’ve learnt from Elizabeth Filby’s recent study of Margaret Thatcher’s religious outlook (*God and Mrs Thatcher: The Battle for Britain’s Soul*, 2015), that she sometimes struggled to comprehend the wider world. As her daughter Carol Thatcher once remarked, her mother would be exasperated that just as the financial markets in London were appearing to recover, they could be sent hurtling downwards as soon as the markets opened in the Far East. Carol once heard her mother say that “this would all be sorted out if the whole world adopted Greenwich Mean Time!” To which Carol retorted, “mum, you have just condemned half the world to living in darkness”.

Our individualism of the post-war years created a culture of aspirants – ambitious, driven and focussed. But nothing stands still, and it is often said that “Thatcher’s Children”, in the end, grew to know what they wanted to *acquire* (i.e., property, cars, holidays, etc.), but not knowing what they wanted to *become* – and in relation to whom. Her vision was to create a country in the image of her father – an age of thrift, discipline and conservative values. It did not materialise. Instead, our present ‘celebrity culture’ offers more of an insight to what we have become. Gawping media-fuelled absorption with (so-called) ‘personalities’ who have considerable wealth, and seem merely to pass the time indulging in conspicuous consumption. To be sure, these new ‘heroes’ of our age were not what Thatcher intended.

David Hare’s play *The Power of Yes* (2009) gave us a gripping narrative of a dramatist seeking to understand the devastating financial crisis of 2007–2008, which sounded the death-knell for over-hyped economic Thatcherism – the end game of deregulation in our banking systems and financial services. Hare constructs an imaginary conversation between a banker and someone working in public services. The character speaking puts it like this:

...people say, ‘Oh get some private-sector people into the schools, that’ll sort them out.’ Actually I doubt if there are many jobs in finance as hard as teaching a class of fourteen-year old boys in a tough school. Because business is in some way quite simple, it has clearly defined aims. The aim is to make money. So you have a measure against which to judge all the subsidiary actions which add up to the overall result. Managing a hospital is rather more complex. Because it’s very hard to know what your objective is. There’s no money-metric to help make the choice between better cancer care or having a better A & E. It’s a judgement call. And running a hospital is an endless series of judgement calls where the criteria and objectives are very far from clear. So don’t tell me that’s easier than making money.

Later on, another character says this:

“Once Bradford and Bingley became a bank, I remember taking an immediate dislike to a new non-exec who said, ‘I want one thing from this company.’ He said, ‘What I want is regular, incremental growth.’ In other words, he was saying ‘*This company must grow every year.*’ Now that we all know that nothing in the world shows regular incremental growth. You know that. I know that.”

Growth is no longer an axiomatic certainty. Capitalism, at least as we knew it, may not be the future. In our emerging era we will need different lenses for some fresh ‘20-20 vision’. Not everything can grow all the time. As Julie Burchill once remarked of Thatcher, it wasn’t for pleasure or profit that she kicked away the crutches of the poor. Thatcher genuinely believed everyone *could* walk without them – and that the best way to help people was to take the crutches away. She was doing you a favour. As Norman Tebbit, famously suggested, once the crutches were gone, a bicycle could help. In the aftermath of the 1981 riots in Handsworth and Brixton, Tebbit responded to a suggestion that rioting was the natural reaction to unemployment: “I grew up in the ‘30s with an unemployed father. He didn’t riot. He got on his bike and looked for work, and he kept looking till he found it”.

The social challenges and changes that lie ahead are profound. The experience of riding a bike and some knowledge of the 1930’s might turn out to be oddly prescient. That said, there has to be some serious engagement with what has and is happening to the world around us. In our nation, it is pretty common knowledge that C-19 deaths are under-reported, possibly by as many as 20,000. As I write today, deaths attributed directly to C-19 stand at 33,000. Yet the “excess deaths” in the UK up to May 1st were 55,000 – far more than the average for the previous three years. Approximately 40% of those deaths were in Care Homes. No criticism of the Carers is implied here, but serious questions have to be asked about whether this is the right way to continue caring for the elderly and frail. At present, there are 120,000 vacancies for Care Workers in the sector, and 80% of the Care Homes are run by private-for-profit companies. (Please note, I have known some brilliant Care Home environments which offered outstanding care. A small network run by Robert Parker comes to mind. At the bigger end of the scale, Methodist Care Homes are often rated as ‘outstanding’).

