

A Prophetic and a Pastoral Voice

Rev. Kennedy Dhanabalan

While on a Zoom call with medical professionals and community health practitioners, I was a silent observer during the meeting. One of the participants, a close family friend expressed after the meeting that he was expecting to hear the prophetic and pastoral voice from me to provide guidance. This has prompted me to write this article.

With COVID-19 raging all over the world, everybody was asked to be at home, not to socialise by meeting one another and everything is done virtually including our Sunday Services. What is the church expected to do in these times, the ones' who were called to be the salt and light to the world?

In this current situation, what would the prophetic voice be and how should the pastoral concern be exemplified? What is the Lord's expectation from us – the pastors, elders and leaders?

A. Studying the Context

Prophet Joel describes vividly the destruction caused by the invasion of the locusts in chapter 1. He poetically writes, "...the fig tree is withered" The people's joy is withered away (Joel:12). He explains in detail the destruction caused by the locusts and the suffering the people were going through, which he narrates first before he calls the leaders (priests) to act (1:13). During the time of Amos, trade was flourishing, there was peace (no war between nations) and the people might have been living with the thought that the Lord had blessed them. But Amos comes and pronounces judgment because they exploited the poor (Amos 2: 6-16). He studied the context of how the people are exploited and the sufferings the poor have to go through.

In the same way, we are called to study the context, discern what the Lord want us to do and call people to action. What is the present situation? As on 20th July, 2020, the total number of cases in the world is 14,688,291, death is 609,511 and 8,750,906 recovered¹. We all know that it can be controlled by not socialising and keeping distance from one another. We know that the migrants are the most affected people, followed by the daily wage labourers, aged people and HIV infected who are highly vulnerable. There is a need for awareness on prevention, providing food materials, test and treatment and counselling. So, in this present context, what is the prophetic role of the pastors, elders and leaders?

B. Heeding to the Call

Read Isaiah 6:8,9 and reflect on the call of Isaiah. In the current situation, the church is called to respond. Will the church heed the call and the cry of the people?

As per 2011 Census, there are 2.3% of Christians in India and the same Census reports that the percentage of poor in India is 22%². Ten times of the Christians equals the poor. Is it a coincidence or God's strategy for us to respond?

¹www.worldmeters.info accessed on 20.07.2020 at 16.35 IST.

²<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/blog/general-elections-2019/many-more-may-fall-into-poverty-trap-and-several-may-not-escape-it-63930>

My thoughts raced back to several centuries ago, when the world faced multiple epidemics such as Cholera and Plague. When the people were afraid of the epidemic, the church responded with courage. Those days there were no protective gears. The only thing they had in their heart was to serve humanity in response to the gospel they have received.

In 1527, when the bubonic plague hit Wittenberg, Martin Luther refused calls to flee the city and protect himself. Rather, he stayed and ministered to the sick. The refusal to flee cost his daughter Elizabeth her life. But it produced a tract, “Whether Christians should flee the Plague,” where Luther provides a clear articulation of the Christian epidemic response: We die at our posts. Christian doctors cannot abandon their hospitals, Christian governors cannot flee their districts, Christian pastors cannot abandon their congregations. The plague does not dissolve our duties: It turns them to crosses, on which we must be prepared to die³. The Tract is a reminder for us to the call to intervene in these times of need.

C. Responding to the Commission

Let us see how we can help the poor in need.

1. Biblical Reflection

Read Ezekiel 34. The role of the Pastor (Shepherd) as expected by the Lord is defined very clearly in the passage. The Pastor is expected to care, feed, protect, rescue and search for the lost. Let us not spiritualise the passage. If one continues to read vs 17-24, then one can recognise that the problems are physical and needs physical response. It portrays a situation where there is pollution caused by the rich and exploitation of the weak and the Lord says He will protect them. So, it is important that we care for the people in whatever way we can.

2. Identify the poor

We do not have to search for poor in far off places. Look around the place where your church is located and, in the place, where you live. Maybe, in a geographical circle of 2-3 kms you will find the most needy. Contact NGO networks or government nodal officers who could guide you to the poor in your locations.

3. Food security

How about as a church or as an individual providing them dry rations, which can help them to cope with the loss of job or income because of the restrictions imposed by the Central and State government in controlling the spread of the virus. An approximate calculation is Rs. 2000/- per family would be sufficient to help the poor. We should motivate our church members to start supporting one family atleast and then extend to others if they can.

4. Health Awareness

In the area of health, how about the church working towards containing the spread of the virus by engaging with the community to bring awareness among them to guard themselves? We could see people not aware of safe practices. So much of materials are available on the website. How about translating it into local languages and spreading the message in the slums and villages. A creative response is needed. People have to be taught cleaning with soap is better than cleaning with an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. This will have a long-term impact in developing a hygienic behaviour. There are different schools of thought in using facemasks - effectiveness, appropriateness, cost etc. Those who cannot afford to buy masks; it is better to use a handkerchief, which at least gives some kind of protection.

