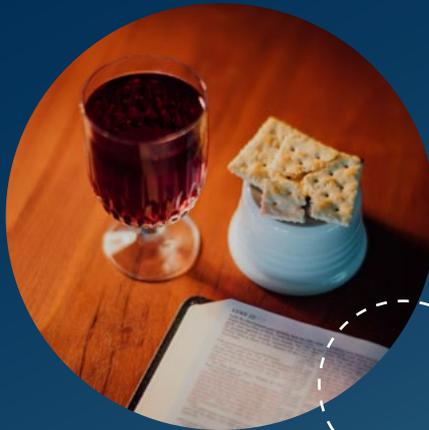


THE POST-COVID THEOLOGY PROJECT

Being Human
(Theological Anthropology)



Good News in the Age of Blame and Risk

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Who do we modern people think we are? A vivid answer to this question was offered in 1796 by the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. Reflecting upon his rejection from society in old age, Rousseau remarked:

I have in the world neither relative, friend, or brother; I am on the earth, as if I had fallen into some unknown planet; if I contemplate anything around me, it is only distressing, heart rending objects; everything I cast my eyes on, conveys some new subject either of indignation or affliction; I will endeavour, henceforward, to banish from my mind all painful ideas, which unavailingly distress me. Alone for the rest of my life, I must only look for consolation, hope, or peace, in my own breast; and neither ought, or will, henceforward, think of anything but myself.¹

Here, Rousseau portrays a condition all too common in the Western world today, a state of isolated estrangement. If the world is no-longer a place of home and affirmation, thought Rousseau, we must strive for self-sufficiency, ensuring through labour or guile, our own happiness. If the solipsism of Rousseau repels us, in this desolate wanderer we see the outlines of our own therapeutic language of self-care. Midst the disasters and indignations brought to us by the twenty-four-hour news-cycle and social media it is easy to collapse in on ourselves, seeing the outside world as a source of hostility and helplessness.

What happens when such insularity meets a pandemic? Covid-19 has burst on many of us like thunder, destroying jobs, suspending relationships, and multiplying our grief. But in all the fracture, the modern heartache of Rousseau has been left eerily untouched. If the pandemic has revealed deep reserves of hope and sympathy, it has also uncovered the brittleness of our life together, the gulfs of experience that divide citizens from one another. This is a consequence of the thought world in which we all live. Our market economy encourages us to stand alone as individuals. Our competitive schooling and workplaces imbibe the notion that we are engaged in a struggle for jobs and opportunities, not with, but against others. But in fighting for the lives we think we deserve, our inevitable failure to triumph alone can easily lead to blame and bitterness towards neighbours. At its darkest, this acrimony manifests as an indifference towards suffering, and the suspicion that others are taking from us.

In a time of crisis this way of seeing has directly rubbed up against escalating social needs. In February 2021, an article in *The Guardian* reported that: ‘Nearly half of people believe those who lost their job during the pandemic were likely to have been underperforming’.² This sentiment offers a window into our present predicament. We have struggled at times to treat lives we do not know with tenderness. The language of personal risk has been utmost in our minds, but less time has been spent dwelling on the risks we must bear together to remain open, caring, and human. Instead of recognising the scale of the social crisis we are in, it has been simpler for some to fall back on an individualistic account of responsibility.

What resources do we have as Christians to speak and act beyond the narrow confines of individual risk and vicious blame? At the heart of the Church’s story is the Parenthood of God. Jesus taught us to call God “Abba”, making our talk of eternity always an affirmation of intimacy and interdependence. The One who birthed the world longs to know and welcome all that has been born. Under the auspices of divine appreciation, no-one is cast out or demoted. As Jesus tells us of the Father: ‘He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous’ (Matt 5:45). What does this image of embracing benevolence tell us about ourselves? In the arms of this sustaining God, we discover that we are not isolated cells of personality, but rather a family, bound together by a love that will not let us drift apart. In this ultimate sense, nothing divides us, not our virtue, not our vice.

