



Survive, rebuild, heal

Christine Allen

This Advent, *Thinking Faith* will be reflecting on Pope Francis' recent encyclical, *Fratelli tutti*, alongside the readings that are chosen for the Sundays of the season in Year B. Christine Allen, Director of CAFOD, considers how the texts speak on the first Sunday of Advent this year in particular to a world, in the throes of the Covid-19 pandemic, which needs to survive, rebuild and heal.

In the gospel for the first Sunday of Advent, there is an exhortation: 'Beware, keep alert!'¹ The reading comes from Mark's Gospel – it is the conclusion of Jesus's discourse to his disciples at the end of his ministry, before he begins his Passion, a time of crisis for them all that would lead to a new future. Its instruction to 'be ready' is well placed, then, to remind us at the beginning of a new liturgical year, while we are very much immersed in our own crisis and must be prepared to respond to its immediate demands, that we are also looking to the future. This is exactly how CAFOD is responding to the coronavirus pandemic.

Coronavirus has thrown every aspect of our day-to-day lives into chaos. Whether it has taken friends and loved ones from us; deprived us of our routines, our income or more; or left us feeling vulnerable, afraid and alone, we have all felt its effects in a new and immediate way.

The pandemic has also highlighted the inequalities and injustices that already existed in our world: we can look at the disproportionate impact on people from BAME communities in the UK, on the poorest around the world who lack the safety nets that many of us take for granted, or on those in refugee camps like the half a million Syrians in Lebanon, the 700,000



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Rohingya in Bangladesh or the 900,000 South Sudanese displaced in their own country.

It will take all of us working together in order to survive, rebuild and heal – which are the three elements of CAFOD's response to Covid-19 – and it will require short-term and long-term thinking. We can hear this call to attend to

the future, as well as the here and now, in the readings for the first Sunday of Advent, and in Pope Francis' latest encyclical, *Fratelli tutti*.

Survive

This is the first step in CAFOD's plan, and the most urgent. This is about saving lives, now. Pope Francis is not afraid to remind us: 'In moments of crisis, decisions become urgent.'²

We must act now, and act fast, to help the most vulnerable communities on earth protect themselves. Isolated communities, without easy access to clean water. People who have no choice but to go out to work – because if they don't work, they don't eat. In the UK, we have felt the strain this virus has put even on our own incredible NHS – just imagine the impact a widespread coronavirus outbreak could have in a country where generations of national debt have left many without access to even the most basic medical care.

But CAFOD does not act alone – we can't. Around the world our local partners and community volunteers, with their knowledge and experience, can ensure help reaches the most vulnerable people before the virus does. By sharing life-saving information about hygiene and setting up handwashing stations, by delivering emergency food packages, by urging our government to do its bit to ensure that help reaches those that need it, wherever they live, we are helping people survive this deadly virus. All of this starts from the love of our brothers and sisters in need, which Pope Francis sees exemplified in the behaviour of the Good Samaritan.³

Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan in response to the question: 'Who is my neighbour?'⁴ Through this crisis, we have truly become neighbours – and not just to the people who live on our street. CAFOD's supporters have helped their neighbours around the world, and this love of neighbour must be at the heart of our ongoing response to the crisis.

Rebuild

Pope Francis has set up a [Commission on Covid-19](#). Yes, it looks at the immediate response, but it is also looking to the future. He has strikingly called us all to 'prepare the future', not prepare *for* it. To grab it and influence it. It's not a *restart* but a *reset* – a transformation. The prophet Isaiah, in the first reading we hear this Advent, uses an image that is familiar to us: 'we are the clay, and you are our potter'.⁵ That does not mean that we are to be passive and wait for the future to happen around us. Rather, as God works through us, the future is shaped by what we are, what we do – and so it is up to us to think about how we, as instruments of God, rebuild our society. It is a point that St Paul also makes at the beginning of his First Letter to the Corinthians⁶: 'what happens when we encounter the gospel is not something that we achieve for ourselves, but something that God does in and to us.'⁷

The biggest challenge in our response to the crisis is to see beyond the obvious. Beneath the number of deaths – which in itself is horrendous – lie inequalities in power and opportunities that mean some people are disproportionately affected.

The longer-term impact on economies will mean that without action the many development gains we have seen over the last 30 years will be reversed. We must not let this crisis further stretch the gap in inequality people around the world have been working for decades to close, and so our immediate response needs to be matched by plans for a post-Covid world in which every woman, man and child can not only survive, but flourish, in a way that protects the planet with dignity and hope. This again is something that Pope Francis is keen to emphasise: 'there is "a need for mid-term and long-term planning which is not limited to emergency responses"', he writes, with a particular concern for migrants and the countries from which they come.⁸

To bring about a more equitable sharing of the earth's resources, politics and policies have to change. For politics and economics are about choices. Nothing demonstrates that more clearly than the fact that after years of austerity in Britain, the chancellor found money to keep millions of people from unemployment. Whether it's investing in health and social care, green jobs or renewable energy sources, strengthening the social safety net or introducing a basic income, respect for our common humanity has to be at the forefront.

