

I had occasion to hang out with a friend today who happens to be one of Ireland's leading scientists in this whole Covid-19 thing. He is a man of faith – his faith is in science. And in these days I value his faith very much. Interestingly, he also values mine, especially perhaps at times when questions of meaning, purpose, dignity and hope are at the centre of his work due to a massive rupture in the Standard Operating Procedures of daily life.

Wash your hands.

And that is what these days are. A huge, and unwelcome, disruption.

Science is giving us wonderfully helpful information statistics and advice.

e.g., We now know that the mortality rate globally for this virus is probably c.1%

Yet the mortality the rate for over 80's >20%

The mortality rate with any sort of cardiovascular disease >15%

Therefore, if you put age and pre-existing disease together, there is a very very high % risk for elderly ill (and ill) people if they get this virus.

Wash your hands.

What I also find interesting is the reality that what will damage us (and if you think it's not damaging just take a quick look at the impact on education, the economy, infrastructure and social cohesion) will, ultimately, help heal us.

What I mean is this:

70% of population (in most scenarios) will get the disease. Of that 70%, 80% will have little or no symptoms, and will recover within 10–14 days of being infected. However, what this 80% of the 70% will then do, is be part of creating a herd immunization. Those with the infection, who then get better, will be immune for life and will create 'herd' immunity for society – think 'herd mentality' and you have what herd immunology is. In herd immunity, most people will not be transmitters of the virus, because they are immune to it! Hence the disease cannot be spread and will die out.

Warm weather also seems to be helping in combatting the disease – and in the words of my immunologist friend, 'it's a really interesting virus, it does not seem to be mutating.' In other words, when it dies out, it dies out.

Hence, what will undoubtedly cause too many deaths (over 4000 already globally) will also, in time, save us.

Advice?

Use your brain.

And wash your hands.

When with the vulnerable – the elderly, the ill, the disabled – wash hands regularly, keep surfaces and handles wiped down (it doesn't have to be with strong bleach, just normal disinfectant will do), and stay one meter away from them.

Once infected yourself, or having been with infected people or an infected area, lock down is actually the only thing that will end transmission. Isolation has worked in China, possibly only because they have been able to put draconian measures in place to ensure lock-down mean lock-down. Ireland / UK will not be as draconian, but social distancing and isolation is the only thing to do. Gte ready for quarantine-like government instructions friends.

What is quite worrying is recent evidence to suggest one does not have to be symptomatic in order to pass the virus on. In other words, any of us could be carrying and spreading, but not show symptoms or get ill.

Having said that, what is vital?

Don't get anxious!

Anxiety suppresses the immune system. So don't get panicked or fearful, take sensible precautions, and allow the immune system to do its natural job!

And wash your hands.

I have seen a lot of trite online from Church–world concerning the virus. Ranging from the bleak to the blatant disregard, and from the petty proceduralism to the pious platitudes.

I tend to react badly to such writing.

While washing my hands.

However

in fairness to my most deeply held faith convictions – I do ask myself what my faith has to say in the middle of the above realities. Anything? Anything worthwhile?

So a few brief thoughts. Incomplete, and certainly not a final word.

1. This is not the Apocalypse, wash your hands. This is not some judgment from God.

Rather, it is interesting that in this world which we believe is a beautiful creation from God, since time immemorial, the earth has had viruses add to the keeping of balance in biological life. Ocean biologists will tell us that fish stocks are full of viral realities that hold balance in the sea. The work of scientists like Dr. Marilyn Roossnick (Pennsylvania) actually argue that there are viruses essential to internal biology that fight off infection and aid health. The question to consider might not be 'how could something so damaging spread so quickly and cause so much harm' – but rather, 'what is it within humans that needs to fight, control and master every single thing that could cause potential harm?' What is it within us, that fanatically desires to control the universe and 'my place in this world?'

2. If we ask those questions, we might not be far from moving into questions that concern the systemic gun violence in USA which saw over 38500 humans killed in 2016 (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention) or, the questions concerning the almost 2 TRILLION Dollars (2% of global GDP) bound up in the International Arms trade – a trade that killed an estimated 100 000 people in 2016 (Amnesty International figures). Or asking questions such as why humanity will panic buy toilet rolls while living in the midst of realities that have 10% of the world's population living on less than US\$1.90 a day. (World Bank Stats)? I am Not. For. One. Second. minimising the over 4000 deaths (so far, there will be many more) by Covid–19, they are a terrible deep loss for families and communities, and need to be treated with the same sanctity, dignity and honour as any such deep loss. I do not diminish the reality of those deaths as, who knows, I may have to bury people who die during this pandemic – or, I may succumb myself. In how these months unfold, I will try to hold my mortality honestly and hopefully, knowing that my faith invites me to remember it was never about me anyway. It was always about who God is. And where might God be in this? God might be inviting you to hold yourself in deep relationships of neighbourliness to the vulnerable and grieving, the anxious and the ill. God in Christ will not be sending a viral threat, but will be present at countless bedsides and gravesides, bidding us into our deepest sense of humanness, where we will know we are not alone. In any way.

3. Maybe, just maybe, if we ask those questions, we will be able to provide the neighbourliness and compassion that such a time demands. In this rip of standard operating procedures, there have been some wonderfully entertaining realities unfold. For example, when students in Trinity received an email informing them at lectures were being cancelled and would appear online for the rest of semester, there was undoubtedly a strange and complex vibe in the air.

Confusion. Apprehension. Lostness.

And how was that anxiety met?

They all went to the pub.

Honestly.

The Pav in Trinity College (a gorgeous place where there is always good craic and chat) had it's biggest night of the year so far. And the night started c.4.30pm, roughly one hour after the email had been sent. 'Social distancing' it seems is a tough concept to get a hold of – you can't do it together!

However, it is also massively understandable. Human behaviour dictates that when we are faced with circumstances beyond our control, we will endeavour to control exactly whatever we can control.

We hold onto the small things. We take control of whatever we CAN take control of, because the 'thing/people/group/virus/war out there' might be so disturbing to us, that it is easier to hold it at bay by buying toilet roll, or going to the pub.

We control what we can, because there is little in life that feels as terrifying as being out of control. And this virus is out of our control – even if you wash your hands.

You did not make it, you will not cure it, (although you just might be the scientist who will find a breakthrough?). If you thus cannot control it, taking control of the small things you can is a natural human response.

And yet,

recognizing the lack of control over the wider bigger picture

holding in place the truths that there are things beyond us over which we do not and can not account,

those thoughts

might

just

give you the chance to sit back and ask yourself questions about everything you do control and why?

You might even find yourself considering who controls you – or what controls you? For these are the things that you give your life to – these are the places where you lay your hope, your meaning, maybe even your love.

So what is it that you offer control of your life to? How might you affirm that in these days and weeks?

Whatever you do,

wash your hands.