

Reflections in Solitude — Week 1

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Many in these days have been giving thought, prayer and effort into finding different ways to be church amidst the distancing, isolation and evolving restrictions. We have asked questions like: What is essential? What is our core “business”? How might we attend to these things within the parameters we are given. How can we maintain our care and connection with our entire community, especially those for whom a kind of “social distancing” is often their experience much of the time?

As more directives come from the Government, I’ve noticed the traffic slowing and Jetty Road quietening down this week. Our church office go-to café for take away coffee is down to a bare boned staff and the owner is worried and dispirited. One of our tenants, Peter Shearer’s, is standing down its employees and closing the door for a time. At home, our family members are around the dinner table and at their desks more often since many of their activities have been cancelled and we are encouraged to work and study at home.

It could feel like the spaciousness and reprieve of Boxing Day—a welcome rest after the feast of Christmas and the rush of weeks leading up to it. But the ominous virus and its impact on so much of life hangs in the air, reminding us this is definitely not a holiday.

Like Martha and Mary as they tended to their sick and dying brother Lazarus, waiting for their friend Jesus to come, we may feel concerned and perplexed about what is happening. The life we had known, the plans we made for our immediate future have been put on hold. Travel is suspended and even visits to family and friends must be done differently, if not given up all together. Seeing the empty shelves in the shops brings a sense of doom.

“Lord, if you had been here...” the sisters cry to Jesus when he finally arrives too late to save their brother Lazarus from death. Perhaps we may feel something similar about this time and the other suffering we’ve experienced. If only God were more imminent, more present practically somehow, might things turn out differently?

This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.

Jesus’ curious response in the Gospel may help to shift our focus or at least cause us to pause from our downward spiral: *This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.*

Let’s sit with these words for a moment... perhaps even read them a few times...

Jesus’ response does not take from us the pain and challenge of our days. I do not hear relief or escape from the grief of change and loss. Jesus himself was deeply moved when he stood before the tomb of his beloved friend Lazarus.



But maybe, in these peculiar words, Jesus invites us to lift our eyes and widen our view beyond our suffering, beyond our present circumstance whatever it may be—not to deny or belittle it, but to see *alongside and in it* the glorious work of God.

In these weeks, I have become aware of the consolations of this time in my own life. By consolations I mean something deeper and more substantial than the “good” things or blessings I can count—though I am mindful of these as well. Rather, consolations for me are an awareness that regardless of the situation—its harsh realities or delights—I have a profound and comforting sense that I am moving with and toward God. I see evidence of growth in faith and love happening in me and my friendship with God and others is strengthening.

Consolation means that Christ is bearing fruit in and through us, even in the most challenging of circumstances. Scripture and life provide many examples for us that this is often the case. The prayer of Dietrich Bonhoeffer—and countless others—bears witness to God’s glory shining in the darkest of times.

My hope is that I am not alone in this experience. As our circumstances must change and we come to know frustration, challenges, pain and perhaps even the death of loved ones in coming weeks and months, may we find ourselves *moving with and toward God* who is at work in all things. May our faith and love grow and deepen as we reach inward with prayer and then reach outward with kindness, compassion and friendship as we are able.

In this way, we may find this time truly does not lead to death—at least, not in the way we usually think of it—but it will be for God’s glory and we’ll notice the profound ways the Spirit of Christ is at work in us and our world.

O God, early in the morning I cry to you.
Help me to pray and gather my thoughts to you,
for I cannot do it alone.
In me there is darkness,
but with you there is light;
I am lonely,
but you do not leave me;
I am feeble in heart,
but with you there is help;
I am restless,
but with you there is peace.
In me there is bitterness,
but with you there is patience.
I do not understand your ways,
but you know the way for me.

Lord Jesus Christ,
you were poor and in distress,
a captive and forsaken as I am.
You know all our troubles;
you abide with me when others fail me;
you remember and seek me;
it is your will that I should know you
and turn to you.
Lord, I hear your call and follow;
help me.

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945)
prayer in Nazi prison camp