³<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/13/christianity-epidemics-2000-years-should-i-still-go-to-church-coronavirus/>

5. Counselling

The church is also known for its strength in counselling. The Corona virus pandemic, has kept all of us inside our homes with less social interaction. The most affected are the elderly and disabled. The self-isolation could silently affect the mental health without them realising it. This could increase the anxiety level leading to Generalised Anxiety Disorder. The church can create a network of its members to call and encourage those people who are elderly and disabled. Where possible, send messages of hope and encouragement to all your friends using different social media platforms.

6. Long-term intervention

Consider this crisis as an opportunity (the Chinese word for crisis is the same for opportunity) for working towards a long-term impact in the society. Some of the NGOs have started working towards providing Cash in lieu of the work the poor could undertake. This is effective in villages where community assets could be built for future benefits of the community, while the poor have cash towards food security.

Recently, there was an article “COVID-19: Are we prepared for a pandemic?” in Down to Earth magazine,⁴ which states that there is a link between climate change and spread of new viruses in the world and added that the warming of temperatures and melting ice are exposing new viruses to the ecosystem. Are we reaping what we have sowed? (Galatians 6:7). This goes along with prophesy from Hosea 8:7 where it clearly portrays the consequences of our bad actions.

While we fight to control and overcome COVID-19, we have to change our lifestyle to make the world a better place by controlling pollution, saving creation and protecting the environment. I also want to reflect from the Sabbath, the land enjoyed during the exile of Israelites. As per the law, in the seventh year, no sowing should be done (Leviticus 23:10, 25:2). The land should be laid to rest. Failure to keep the Sabbath led to the removal of Israelites from the Promised Land (Leviticus 26: 32-33, 43; II Chronicles 36:21) and the land enjoyed its Sabbath for 70 years. Can the church utilise this opportunity to work towards advocating on environmental issues? How about working towards influencing change in government policies towards community health, quarantine, etc.? The Quarantine Act which we have now is the “Epidemic Disease Act, 1897” which is more than 130 years old. A Public Health (Prevention, Control and Management of Epidemics, Bio-terrorism and Disasters) Bill was drafted by the Ministry of Health and Family welfare in 2017 to empower local government bodies for taking swift action during emergency situations.

Ideas for Action

What other steps can the church do to create a caring community, protect our people from contracting the virus and help those who are infected? Below are some action points for individuals and for churches to help address the issue of mental health and trauma.

1. Identify the old, aged and poor people, daily wage labourers who are in need of essentials like food. You can help them by -
 - Providing cash to the poor labourers.
 - Provide dry rations where possible, for a month.
 - Transfer cash to NGOs who are working with the poor labourers.
2. Encourage one another to maintain social distancing.
3. If you see anyone walking on the streets without masks, encourage them to wear one.

⁴<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/health/covid-19-are-we-prepared-for-a-pandemic--69443> (accessed on April 5, 2020)

4. Avoid travelling in overcrowded auto/e-rickshaws.
5. Use hand sanitizer or wash your hands with soap every 20 minutes and do not touch your face with your hands after touching other things.
6. To maintain good physical and mental health, it is good to take the following measures:
 - Eating healthy and nutritious diet helps immune system to function properly. Avoid sugary drinks.
 - Exercise regularly. If you are working at home, make sure that you don't sit for long periods. Get 3 minutes break for every 30 minutes.
 - Look after your mental health. It is normal to feel stressed and confused. Talk to people you trust who can help.
 - Acknowledge and deal with mental health issues by talking to your family, counsellors or reaching out to the Government Helpline. The Government of India Behavioural Health, Psycho-Social Toll free number - is 08046110007.
 - Support your community people – your neighbours, family and friends.
7. Try getting used to new technology and shifting work patterns to reduce work-related anxieties. Ensure proper electrical connections and networks are in place to avoid sudden disruptions while working.
8. Maintain social life - keep in touch with friends and families through telephone, social media, emails and video calls.
9. Maintain a healthy environment at home. Have a contingency plan in case a family member gets sick.

Conclusion

The Church has done commendable work since the past. Can we rise up to face the current situation in response to the call we have received, to be the salt and the light? John exhorts us to show the love of Jesus in a practical way, even risking our lives (I John 3:16, 17). May the Lord give us the wisdom, strength and a compassionate heart to respond to the sick and the dying, the poor and the aged, the mentally affected and marginalised individuals - so that we can bring about hope and healing to the communities we live in and serve.

(This article has been written by Rev. Kennedy Dhanabalan. He has served EFICOR as the Executive Director. He is the incoming Executive Director of Serve Afghanistan. He can be contacted at kennypremi@gmail.com)