In God’s welcome we are showered with gifts we do not deserve and cannot earn. The same lesson of overflowing affection is interwoven into the life of Jesus Himself. In the face of the Son, ‘the radiance of God’s glory’, (Heb. 1:3) we recognise the intermingling of love and loved one, giver and gift. In his ministry, suffering, and death, Jesus made a gift of himself for the world and invited his disciples to give in return. In this, in every word and every touch, Jesus taught us about the quenching power of service. The answer to loneliness is vulnerability, the answer to isolation is leaving ourselves open to hurt and sorrow. In the contemporary world, this assertion might be interpreted as an admission of frailty. But it is in such professions of fragility that we approach the essence of the good news of Jesus. We were not made to live in a fortress of our own free desire, but accompany, cradle, and affirm needful people like ourselves. In the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), we are reminded that the promise of God’s homecoming is not worked for or deserved but reflects a peace that ‘transcends all understanding’, (Phil 4:7). To taste this peacefulness we must let go of our habitual notions of giving and receiving, deserved and undeserved. We must listen, love, and forgive. Instead of endlessly attempting to justify ourselves against others, we are invited to acknowledge that our lives are not ours alone to risk or shield but constitute precious centres of joyous insufficiency. We need others to be complete. We cannot find out what we are as solitary walkers, but only in and through mutual care. In 1944, overshadowed by the cataclysm of war, British Quakers affirmed this basic truth:

All men are of the family of God. No man is a ‘hand’ to be kept in or thrown out of the economic life of the community as suits the needs of any system. The community is a fellowship wherein each man and woman should find a place of significant service and creative living. All are members all share the duty and should enjoy the right of helping to determine its policies, whether political, economic, industrial, or social. For its foundations rest on a democracy based on the brotherhood of man and drawing its reality from the Fatherhood of God.³

Midst the personal and social scars of Covid we are asked again to dwell on the deep wellsprings of human fellowship. How can outsiders become companions? What mode of social organisation will help us best serve one another? How are people confined to the edges to be brought back to the centre? The generous spirit behind these questions is hard to live out, particularly in a world that insists on achievement, mobility, and advancement as collective ideals.

In periods of upheaval, it is natural to dismiss such inquiries and long for a return to 'normality', (even if such normality never really existed). But even when the present crisis is over, we will still be confronted with a fundamental contest between world-pictures, and an urgent task to complete. Will we continue to be bitter strangers living in our own worlds or will we find ways of breaking free of solitudes more biting than recent social distancing? In this way, Covid is but one manifestation of a more profound moral challenge. Confronted with the Climate Crisis and the needs of those fleeing war and poverty, we must learn anew to be human together in acts big and small. The Church can play its part in this task of moral imagination, making space, sustaining community, making shelter, and welcoming the stranger. Christians do not have all the answers, nor do we possess ready-made solutions to complex social and economic problems. What we offer is the lived-out hope for the 'restoration of all things' (Acts 3:21) in which 'Christ is all and in all' (Col. 3:11).

In the years ahead our task is plain. In standing in the breach between time and eternity, the followers of Jesus are called to mend fragments into wholes and loneliness into friendship. In a world of estrangement and blame, the Church stands for reconciliation and humanity as interdependence. Let us pray that the solitary walker finds a home.

Reflective questions

- What does the image of divine parenthood mean to you?
- How do you interpret the Parable of the Prodigal Son?
- What has Lockdown revealed about your community and relationships?
- What might happen if you let go of the notion of the deserving and the undeserving?
- What does Jesus' life tell us about notions of care and risk?

¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions of J.J. Rousseau, Citizen of Geneva, Part the First. To which are Added, The Reveries of a Solitary Walker* · Volume 2, (London: G.G. and J. Robinson, 1796), p. 195

² Robert Booth, 'Job losses in pandemic due to performance issues, say nearly half of Britons', *The Guardian*, Thu 25 Feb 2021 00.01 GMT, www.theguardian.com/inequality/2021/feb/25/job-losses-in-pandemic-due-to-performance-issues-say-nearly-half-of-britons [Accessed, 10 Aug. 21]

³ 'A social Testimony', 1944, (345), quoted in *Christian Faith and Practice, in the Experience of the Religious Society of Friends*, (London: London Yearly Meeting, 1960)