



# The revelation of the lockdown



## Paul Williams

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The missional environment in Britain has changed, perhaps in more profound, challenging and hopeful ways than we yet realise. We are seeing a spike of interest in the Bible, in prayer, and in Christian faith.

As I write we are over three months into a self-enforced social and economic 'lockdown' in response to the global pandemic of a new strain coronavirus, Covid-19. This microscopic infectious organism has exposed the wealthy West to the fragility of its false gods: secularism, capitalism and social constructivism. In just a few short months our pensions and savings plummeted in value; our jobs and incomes became insecure; our primary activities were reduced to securing food and essential medicines; healthcare became practically inaccessible for all but emergency needs; and our experts argued over how the virus can be defeated and how much of an economy we will have left by the time it is. Our survival in recent months has depended on the labour and risk-taking of the lowest-paid people in society – the shelf stacker, the delivery driver and the intensive care nurse – yet many of them still need to visit food banks. With neither the market, the government or science able to save us, the allure of the 'autonomy of the rational individual' has faded. A surge of anxiety, loneliness, grief, exposure to death and mental illness is driving our search for meaning and belonging, a new openness to faith and, of course, also a new dabbling with all manner of spiritual practices, the occult and millenarian beliefs.

Yet for all this, the pandemic reveals rather than causes the momentous shifts in our missional context.

## Our missional context

Since the 1960s it has become increasingly clear that Britain, along with the rest of the West, has become a post-Christian society. By this I mean not that Christ is no longer relevant, but that society has turned away from the Christian faith that brought it to birth, placing its faith instead in secular reason, scientific progress and consumer capitalism. The Church has largely retreated before a wave of hostility and indifference. Sadly, there has been a loss of confidence in the gospel, we have grown ignorant of the Bible and vulnerable to ideological capture by the attractive narratives of our culture. Our theology remains hampered by a chronic sacred–secular dualism, we too readily confuse discipleship with therapy and much of our institutional infrastructure was created for a world that no longer exists. Fortunately, this strategic crisis for the Church in the West is only part of the story.

Our society can now also be described as post-secular. For a long time, the secular narrative essentially tried to keep the benefits of Christianity without incurring its costs – a false teaching worthy of the brutal epitaph of the Apostle Paul as 'having a form of godliness but denying its power' (2 Timothy 3.5, NIV). Without the Bible at the centre of our public conversation, holding the various parts and interests of our society together, these

outward ‘forms of godliness’ are degenerating. The gifts of reason, freedom of speech and dignity of the human person are diminished in our public life. Trust in our institutions has plummeted. As a result, it is increasingly difficult to hold our common life together, or even engage in civil discussion about it. Western societies have fragmented into a wide range of incoherent and incommensurate discourses. We have witnessed an epidemic of loneliness and mental health problems in the midst of familial and community breakdown. More and more people struggle with a lack of purpose and meaning. We have become a culture that is losing hope and desperate for something real to hold on to.

The description of our society as post-secular could be interpreted as the triumph of postmodernity. After all, we are familiar with the well-known saying of Jean-François Lyotard that defines postmodernity as ‘incredulity toward metanarratives’ – and secularism is among other things an attempt to impose an ideological narrative on reality in which only those matters capable of being evidenced by scientific reasoning count as permissible contributions to public life. What we have seen during the lockdown is an attempt by governments to pay lip service to the secular narrative by ‘following the science’. However, the science has not been clear and scientists have disagreed, so, in the end, politicians have had to make decisions based not on evidence, but on ethics. By and large, and to their credit, the politicians have chosen to prioritise the saving of life within the limits of the knowledge that science could provide.

Capitalism is also a metanarrative from the perspective of postmodernity. Like science, business has had to find its place as a servant of human flourishing within this lockdown, not as the master of our destinies always gaining the prioritisation of public policy as it did in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008. Prevented from being able to buy whatever we want, it seems we have been freshly able to articulate an appreciation of the good of human friendship, physical presence, a safe home, food to eat, medical care, green space and human life itself, without resorting to cynicism. This rediscovery of the essential deep goodness of things aside from their monetary value, of joy at the beauty of the created world, of gratitude for the NHS carers and the food delivery drivers, reflects not an act of deconstruction but the beginning of the opposite. We have had enough of endless postmodern word games that destroy meaning but cannot create it. This generation wants authenticity. It seeks beauty. It longs for the real.

So, in halting, imperfect and stumbling ways, what we are seeing is not the triumph of postmodernity, but rather its timely end. What began as a welcome critique of the hubris of enlightenment rationalism, turned into an anarchic and indiscriminate decon-

struction of the entire modern project. In our collective anger against the oppressive pride of modernist institutions, we turned our power with language against our own culture and vandalised our own home. Like the prodigal son who finally comes to his senses in the middle of the pigswill, we are beginning to realise that blowing our

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cultural inheritance on a giant consumerist orgy does not lead to the life of fun, freedom and fulfilment that we imagined.