In a few weeks’ time – by which time this article will be ‘live’, and the numbers from May 15th are out – I estimate our ‘excess deaths’ for the period will have risen well beyond 65,000. There is no guarantee that phases one, two and three of C-19 won’t continue for some time. There is still a high probability of a return to phase one relatively soon. C-19 is a virus, but unlike HIV/Aids in the 1980’s, there is a lot of normal human behavior that now has to be paused or curtailed, simply in order to control the viral spread. Meanwhile, other problems have gone ‘viral’. Mental health referrals are at record levels. And the charity Refuge have reported a 49% increase in domestic violence.

We don't really think of plagues and pandemics today in the ways that our forebears once did. But they were a common feature of everyday life for many centuries. Pepys wrote about them in his *Diaries*. Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* and *King Lear* whilst under plague-lockdown-quarantine. Not far from where I am writing – less than two miles east of Christ Church, at Cowley, is the (St Bartholomew's) Bartlemas Chapel. Its adjacent Bartlemas Hospital was endowed by King Henry I back in 1126, so that the terrible threat of leprosy could be safely excluded from the city of Oxford.

Infectious diseases of all kinds were common enough in mediaeval Europe, but the 12th and 13th centuries saw an unprecedented rise in leprosy right across Western Europe as crusading knights returning from the Holy Land brought newer and nastier threats to the public health of our island community. The public response was a mixture of pity and horror. For all that some wealthy and influential patrons tried to ensure a minimum of decent care for the sick, there were many others who went along with those primitive feelings of disgust and revulsion that led to a systematic rejection of the most vulnerable members of the community, who were ostracised to the very margins. Way out in the fields, far beyond the city walls.

The church went along with this policy of exclusion. Literally following the injunctions of *Leviticus* 13, the church required anyone suspected of contracting leprosy to present themselves to a priest (with duly diligent social distance observed). If the leprosy was confirmed, the person was pronounced legally dead, cut off from society, and dispossessed of all their material wealth.

You can find in our archives the details of a special ritual which accompanied this process of social banishment. It was presided over by the church in a chilling liturgy called the *Mass of Separation*. The unclean person was led out to the leprosarium after the fashion of a funeral procession. Typically, the victim was then formally clothed with a simple set of leper's garments, basic everyday utensils and a begging bowl. Sometimes they were actually forced to stand in a coffin for the duration of the rite. The priest then read out the binding admonition that would finally sever all links with the wider community:

I forbid you ever to enter a church, a monastery, a fair, a mill, a market or an assembly of people. I forbid you to leave your house unless dressed in your recognisable garb and also shod. I forbid you to wash your hands or to launder anything or to drink at any stream or fountain, unless using your own barrel or dipper. I forbid you to touch anything you buy or barter for, until it becomes your own.

I forbid you to enter any tavern; and if you wish for wine, whether you buy it or it is given to you, have it funnelled into your keg. I forbid you to share house with any woman but your wife. I command you, if accosted by anyone while travelling on a road, to set yourself downwind of them before you answer.

I forbid you to enter any narrow passage, lest a passer-by bump into you. I forbid you, wherever you go, to touch the rim or the rope of a well without donning your gloves. I forbid you to touch any child or give them anything. I forbid you to drink or eat from any vessel but your own.

Our recent history teaches that fear, horror, and primitive dread, in any society (whether ancient or modern, eastern or western) can provoke the cruellest reflex responses to fellow human beings who have the misfortune to represent some loathsome threat to the wellbeing of the community. Tainted. Unclean. Excluded. Lepers. Then, as now, the identity politics that played out between powerful groupings in religion and society took a particularly cruel toll on some of the most vulnerable people. Lepers ejected to the margins, were made to represent in their tainted identity the fears and forebodings of a whole community uneasy with itself. These were some of the ugly dynamics faced by Jesus in the healing ministry he offered, as he frequently touched the untouchable and the tainted, and drew the marginalised and demonised back into the social centre – then made them whole.