So CAFOD has also been campaigning, too, for an 'economy that is an integral part of a political, social, cultural and popular programme directed to the common good', for which the pope calls.⁹ We have a [petition calling on the PM](#) to improve access to healthcare for people around the world in various ways, to work towards a fairer, more just society after the crisis in which the world's most vulnerable

people can live in dignity and through which our common home is restored for future generations. It was particularly disappointing this week to hear the announcement that the government has cut the aid budget. While we recognise that aid alone can never solve the problems of the world, it is a big sign of our generosity and responsibility to others, which can and must inform our behaviour as individuals and as a society.

We have seen in recent months (after the toilet roll panic was over) what our world *could* look like – one of collaboration and compassion, marked by a desire for the common good. When we realise that our strength and value lie in our community (even if it is virtual for the time being), surely we cannot go back? And it is this realisation that will help us to heal – physically and mentally, personally and collectively.

Heal

As much as this crisis has kept us apart, it has also brought us together. Through small acts of kindness, like picking up the phone to check on a friend who lives alone, or leaving a bag of groceries on the doorstep for someone who can't get out to the shops, we've shown that even in isolation we are united, closer than ever before. Pope Francis recognises the value of taking these experiences forward: 'It is truly noble to place our hope in the hidden power of the seeds of goodness we sow, and thus to initiate processes whose fruits will be reaped by others. Good politics combines love with hope and with confidence in the reserves of goodness present in human hearts.'¹⁰

We've also felt our connection with our common home more keenly than ever. Natural spaces we once took for granted have become precious havens to be cherished. With fewer cars on the road and planes taking off, we've seen our air get cleaner, and our skies get clearer.

We have a chance now to step back, and reflect on the world we want to live in. The world we want to leave for our children. By helping the most vulnerable communities on earth protect themselves and survive the spread of coronavirus. By standing with them as they rebuild their lives. By urging our Government to drop the debt so developing countries can focus their resources on healthcare, or simply by driving less and walking more so we have cleaner air to breathe. This is our chance to heal our human family, and to heal our common home... and it can start from within ourselves. In a passage evocative of the Spiritual Exercises, where St Ignatius invites personal reflection on 'what I have done for Christ, what I am doing for Christ, what I ought to do for Christ'¹¹, Pope Francis directs us inwards as we seek to change the world around us.

At times, in thinking of the future, we do well to ask ourselves, 'Why I am doing this?', 'What is my real aim?' For as time goes on, reflecting on the past, the questions will not be: 'How many people endorsed me?', 'How many voted for me?', 'How many had a positive image of me?' The real, and potentially painful, questions will be, 'How much love did I put into my work?' 'What did I do for the progress of our people?' 'What mark did I leave on the life of society?' 'What real bonds did I create?' 'What positive forces did I unleash?' 'How much social peace did I sow?' 'What good did I achieve in the position that was entrusted to me?'¹²

This is the prophetic response. To name the transgressions we see in our lives and societies – as does Isaiah in today's reading – and make changes accordingly and call others, not least our politicians, to do the same.

We have a roadmap in our faith, particularly in *Laudato si'* and *Fratelli tutti*. We need to continue to bring our prophetic voices to bear on the kind of society we want to be – by our actions in the short-term and our shaping of the future.

Holding two different timescales together makes us aware that God works through us in our time and in his own time – a reality that was clear to my colleague Mauricio López during the Synod for Amazon last year, when he recognised:

...the tension between the *kairos* and the *chronos* temporality. You have *kairos* moments – the ways in which God reveals Godself, in God’s time, bringing change, meaning and mystery. Through these we can find new pastoral ways and become a Church that goes forth ... But the other element is the urgent situation of our common home... and you cannot wait to respond to this. This is what we call a *chronos* moment.

The Church, in its discerning capacity, needs to find a way to connect both. Yes, it needs to find new ways to be present, to accompany diversity, to be relevant, to respect cultures, to understand new ministerial approaches; but at the same time the urgency is such that we cannot fail.¹³

Kairos and *chronos*, present and future – as we begin this season of anticipation, of preparation, of waiting to receive a gift we have already been given, time takes on a strange shape. But in all of our looking ahead, we must never take our eyes off what is happening around us now, and where our help might be needed. ‘Therefore, keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house may come,’ as our first Advent gospel reminds us.¹⁴

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¹ Mark 13:33 (all quotations: NRSV).

² Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, §70.

³ Cf *Fratelli tutti*, §78.

⁴ Luke 10:29.

⁵ Isaiah 64:8.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 1:3-9.

⁷ Nicholas King SJ, ‘Paul and Christian Disunity’, *Thinking Faith* (2 March 2013):

https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20120302_1.htm.

⁸ *Fratelli tutti*, §132.

⁹ *Fratelli tutti*, §179.

¹⁰ *Fratelli tutti*, §196.

¹¹ Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, §53.

¹² *Fratelli tutti*, §197.

¹³ Frances Murphy, ‘The Amazon biome: from “backyard” to “main square”’, *Thinking Faith* (4 October 2019):

<https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/amazon-biome-%E2%80%98backyard%E2%80%99-%E2%80%98main-square%E2%80%99>.

¹⁴ Mark 13:35.