### Exiles on mission

In the midst of all this, my conviction is that God is mobilising the Church for a new wave of mission. There is much evidence that God has been preparing us. Confidence has been growing in the British Church. Returning to Britain after living abroad for several years, I have been struck by the changes: a renewed appetite for Scripture, a fresh conviction about evangelism, a sustained commitment to unity, and a growing confidence in the gospel and to talking about it in public. I have noticed a greater boldness among leaders and a culture of collaboration in place of disunity. Across these shifts it is now common to see missional gatherings that embrace a wide range of the confessions and traditions of Christianity. All of this can only be possible because of the work of the Holy Spirit and it is amplified by the experience of lockdown.

Lockdown is giving our entire culture an experience of liminality. The anthropologist Victor Turner uses the concept of liminality in his work on pilgrimage to explore the state of ambiguity that exists in the transition from one fixed social structure to another.<sup>1</sup> We have been experiencing that ambiguity during lockdown as we have noticed what we do and do not miss about the old life, what we love about an enforced prolonged stay at home, and considered what we want to change when all this is over. Characteristic of liminal experiences is that we are free of previous structures of life but not yet engaged in new structures and ways of being. We may feel a sense of freedom, but also of uncertainty and anxiety. Immigrant communities and exiles experience liminality as those who have not chosen it, whereas pilgrims – whom Turner was studying – experience liminality by choice.

Lockdown is a kind of exile – a kind of enforced liminality. In this sense, it is a good metaphor for the larger situation of the Church in the world. Many of us experience the post-Christian convulsions in our society that I have described

### NOTES

1. See V Turner, ‘Liminality and Communitas’, in *The Ritual process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), ch 3.

as an unwanted form of exile. We resent the changes and the newfound experience of cultural alienation that is now commonplace for Christians. Few of us enjoy social marginalisation. We may be tempted to withdraw into a Christian ghetto, or, instead, assimilate to mainstream societal culture in an attempt to fit in.

There is an alternative, however, and that is to understand our present experience as part of the permanent characteristic of Christian identity, to be in the world but not of it. Jesus' prayer in John's Gospel suggests that by virtue of our allegiance to

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Jesus, we are no more of the world-as-it-is than he is, but we are, nonetheless, sent into it:

*I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.*  
(John 17.14–18, NIV)

This is what characterises Christian pilgrimage – perhaps best put in the language of the ancient Celtic missionaries – a voluntary exile for Christ.

The whole Christian life is supposed to have the quality of sustained liminality as we journey through the world, leaving behind the sinful nature, its desires and 'worldly' ways of being and thinking, and yearning for the coming kingdom and its fullness of life, joy and peace in the Holy Spirit. This is not a journey from earth to heaven, but rather a life that cries out for the kingdom to come 'on earth as it is in heaven' (Matthew 6.10, NIV) and keeps moving toward that fulness.

### Seeking God

Strangely, then, this moment can be a kind of gift to the Church. There is nothing good about a deadly infectious disease. However, God is able to work and bring about something good from this crisis, if we will allow him: good in our lives and good in our society:

- Can we allow ourselves at this time to be pushed deeper into Jesus?
- Will we go deeper into prayer, Scripture and dependence on God?
- Will we go deeper into care and awareness of our neighbour?

- Will we go deeper into a lament for the state of things – the way we as a society are now living, the failings of our discipleship and witness, the loneliness, despair and anxiety of many?

Lament in the presence of Jesus is the powerful gift of lockdown. If we receive it, if we will unwrap it, then we will find ourselves drawing near to the heart of God himself. His heart also weeps and grieves over the West, over Britain, over us.

The tears of lament will renew our imagination. If we are close enough to Jesus to know his heart, we will be able to see from his perspective. God wants to do something radically new in our generation. If we draw near enough to him to see it, we can be part of its unfolding. We will hear his voice speaking it into being. Like the prophets of old we will be caught up into this divine proclamation.

### Conclusion

Our society is emerging from over half a century of rage at the oppressive power structures of modernity – structures that the Church has been bound up in and must free herself from. Tired of deconstruction, this generation now wants to find a narrative to make sense of its longings. Whether the Church can help is as much a spiritual question as it is a theological or intellectual one.

We certainly need a new language for this emerging new era – fresh ways of articulating the biblical gospel of the coming kingdom. The deep miracle at Pentecost was not so much that the disciples spoke in tongues, but that those listening heard in their own languages what was being said and understood the message (Acts 2.1–6). The prophets and prophetesses who can proclaim the kingdom coming in the twenty-first century in such a way that it makes sense to this generation, will be those who have spent time getting close enough to God's heart to see from his perspective and to hear his words, and close enough to the culture to understand its pain and desire. Such intimacy is discovered only in the place of shared tears.

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*This is an extended version of 'God is mobilising the Church for a new wave of mission', an article published on the Christianity magazine blog on 12 June 2020. See [www.premierchristianity.com/Blog/God-is-mobilising-the-Church-for-a-new-wave-of-mission](http://www.premierchristianity.com/Blog/God-is-mobilising-the-Church-for-a-new-wave-of-mission)*

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