According to the World Health Organization, well over 90 percent of the illnesses and diseases on this planet have a single cause: poverty. We lose five million children a year, under the age of two, to perfectly preventable malaria-related fever. Clean the nearby water supply, and you eradicate the breeding grounds for the mosquitos that spread the disease. In the United Kingdom, obesity is now one of our biggest threats to health, and one of our biggest killers. Yet it is not a disease of the rich but of the poor. Maps of the United Kingdom spell out the demographics of obesity plainly. The concentrations of obesity lie in our poorest and most disadvantaged communities. A map of Scotland, taken from September 2014, (see Christine Jeavens, “In Maps: How Close Was the Scottish Referendum Vote?”; BBC News, September 19, 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-29255449>) showed that the concentrations of population voting “yes” to Scottish independence correlated precisely with maps that chart concentrations of obesity (i.e., see “Map Highlights ‘Obesity Hotspots’,” BBC News, August 27, 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/7584191.stm>).

In turn, those maps of obesity also correlate pretty well precisely with indices of poverty and unemployment. And the maps charting the related consequences – cancers, heart conditions, and diabetes – follow in their wake. The areas in Scotland that voted “no” to independence were, unsurprisingly, the wealthiest and healthiest. The map has too many similarities to the patterns of voting “yes” for Brexit (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-36616028>). That map, in turn, looks very similar to the ones we now stare at, as we contemplate the ‘concentrations’ of Covid-19. Parts of London are featured. Towns and cities across the UK figure, and there is little escape for our deprived Urban Priority Areas; but you’ll be fine in the wealthy shires (see: <https://www.covidlive.co.uk/>).

So it does seem that there is a direct correlation between poverty, opportunity, housing, unemployment, education and health...and finally, rates and ages of mortality, driven by underlying health conditions. Who knew? Our planet faces a bewildering number of crises at the dawn of the twenty-first century: global warming and climate change; pollution and a continued dependency on fossil fuels and minerals; deforestation and the degradation of our ecologies; migration and refugees; poverty and increasing inequality; congested cities and unsustainable living; ageing-declining populations in the global north with proliferating-younger populations in the global south; unemployment; deteriorating levels of mental and physical health; and stubborn systemic issues in addressing collective social well-being. The list was already lengthy, even before factoring in Covid-19 and our global pandemic.

In our emerging AC Era, we will have to reckon with how we have allowed the largely beneficial 'viral spread' of capitalism to infect too many areas of society. If the C-2020 virus (i.e., today's capitalism) is now put under some closer scrutiny, we can see that for all the blessings it has brought, it is has also detrimentally commodified far too many features of existence and normal life that should be basic human rights and essentials. To be sure, capitalism can, like a good virus, breed healthy competition within the body politic. Society becomes stronger as a result. But once the virus has freedom to move in spheres like education, health, social care and welfare, results are less wholesome. Our vulnerable warehoused elderly are paying an especially high price.

Ironically, the social-distancing we're all now familiar with was already the experience of many who were cooped up in pockets of deprivation, exclusion and marginalisation. The spread of C-19 has mirrored something of what capitalism had already done to us. C-19 is an unwelcome symptom of our obsession with individualism, unfettered growth, social mobility and inequality. As usual, the people who will suffer the most have the least; they are more vulnerable and less mobile.

So, we have arrived at the inevitable "WWJD" question: what would Jesus do? The question is only valid and useful if the church intends to copy the answer. And here it is. Jesus is the body language of God. He sees the unseen; hears the unheard; speaks for the mute and marginalised; touches the untouchable. The incarnation closed the gap between humanity and divinity. In Christ, there is no more social distance between God and the world.

It won't be easy to minister much longer by staying safe and at home. Witnessing through worship live-streamed from living rooms is valuable and vital; but only one very small contribution in facing the challenges that lie ahead. This Era is an *Epoch* from which time is reckoned; we will learn to count our days *from* this moment. So as we look forward, I hope and pray that we'll have the courage to be the hands, feet and voice of Christ in our communities once more. Our churches to again become like Jesus, expressing the body language of God.