

THE POST-COVID THEOLOGY PROJECT

Being Human
(Theological Anthropology)



Pandemic vision

Living with limits

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A friend who returned to the UK after years of working in a less prosperous country remarked that she often felt overwhelmed at the supermarket. There were just *so many* types of tinned tomatoes. Shopping here was a confusing experience of multiple choice rather than a necessary task of survival. For decades in western nations, our freedom to choose between products and services has been the hallmark of good living standards, and our expectations have increased steadily: we have demanded *faster, better, more!*

The experience of the pandemic and the consequent lockdowns meant that almost overnight we could no longer buy what we liked, go where we wanted, or do as we pleased. For many uncertain months, our horizons shrank to the houses or flats in which we lived and our local shops and services. While we all experienced the privation of minimal social contact, for some the lockdown meant being entirely 'home alone', with communication limited to the internet, telephone and social media. Even worse was the fear of, and experience of, being infected with coronavirus. Nobody could predict how sick a person might be, or whether that person would survive, die, or develop long Covid. The pandemic was thus marked by the most extended period of uncertainty and insecurity in the UK since WW2. It was also marked by a level of social imposition that western democratic societies would not normally accept. Was this just a time of suffering, or did it show us important truths?

We experienced nationally two key challenges to our accepted way of life, forcing us to re-evaluate our ideas of human freedom and limitation. Social lockdown compromised our 'freedom to consume and to do'; while serious infection, more profoundly, jeopardised our 'freedom to exist'. Thinking about these limitations leads us to question how modern life has come to be understood, and to suggest that being limited is not all bad – it is just being human.

Christians believe that God freely created us (so, God did not *have* to create us, but chose to do so) to have our own free will (so, for example, we can choose not to believe in God; or perhaps choose to believe in God but then to behave as if we don't – *ie* we sin). But what does 'freedom' mean in a person's life in our times? Have we come to define freedom in a very singular manner, as the freedom to please ourselves? Is this really the key to being human?

The Franciscan priest Richard Rohr, a speaker and writer on spirituality, suggests that freedom gives us power. If we think about repressive political regimes, or perhaps of individuals in our own society who are imprisoned by abusive relationships or poverty, we can see that being able to give a free response is indeed powerful. However, when we come to think more deeply about the nature of freedom, Rohr comments that: 'We have defined freedom in the West as the freedom to choose between options and preferences... Secular freedom is *having* to do what you *want* to do. Religious freedom is wanting to do what you *have* to do' (*Everything Belongs*, Crossroad Publishing 2003, p108). Freedom is within us and it is both gift and attitude.

In fact there are always limitations to doing as we like. If you are uncoordinated you are not likely to be a good footballer, for example. Usually we simply move on to something else that we can do, and sidestep any helpful reflection on our limits. Yet there are human limitations that have been brought forcibly to our attention by Covid 19. They are things that many people experience every day, but which most of us ignore most of the time, and here are two examples.

- **The experience of disability** (defined by the WHO as a lifelong limiting condition). Disability has often meant exclusion from some parts of mainstream life because our workplaces, shopping centres, churches and organisational structures are designed by and for those without obvious disabilities. The pandemic, however, showed us that the thing we missed most was the physical presence of others, not what we can or cannot do. Does this reflection on limits bring a new understanding to being human: that our main value is in being together, not in some idol of independence and freedom?
- **The experience of dying** (the natural limit ending our earthly lives). Since the beginning of modern medicine our ability to mitigate the impacts of disease and to defer the day of death has increased steadily, as new treatments and medicines have been developed. While we can praise God heartily for this relief of suffering, one unintended consequence has been to allow us to ignore our mortality. Without reflection on this limit, dying - which has always been part of a human life - can seem unfair, rather than something for which we should prepare. The pandemic forced everyone to confront the very real possibility of dying 'before our time', in the Prime Minister's phrase from March 2020. Does this insight refresh our vision of the human being – that we are created not simply to live as long as possible, but for eternal relationship with God?

The pandemic has brought a measure of clarity to the question: *what really matters?* by forcing us to take a view from a new vantage point. Being limited is not bad: it is how we were created. Our 'human-ness' is defined by being together and being with God, not by what we can do or achieve.

Questions for Discussion

1. How did you experience the limitations of lockdown? What was the most important challenge or blessing for you in that time?
2. Did you feel you were more 'free' during lockdown? How did you experience that? Will you continue or discontinue anything in your lifestyle as a result?
3. Have you thought more about dying since the pandemic? Has that been helpful in preparing for your own death, whenever it comes?
4. Do you think people with disabilities have helpful things to share with us about *what really matters*? Did we appreciate their contributions before the pandemic? What about when our lifestyles return more to pre-pandemic times?
5. *What really matters* to you?

FURTHER RESOURCES

Covid 19: Lazarus or Jesus? (a public reflection on the liminal space of lockdown).

www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/573086/Covid_19_Lazarus.aspx

The Church in our Post-Covid World (a reflection on the move to listening).

www.baptist.org.uk/Publisher/File.aspx?ID=263160&view=browser