

Living with the Lord . . . and the Pandemic

by Father Emmanuel Kahn

“God of our life, there are days when the burdens we carry chafe our shoulders and weigh us down; when the road seems dreary and endless, the skies grey and threatening; when our lives have no music in them, and our hearts are lonely, and our souls have lost their courage. Flood the path with light, run our eyes to where the skies are full of promise; tune our hearts to braver music; give us the sense of comradeship with heroes and saints of every age; and so quicken our spirits that we may be able to encourage the souls of all who journey with us on the road of life, to Your honour and glory.”

St. Augustine

“The road of life” on which each of us are travelling at this time can be difficult. However, in the midst of every difficulty the Lord floods “the path with light,” draws us to the “heroes and saints of every age” and empowers us “to encourage the souls of all who journey with us.” Let us consider then the precise nature of the Light that guides us on this path, a few of the heroes and saints who can serve as models for us, and how we can encourage others who journey with us.

Understanding “Light” and “light”

For all of us as Christians, the first verse of Psalm 26 (27) is a guide: “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?” At this challenging time of staying home and protecting ourselves and our loved ones against the Covid-19 pandemic St Paul’s words in Ephesians 6 encourage us to “be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armour of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. . . . Take your stand, therefore, having girded your waist with truth, and donning the breastplate of justice.” This does not imply that the devil sent the present pandemic. Rather, that we should stand firm against the confusion and threat of illness and (for some, but hopefully only a few) death that the pandemic brings. To “gird oneself” is defined as “to tuck up loose

garments under one's belt, so as to be able to move more quickly, to prepare oneself for action.”

This is sound advice as we continue to stay at home to protect ourselves and the NHS. Even in self-isolation, we can “prepare ourselves for action,” seeking truth about what is happening in the pandemic, even if we are not yet sure what action we will need to take. There is a danger that we might think that the Psalms and St Paul's words (and even the whole Bible) are important only for spiritual advice. This would be a serious mistake. The word “secular” means “relating to the present world rather than to heavenly or spiritual things;” however, reading and praying the Bible offers us guidance and support, both for secular and spiritual challenges.

We know that Jesus Christ Himself is the Light of the World—with a capital letter “L” to indicate His divinity (John 8.12; 1 John 1.5). However, we sometimes forget that as Christians our beliefs and actions reflect that Light, so that we can become lights in the world—with a small letter “l”—as human beings, drawing others to Christ, to truth and to justice (Matthew 5.14). In these challenging times, we can as a Church and as Christian persons “appear as lights in the world” (Philippians 2.15). The brighter we can experience the Light of Christ in our lives, the stronger we can respond to St Augustine's challenge to “flood the path with light,” both in our own lives and the lives of others.

Once we know that Christ is the Light of the World, it places upon each of us a responsibility to become leaders in our own families, in our local situations and often beyond. Seeking to be a leader begins with using our time on earth in an efficacious manner to seek God's will in our lives. The goal is certainly not to become a celebrity, nor to posture before others, but rather to problem solve. In the book, *Thy Will Be Done: Strategic Leadership, Planning, and Management for Christians*, Protodeacon Peter Danilchick sets out five attributes that leaders need: “(1) Fear the Lord your God; (2) Walk in all His ways; (3) Love God; (4) Serve

the Lord your God; and (5) Keep the commandments.”¹ Especially in the midst of a pandemic, strategic leadership requires “a vision,” as well as recognising our own weaknesses and developing “ways of compensating for them,” considering “obstacles,” and developing “discipline and proper organization, with everyone pulling together in community.”² Such a comprehensive understanding and implementation of leadership is not achieved without considerable prayer.

The Light of Christ can be bright indeed. At times, our response to this divine light might be similar to Moses when he saw “a bush burning with fire, yet the bush was not consumed” (Exodus 3.2). We too can be confronted with events in our lives which make us “turn aside now and see this marvellous sight” (Exodus 3.3). Just as Moses was told by God to bring the people of Israel out of Egypt, we too can be guided to take bold action in specific challenging situations in our own lives (Exodus 3.6-22). However, even outstanding leaders like Moses who genuinely wished to know God better were at times unsure of their ability to follow His guidance and needed help from Aaron and the elders of Israel (Exodus 4.1-31). We too will often need help from our friends. In such situations, it is right to search for the models from the past—both heroes and saints—to guide us into the future that the Lord has prepared for us.

Heroes and Saints of the Past Who Can Guide Us into the Future

St Augustine prayed that we might all be given “the sense of comradeship [that is, a sense of friendship and awareness of being a fellow worker] with heroes and saints of every age.” In the last great world-wide influenza pandemic in 1918-1920, there was a doctor who emerged as a hero in Manchester and saved the lives of many people—Manchester’s Medical Officer of Health, James Niven (1851-1925). Those who worked with Dr Niven certainly respected him, as earlier when he was Medical Officer of Health in Oldham, his colleagues had raised the funds to send

¹ (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2016), pp. 33-57.

