

no fear in love

During the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, a meme of sorts began circulating around Christian online forums. Blogs, articles, & social media posts retold a story about Martin Luther, who, during an outbreak of bubonic plague in 1527AD, penned a letter entitled “Whether one may flee from a deadly plague?” Deadly plagues being more than a little alarming in those days, most sensible people were looking to get out of town. A local pastor wanted to know, what should a Christian do?

Fear, one of the most basic human instincts, seems to spread amongst people faster than even the deadliest virus. Fear can often be thought of as either rational or irrational, although truth be told, the distinction between the two is pretty blurry, especially in a crisis situation. The normal response to fear is to attempt to minimise risk. Fear has utility, helping us make choices that keep ourselves & others safe. But sometimes our responses to fear can also become irrational. For COVID-19, increasing personal hygiene & staying indoors makes sense. Stockpiling toilet paper on the other hand, not so much. As Christians, & as leaders in our churches, workplaces, families, & communities, we have a problem if our response to fear prevents us from living as God’s people in the world. During COVID-19 so far I’ve seen distrust — of politicians, of the media, even of medical professionals — increase as people clamour for the action & advice that will save them. I’ve seen the videos of folks fighting over groceries, worried they might be left without vital supplies. I’ve seen people terrified to go to jobs they’ve done for years, anxious that they might catch the virus, or worse still, transmit it to someone vulnerable. I’ve seen leaders second-guess themselves & lash out at others, knowing that a wrong decision might cost lives. None of this seems particularly conducive to loving God, loving our neighbours, telling the good news, or making disciples.

In our current state fear is often instinctive, but it does need to be overcome — & the Bible says it can be. 1 John 4:18 speaks of perfect love which casts out fear, perfect love that clearly comes from God. A God whom we should by rights fear, but who showed us what love looks like by offering us grace & mercy through his death on a cross. This kind of love trumps anything the world throws at us. Easy enough to say, but it’s pretty difficult to hold on to that — to feel that — in times like this. But I like to think that practising love also casts out fear.

“there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.” 1 John 4:18

Demonstrating the love of God to others no matter the situation reminds them & us of who he is & who we are in him. The old cliché that “everyone is a leader” is never truer than in a time of crisis. We are all capable of building up or tearing down one another, & therefore each of us has the responsibility to be figures of peace & hope, not of fear. A global pandemic & the virtual shutdown of society doesn’t have to prevent us from showing calm & respectful leadership, from caring for & loving the vulnerable, & from supporting our neighbours with simple & practical acts of kindness — even if we don’t feel entirely safe ourselves.

Don’t get me wrong, following the government’s health directions right now is essential as a matter of both personal safety & civic duty. But government edict is not, & never has been, an excuse to give up on being the church, especially in this age of digital connectivity & technology. So take care of each other. Remind each other of who Jesus is & what he has done. Start each day intending to show God’s love to another human in this crazy time, & you may find that fear is not so powerful as it seemed.