

More useful resources from <https://arthurrankcentre.org.uk/>

Oxygen masks

My guess is that most of us haven't flown in a while! I was due to fly to the USA in April to visit my sister and her family, but COVID-19 put a stop to that. But I was reminded recently about all those pre-flight rituals that happen once you board an aircraft, and particularly of the directions around putting on oxygen masks.

For many of us, the clear instruction to don your own oxygen mask before helping others - particularly children and vulnerable adults - with theirs seems pretty counter-intuitive, and yet we know it makes sense.

This week, England is facing its second national lockdown, and the other nations of the UK continue to live and work through their own 'circuit breakers'. I know that many of you will be spending increasing amounts of time and energy thinking through the implications of COVID-19 on enabling your church and community to mark Remembrance, observe Advent and celebrate Christmas, not knowing how current or future restrictions - or freedoms - will affect the plans that are developing. You will be trying to listen to a myriad of voices and meet a myriad of needs.

In these next few weeks, can we encourage you to put your own oxygen mask on first? As counter-intuitive as it may seem, give yourself permission to prioritise your own mental and spiritual wellbeing. Through the noise of those asking for help with their oxygen masks may you hear the gentle voice of the One who speaks to you saying, 'well done, good and faithful servant'.

Go well!

Louise, on behalf of the wider Arthur Rank Centre team

'Generation COVID' or Generation Hope?

Bible reading: Matthew 15:1-9

Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, 'Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!'

Jesus replied, 'And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, "Honour your father and mother" and "Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death." **5** But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is "devoted to God," they are not to 'honour their father or mother' with it. Thus, you nullify the

word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:

“These people honour me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.
They worship me in vain;
their teachings are merely human rules.”

Reflection

As I wrote this reflection, I found it almost impossible not to read it through the lens of COVID-19. Surely the Pharisees are right? Washing your hands is a basic necessity in these times of anxiety around spreading infection and yet Jesus turns it on its head and challenges them. Of course, that is no way to read the text.

This encounter marks another point in the narrative of the growing tension between Jesus and the Jewish establishment. Matthew, especially, places Jesus at odds with the Pharisees again and again. They were motivated by a love of the law, yet Jesus challenges them to follow his example and operate out of the law of love. Handwashing and *qorbān* (sacrifice) are two points of pharisaic practice that aren't found in the written law, so here Jesus isn't attacking *Torah* but the Pharisees propensity to interpret the law out of self-interest.

We seem to be beset by self-interest in our world today.

This week, for example, the world feels like a dark place: on a Zoom call with a friend in the US we were talking about the toxic narratives and narcissism in American politics as the election looms; the appalling murder of three people in Notre Dame Basilica in France; the earthquake in Turkey and Greece. And the UK government's announcement of another national lockdown for England (following similar 'circuit breaker' lockdowns in the three devolved nations) brings continued levels of distress. Delayed, but on the horizon, we see a tsunami of businesses collapsing and unemployment levels rising. We read about Generation COVID and I'm finding it hard not to be depressed. In fact, over the last few weeks I've tried to limit my exposure to social media, the radio and television.

But for Christians this isn't the end of the story. Jesus invites us to two things. Firstly, as his encounter with the 'law lovers' demonstrates, he flips things upside down. He whispers to us, 'all is not lost.' Secondly, as we approach the likelihood of a difficult winter there is hope. The church is called to be a harbinger of hope; that's our mandate, because hope is found in the God who comes from the future with the promise that he will make all things new. He will wipe away the tears, he will be our God we will be his people. He can redeem, restore, renew, rebuild, rework, rekindle any and every situation. All is not lost.

I hate the pessimistic language of 'Generation COVID' because it does not recognise that out of difficulty, adversity, pain, death and discomfort God can, and surely will, be with us and make his face to shine upon us once again, even if that idea feels dim and distant.

Response

Of course, we must continue to obey the rule of six and practice social distancing (physical distancing and social solidarity is perhaps a better phrase) but we can find ways to bring hope. A practical suggestion might be to commit this week to get in touch with people in your sphere of influence who might be struggling – young or old, by phone, email, WhatsApp or in some other way – and whisper 'all is not lost.' Practice the law of love this week.

Revd Dr Ben Aldous, Principal Officer for Mission and Evangelism, Churches Together in England