² Danilchick, *Thy Will Be Done* (London: SPCK, 2017), p. 60 f.

him to Berlin to study with Dr Robert Koch (1843-1910), the founder of modern bacteriology.³

With his 40 years of medical experience, as well as earlier training in mathematics, Dr Niven saw that “Public health authorities should press for further precautions in the presence of a severe outbreak.” His vision contrasted starkly with the approach of Sir Arthur Newsholme, the senior health advisor to the British Government who was insisting that “no action should be taken against the pandemic, because munitions factories and public services needed to remain open to help with the war effort.” Dr Niven courageously required “that schools and cinemas [in Manchester] be closed to reduce people's proximity to each other and published leaflets that were displayed around the city, advising residents on how to reduce the risk of becoming infected.”⁴

The 1918-1920 influenza pandemic infected some 500 million people—nearly one-third of the world's population of 1.8 billion—and killed at least 17 million people—an estimated death rate of nearly 1% of the world's population, with possibly 3% of those infected dying.⁵ Just as the UK's Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, was seriously infected in 2020, so in the 1918-1920 pandemic were the UK's Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, and the US President, Woodrow Wilson, seriously infected; however, happily, all three recovered.⁶ There is much we can learn about

³ See the Science Museum article on Robert Koch at:

<https://collection.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/people/cp75420/robert-koch>. (CTRL + Click views article).

⁴ See <https://thenorthernquota.org/features/james-niven-doctor-who-saved-manchester-worst-effects-spanish-flu-pandemic>.

⁵ Estimates of infections and death vary greatly. See <https://ourworldindata.org/spanish-flu-largest-influenza-pandemic-in-history> which argues persuasively for these estimates, as well as providing comprehensive statistics on the Covid-20 pandemic. Cf. Rosenwald, Michael S. (7 April 2020). "History's deadliest pandemics, from ancient Rome to modern America," *Washington Post*. Archived from the original on 7 April 2020 at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/local/retropolis/coronavirus-deadliest-pandemics/>. Cited in a comprehensive article updated 20 April 2020 at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_flu.

⁶ See <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/how-manchester-beat-spanish-flu-18067909>.

⁷ See [https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736\(09\)60530-4.pdf](https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736(09)60530-4.pdf).

how to face the present Covid-19 pandemic by reading Mark Honigsbaum's *Living with Enza: The Forgotten Story of Britain and the Great Flu Pandemic of 1918*. As Bill Bynum concludes in his review of that book for *The Lancet*: "'No man is an island,' the poet John Donne reminded us four centuries ago. He was correct, of course, but we must go further: No island is an island."⁷ So we are learning today, as Covid-19 moves in its waves around the world, person by person, region by region, nation by nation. There was nothing preordained about what happened in 1918-1920: those cities that took the most effective precautions had the fewest infections and deaths; the same will be true in 2020 and thereafter.⁸

Earlier, during the Crimean War of 1853 to 1856 the hero who emerged was unquestionably Florence Nightingale (1820-1910). Like James Niven, she combined a deep sense of empathy for others with careful study of the patterns that can emerge from a study of the available data.⁹ As Rowan Williams has suggested, Florence Nightingale also had the discernment "to love with clarity . . . to love human beings in their particularity and to cast light on individuals, the particular needs of this person, this patient; not to generalize but to attend, to look."¹⁰ In the midst of her caring for so many others, she drove herself relentlessly and paid a high price. After her return from Turkey, for several decades Florence Nightingale spent much of her life in bed. "In all likelihood, Nightingale [developed] not one, but four different disorders, all at least loosely inter-related—bipolar personality disorder, Crimean fever (brucellosis), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and . . . Alzheimer's disease."¹¹ Yet in the midst of poor health, Florence Nightingale

⁸ See <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/208354>.

⁹ James Niven became President of both the Epidemiological Section of the Royal Society of Medicine and the Manchester Statistical Society. Florence Nightingale has been accurately described as "The Lady with the Data" at: <https://thisisstatistics.org/florence-nightingale-the-lady-with-the-data/>, with further online references there about Florence Nightingale from the American Statistical Association.

¹⁰ Rowan Williams, "Florence Nightingale: The light of life," in *Luminaries: Twenty lives that illuminate the Christian Way* (London: SPCK, 2019), p. 96.

