

First, the bad news:

For every patient who dies from Covid-19 in hospital, from the moment they encounter that first masked paramedic, they will never see a human face again. Not one smile, nor pair of cheeks, nor lips, nor chin. Not a single human being without barricades of plastic . . .

Of all Covid's cruelties surely the greatest is this? That it cleaves us from each other at precisely those times when we need human contact the most. That it spreads through speech and touch – the very means by which we share our love, tenderness and basic humanity. That it transforms us, unwittingly, into vectors of fatality. And those we love the most - and with whom we are most intimate - are the ones we endanger above all others.

That's a stark and bold presentation of the facts of Covid from a desperately engaged doctor at the end of her tether. (Dr. Rachel Clarke in *Guardian Review* 6th Jan. 2021). It's powerful because every word counts. There's no room for flannel and politicians' lies, now; nor for religious sweet-talking. The human condition is laid bare. We live on the cusp of death, and some, like Job, would like to get it over and done with. What 's the point, after all? Well, one point is not to introduce the self-satisfied reasoning of Job's comforters, nor that of many Christians in similar vein: 'Well, you must have done something wrong to deserve this' or 'You may not understand this at the moment but it's all to God's glory eventually. Have faith and all will be well.' After being near death himself, in a hospital ward, Pope Francis wisely counsels silence.

So we need to be very careful about a gospel which highlights Jesus' ability to cure the sick wherever he goes, as Jesus is careful, too – moving on when the crowds begin to chase him for physical and mental cures. Curing the physically or mentally sick is not his primary call – but loving all who come to him, is, – whatever state of sin or physical or mental disability their human condition has visited on them. And, with apologies to Dr. Rachel Clarke for using her words in a way she may not have intended, the good news she finishes with, is still able to find, and which in no way offsets the tragedy of so many inhuman deaths, is that this tragedy has also unleashed a spectacular wave of human kindness.

All across the hospital you see it. In the tiny crocheted hearts crimson hearts, made by locals for patients and delivered in their scores so that no one feels alone. In the piles of donated pizzas, devoured at night by ravenous staff. In the homemade scrubs, whipped up by an unstoppable army of self-isolated grandmothers whose choice of fabrics is fearlessly floral. In the nurses and carers and porters and cleaners who keep on, despite everything, smiling. I may be tired and angry and sometimes mad with grief, but every single day at work, I see more kindness, more sweetness, more compassion, more courage, more resilience, more steel, more diamond-plated love than you could ever, ever imagine. And this means more and lasts more than anything else, and it cannot be stolen by Covid.

This is, also, the human condition laid bare and what Jesus, across so many centuries, is also, perhaps, trying to tell us.

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