

Deconstructing corona

Corona, corona, corona ... the media would seem to have fixed their tunnel vision – and ours – on this one topic to the exclusion of all others. It is important. Literally vitally important. No doubt about it. But, as important as dealing properly with the coronavirus is to our survival and to our physical and social life, it is not all there is to life. Surely that's what the Gospel is constantly telling us with its talk of "fullness of life": that there is more to life than we commonly believe or usually appreciate. There is always far more to life than our specific worries and present concerns cause us to fear.

With our public thoughts and our media perspectives reduced to this one all-consuming theme, I found myself wondering whether the Bible itself has anything to say directly about corona. Well, it does, actually. Not a lot, but it does – if you consult the Vulgate, one of the earliest translations of the Bible, dating from the 4th century; a translation into the most widely spoken language of its day: Latin.

The word *corona* in Latin means: crown, diadem, garland, victory wreath. And the few passages where the Vulgate Bible uses the word are all central texts that tell us of the amazing core Gospel message of Easter. Starting with the human suffering Christ shares with us.

John 19:5

Vulgate: Exiit ergo Jesus, portans coronam spineam et purpureum vestimentum.
Et dicit eis: Ecce homo!

Good News: So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe.
Pilate said to them, "Look! Here is the man!"

In other words, the earliest uses of the word *corona* in the New Testament tell of suffering. At the peak of the Passion narrative, the word *corona* raises questions we too find ourselves asking today: "Where is this all going to lead?" "When will this all end?" "How long is this going to last?" "What will life be like after this?" "Is there a better life beyond in store?"

The message of Easter is not the straight triumphalist thing we often make of it, especially when we think of heady, gutsy hymns like "Thine is the Glory, Risen, Conquering Son!" Sung full voice and with exaggerated 'whistling-in-the-dark' conviction, these Easter acclamations can easily lead us into a state of heroic denial. Even when it parades as strength of faith, this can quickly end up blinding us to the gruesome realities of life as we seek spiritual thrills in a bombastic display of defiant belief.

But the Gospel message, the Easter message, never was that straightforward, never was that unambiguous. For it is the message of the broken healer, of the suffering servant raised to glory. It is a message that was picked up by outcasts and those on the fringes of society, by slaves and people persecuted for their beliefs. Ours is the wonderfully paradoxical Good News of the victorious victim, echoed in that other triumphant but far subtler hymn: "Crown him with many crowns, the Lamb upon the throne!" What a wonderful picture, what a marvellous visualisation of the weakness of God that is stronger than human strength, and that is powerful to reach out to us in our weakness, and our fear, and our uncertainty. The hands of the Risen Christ – as in the central stained-glass window in our church – still are pierced hands. The Lamb upon the throne. That is the message of Easter.

And it is of this that all other uses of the word *corona* in the New Testament speak. They speak of hope, of anticipation. They speak out of contexts of longing and wondering and uncertainty. Where are we headed? When will our trials end? What lies ahead? What, in short, is life?

The 'corona' answers of those early Christians are born out of their persecution and out of their assurance of resurrection. That assurance and that hope lead them to speak with conviction of *corona gloriæ* (the crown of glory), of *corona vitæ* (the crown of life). Deconstructing corona.

1 Thessalonians 2:19

Vulgate Bible:

Quæ et enim nostra spes aut gaudium aut corona gloriæ?

New International Version:

For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory?

James 1:12 -

Vulgate Bible:

Beatus vir qui suffert tentationem: quoniam cum probatus fuerit, accipiet coronam vitæ, quam repromisit Deus diligentibus se.

Christian Standard Bible:

Blessed is the one who endures trials, because when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

When Mary visited the tomb that first Easter morning, the last thing she expected, given the circumstances, was to find Jesus alive. How much greater, then, her joy at finding that most improbable, that most unforeseeable option to be true. For her, morning had broken like the first morning. A new dawn. The morning of a new day. The morning of new life.

Like the disciples after the crucifixion – and more of that next week – we find ourselves for different reasons locked in our room (not locked in a tomb, quite, but locked in our room), perhaps afraid to go out into the threatening, risky world out there. We have a better realisation of the truth of what the great German-American theologian Paul Tillich says, “that the tomb of Jesus was the end of His life and of His work *before* it became the place of His final triumph.” The words ‘rose again’ in the Creed don’t describe “the inevitable ‘happy ending’” like in some kitschy film. They describe the most improbable, the most unforeseeable option – and the option which is ultimately true: for Jesus and for us. Maybe the present situation of physical distancing in fact enables us to grasp far better what an amazing new start that must be, the new life ‘out there’ in the world, the different life that lies ‘out there’ and ahead of us.

Today I want the German poet Joachim Ringelnatz to have the last word, and so I’m ending my reflection with a poem of his that has absolutely nothing – or perhaps absolutely everything – to do with Easter.

Morgenwonne

Ich bin so knallvergnügt erwacht.
Ich klatsche meine Hüften.
Das Wasser lockt. Die Seife lacht.
Es dürstet mich nach Lüften.

Ein schmuckes Laken macht einen Knicks
Und gratuliert mir zum Baden.
Zwei schwarze Schuhe in blanken Wachs
Betiteln mich „Euer Gnaden“.

Aus meiner tiefsten Seele zieht
Mit Nasenflügelbeben
Ein ungeheurer Appetit
Nach Frühstück und nach Leben.

Morning Rapture

I woke so giddy-gleefully.
I slap my hips together.
The water laughs. Soap summons me.
I drink in air with pleasure.

A bedsheet curtsies trim and spruce,
Commending my ablution.
“Your Lordship!” two black polished shoes
Address me with devotion.

My soul exhales with a delight
That sets my nostrils quivering
A most prodigious appetite
For breakfast and for living.