¹¹ See <https://blog.oup.com/2015/08/florence-nightingale-syphilis-death/>. For a balanced life of Florence Nightingale, see Lynn M. Hamilton, *Florence Nightingale: A Life Inspired* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015).

continued to write and inspire others, establishing the training programme at St Thomas Hospital in London that became the model for professional nursing.

Saints are sometimes heroes, but at times hated in their own lifetimes. Always, they are holy persons, some recognised by the Church as living with God in heaven, others unrecognised but living holy lives that have implemented God's will for themselves and helped others.

Beginning with St Luke, there is a long tradition of women and men who were recognised as healing saints.¹² Natalie Stavrevsky, RN, has pointed out that: "Examples of Jesus Christ's healing ministry are found throughout the gospels. The early Church teaches us of deaconesses [and other women and men] who provided holistic care to those in need. Their vocation encompassed all aspects of physical need: feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, caring for the sick and burying the dead."¹³

Of particular interest are three first-century Christian women who have been described as "the mothers of modern medicine"—Saints Zenais (or Zenaida) and Philonilla of Tarsus and St Hermione of Caesarea in Palestine. Each of these women were "trained physicians who, being Christian, added not only the holistic dimension to their practice, but treated the poor and disadvantaged without charge for their services." The two saints from Tarsus were Jewish cousins of St Paul. "After their baptism, the two gave themselves over more fully to the study of medicine and began to apply Christian principles and ideas to medical philosophy. Orthodox Christianity [teaches] that salvation is a healing process. The two sisters were deeply impressed with the realization that Christ tied the healing of the whole person, spiritual and physical with the presence of the Heavenly Kingdom. . . . When Zenaida and Philonella completed their studies, they moved to Thessaly, where

¹² See the 10-page PDF prepared by Archbishop Damianos of Sinai, "The Medical Saints of the Orthodox Church in Byzantine Art" at: <https://www.austriaca.at/0xc1aa5576%20x00178c45.pdf>.

¹³ See "Development Of An Orthodox Parish Nursing Ministry" at: <https://www.o.ca.org/parish-ministry/parishdevelopment/development-of-an-orthodox-parish-nursing-ministry>. For the period from 330 to 1453 see John T. Cherban (Ed.), *Holistic Healing in Byzantium* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2010).

there were many medicinal mineral springs flowing in the numerous caverns of the Felion Mountains. The sisters purchased one of these medicinal springs and built a small dwelling and clinic in its cavern.”¹⁴

St Hermione, the daughter of St Philip the Deacon in Acts 6, was joined by her sister St Eukhidia and “bought a house and founded a medical clinic devoted to the treatment of the poor and the homeless. Rooms were added for poor travellers who were ill. In this way, Hermione started the tradition of Christian hospital-hostels or “xenodokhia”, which would become so much a part of the function of the early Orthodox Christian dioceses.”¹⁵ That tradition of medical and evangelistic service has continued today with the international expansion of the Parish Nursing Ministry,¹⁶ as well as regular gatherings of Orthodox women in healing ministries.¹⁷

The fourth-century physician and monk, St Cyrus of Alexandria and his younger military friend, St John, also offer strong evidence of the power of healing saints, both during their lifetimes and after death. St Cyrus used to advise those who came to him, “If you want to keep clear of illness, take care not to sin, because, more often than not, illness is a result of sin.”¹⁸ Linking medical science and faith, St Cyrus often healed those who came to him with the sign of the cross. In about 412 AD, many years after the deaths of the two saints, their bodies were exhumed, found to be incorrupt and taken in a great procession from Alexandria to Menouthis, where for many years thousands of people came to venerate the relics of these saints and to be healed.¹⁹

¹⁴ *Saints who were physicians and healers* at: <http://dce.oca.org/assets/files/resources/Saints-Physicians.pdf> pp. 84-86. This Activity Book for Orthodox Children and Parents from the Department of Christian Education, Orthodox Church of America, 2018, cites the writing of Archbishop Lazar (Puhalo), *The Impact of Orthodox Christian Thought on Medicine*, (Dewdney, B.C. Canada: Synaxis Press, The Canadian Orthodox Publishing House, 1974), pp. 51-53. See also *Orthodox Women in the Healing Ministries* at: <https://owhm.org/saints>.

¹⁵ *The Synaxarion: The Lives of the Saints of the Orthodox Church, Vol. 1*, September 4, pp. 28-29.

¹⁶ See <https://www.parishnursing.org.uk/> and Orthodox Parish Nurses of New England [USA] at: <https://opnnewengland.org/faq-2/>.

¹⁷ See <https://www.ancientfaith.com/specials/owhm>.

¹⁷ *The Synaxarion: The Lives of the Saints of the Orthodox Church, Vol. 3*, January 31, pp. 361-363.

