



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Plaguing Interruptions Redux

Clay Nelson © 25 October 2020

As I shared last Sunday, there are times when the preacher loses control of his talk, not unlike a wild horse taking the bit in their teeth, hellbent to go where they will. Last week was a wild ride like that. While surprised to have my intended journey interrupted I was not unhappy where my musings took me. I saw some unexpected sights. Even so, I am going to try again to reach my intended destination.

Like many of us I have spent considerable time thinking about how Covid has changed the future both in the short term and for the long term. I don't have a crystal ball for this task. And if I did, this being 2020, it would malfunction: Filling with smoke before rolling to the floor and smashing into smithereens. What I do have is current events and, more importantly, history to offer insights.

My interest is not just about satisfying idle curiosity. It is about finding hope in such dark times to feed our resilience to carry on in a world made unpredictable by a deadly virus. I dare to exercise my foresight because, given my age, I am not likely to find out how wrong I am.

Current events in New Zealand show us how our lives have already changed. We know Covid is a slippery sucker always on the lookout for a new host. In spite of our vigilance at the border we know that it sneaked in through the ports last week, threatening our level 1 status once again. Masks, social distancing, frequently washed hands and using our contact tracing app are going to be part of our daily lives for an indeterminate time. While we have eliminated Covid twice, our strategy will need repeating periodically as long as the virus ravages the rest of the globe.

We also know from recent history the right leadership can create the level of social cohesion necessary to keep us all safe. In spite of over forty years of vilification by neoliberalism, government once again enjoys the trust of New Zealanders that it will be more interested in their well-being than in the gross national product. I doubt that we would have a strong progressive government if it weren't for the pandemic. Whether or not this is for the long term or short term, only time will tell. Whether or not our last election is a bellwether ringing for a more compassionate and science-based way of governing that other countries will follow is difficult to know. We might get some indication in nine days when the polls in the US close.

But I am much more interested in what the world might look like several generations from now. Since Covid-19 broke out experts and politicians have said that it's unprecedented or, when pushed, compared it with other corona viruses, SARS and MERS. Many have cited lessons of the 1918 Spanish Flu that killed about 50 million people around the world, about 2% of the population. But the Black Death was by far the deadliest pandemic of the past thousand years, reducing the world's population from 450 million to 350 million in only a few decades. And while this is a grim statistic, the Black Death was also a catalyst for the brighter, centuries-long history that followed, right up to today.

By the time the plague wound down in the latter part of the fourteenth century, the world had utterly changed: The wages of ordinary farmers and craftsmen had doubled and tripled, and nobles were knocked down a notch in social status. The church's hold on society was damaged, and Western Europe's feudal system was on its way out.

Because my expertise lies more in church history let's look more closely at the Black Death's impact on the church as an example.

Religious practice in medieval Europe (c 476–1500 CE) was dominated and informed by the Catholic Church. The majority of the population was Christian, and "Christian" at this time meant "Catholic" as there was initially no other form of that religion. The rampant corruption of the medieval Church, however, gave rise to reformers and new religious sects, condemned by the Church. Even so, the Church maintained its power and exercised enormous influence over people's daily lives, from the king on his throne to the peasant in the field.

The Church regulated and defined an individual's life, literally, from birth to death and was thought to continue its hold over the person's soul in the afterlife. The Church was the manifestation of God's will and presence on earth, and its dictates were not to be questioned, even when it was apparent that many of the clergy were working far more steadily in their own interests than in those of their god.

The Church maintained the belief that Jesus was the only begotten son of the one true God as revealed in the Hebrew scriptures and that those works prophesied Christ's coming. The date of the earth and history of humanity was all revealed through the scriptures that made up the Christian Bible — considered the word of God and the oldest book in the world — that was consulted as a handbook on how to live according to divine will and gain everlasting life in heaven upon one's death.

Interpretation of the Bible, however, was too great a responsibility for the average person, and so the clergy were a spiritual necessity. In order to talk to God or understand the Bible correctly, one relied on one's priest as that priest was ordained by his superior who was, in turn, ordained by

another, all under the authority of the Pope, God's representative on earth.

The Church hierarchy maintained the social hierarchy. One was born into a certain class, followed the profession of one's parents, and died as they had. Social mobility was extremely rare to non-existent since the Church taught that the hierarchy was God's will. One had been born into a certain set of circumstances and attempting to improve one's lot was tantamount to claiming God had made a mistake. People, therefore, accepted their lot and made the best of it.

A dramatic blow to the power of the Church came in the form of the Black Death pandemic. People began to doubt the power of the clergy who could do nothing to stop people from dying or the plague from spreading. Even so, the Church repeatedly crushed dissent, silenced reformers, and massacred heretical sects until the Protestant Reformation (1517-1648 CE) broke the Church's power and allowed for greater freedom of thought and religious expression.

It was "the end of an age of submission," [Barbara Tuchman](#) wrote. "To that extent, the Black Death may have been the unrecognized beginning of modern man."

As Unitarians were leaders amongst the radical reformers of the Reformation, it could be said that we are the child of the Plague. I'd like to think that was a good thing.

The Reformation was only the beginning of outcomes from the Plague. Historians link both the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution to conditions made possible by the Black Death. And yes, horrible things also happened in its wake. Anti-Semitic pogroms, misogynistic witch burnings, zealous religious wars, bloody revolutions, and soul-shattering famine were all part of the post-plague landscape. Things had changed for better and worse. What changed most was the seemingly unchangeable, especially for people who until then had been largely invisible. What had been fixed in place was, all at once, not. As we try to discern the shape of the future, this phase of history is increasingly looking like that one.

What will happen when more and more people work from home, emptying huge office buildings in city centres? How will a growing gig economy impact and transform a labour movement nearly decimated by neoliberalism? Will automation and robotisation make room for more meaningful work or increase unemployment and poverty? How will educational institutions function on campuses no longer necessary? How will religions change to meet this very different world? Will globalisation lose its hold on world economies? Will technology be used for evil as much as for good? Will our plague give impetus to create a greener world? As human beings will become despondent, despairing and uncaring cruelly

acting out our embitterment on the innocent or will we find hope and sustenance through connection to diverse communities?

The questions go on and on without answer, for we don't know what we don't know. What we do know is that we have to take a long view, knowing none of us alive today will see the final outcomes. We need to dispense with wishful thinking. We need to hold fast to our Unitarian values born of the last great plague and make choices along the way that further a brighter future for the children of our great-great-grandchildren. It is both the least and most we can do.