¹⁹ *The Synaxarion, Vol. 5, June 28*, p. 642-644.

The lives of these saints, two sets of sisters and two brothers, certainly offer what St Augustine sought for all of us—“the sense of comradeship with heroes and saints of every age.”

Encouragement: Growing Hope in God, in Ourselves and in Others

In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic many of us are experiencing “radical uncertainty,” and that for now the honest and “sensible response to the question ‘what should we do?’ is “I don’t know.”²⁰ St Augustine would have been sympathetic, with his own deep personal experience of the restlessness inherent in what he “called ‘the unstable heart’ (*cor inquietum*), tumbling humans off balance toward what they want, without knowing what it is.”²¹ Of course, we do know that in the face of an influenza pandemic certain actions are important, such as regular hand washing and social distancing. However, it is not yet clear whether “lockdowns will end up with higher mortality because they will delay the peak until next winter. We don’t know and it may be years before we do. But we can only learn from variation [among national approaches to lockdown] if there is no contamination between countries trying different approaches, and for this we need to close borders to population movement [which is difficult to achieve] The country [the UK and other countries] may be entering a phase of lockdown-ease-lockdown-ease, until testing has been scaled up to permit test-and-release. Time will [thus] be bought until a vaccine is discovered”²² and mass-produced. Many labs throughout the world are working on vaccine research; and work at an Oxford group is especially promising.²³

²⁰ Paul Collier, “The Problem of Modelling: Public policy and the coronavirus,” *TLS (The Times Literary Supplement)*, April 24, 2020 at: <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/problem-modelling-public-policy-coronavirus-paul-collier/>

²¹ Garry Wills, *St Augustine* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1999), p. xiii.

²² Collier, *TLS*, as cited in footnote 20.

²³ See David D. Kirkpatrick, “In Race for a Coronavirus Vaccine, an Oxford Group Leaps Ahead, *New York Times*, 27 April 2020 at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/27/world/europe/coronavirus-vaccine-update-oxford.html?smid=em-share> .

Perhaps in the midst of the pandemic some of us are learning from St John Chrysostom that “love which comes from material necessity will give [the marriage] bond the strength it needs to endure times of difficulty. The same is true for society as a whole. God has put into every person’s heart the capacity to love [their] neighbours. But that love is immeasurably strengthened by their dependence on one another’s skills.”²⁴ Certainly, the Covid-19 pandemic is causing us to depend much more on each other, with both our strengths and our weaknesses.

In *The Way of Christ*, Father Theodore Stylianopoulos has reflected that: “Yes, life is a journey, a pilgrimage toward God. It has many difficulties, many burdens. But let us focus on Christ. All of us possess the holy flame of God’s grace through baptism. Every person, clergy or laity, and every parish or regional Church can reach as high as inner yearning gives them motivation and strength. [But] you are [often] like a powerful light on a dimmer switch. The dimmer switch can be on, but so low that no light shines. Your task, as well as the task of all, is to turn on that switch to high in order that the grace of Christ may glow to its full power. If you desire it and seek it diligently, you can become all light and fire!”²⁵ Perhaps that is starting to happen to many of us.

Covid-19 is going to be with us for some years to come, although its evolution in particular locations and countries is not yet clear.²⁶ In a recent YouGov poll of 4,000 people across the UK only 9% of people said they wanted “life to return to how it was before.” Four in 10 said “there had been a stronger sense of community and the feeling of neighbours looking out for each other. And 39% are more in touch with friends and family, aided by the boom in video-chats.” Furthermore, 54%

²⁴ Robert Van de Weyer, Compiler of *On Living Simply: The Golden Voice of John Chrysostom* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1996), Reflection 5.

²⁵ Father Theodore Stylianopoulos, *The Way of Life in Christ: Gospel, Spiritual Life and Renewal in Orthodoxy* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2002), p. 187.

²⁶ For further information, listen to the podcast interview with Donald G. McNeil Jr. of the New York Times, “The Next Year (or Two) of the Pandemic” [here](#).

agreed with the statement, “I hope to change some things about my life; and I hope we will have learned from this as a country.”²⁷

Precisely how we will each change will depend to a considerable extent on a combination of the intentions of the Lord for His world, our prayers and scientific research. St Augustine understood that Christ’s peace—His presence, the gift of Himself to each of us—is a goal at all times, but especially “when the burdens we carry chafe our shoulders and weigh us down.” His closing prayer can be ours—that we shall all “quicken our spirits that we may be able to encourage the souls of all who journey with us on the road of life, to Your honour and glory.”

²⁷ Roger Harrabin, Most people 'want to change their lives' after Covid-19 - poll,” BBC News 17 April 2020 at 9:07 am, page 7 of 9 at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/live/world-52319956> .