

# ONE VOICE

TOGETHER IN PRAYER FOR AN **END TO POVERTY**

## **VENEZUELAN REFUGEES FACING FOOD CRISIS AFTER CORONAVIRUS LOCKDOWN**

**Thousands of refugees who fled the political and economic crisis in Venezuela are facing weeks with very little food after a national lockdown in Colombia.**

'I don't know what I'm going to do without being able to feed my daughter,' says 24-year-old Ana\*, who has a four-year-old daughter. 'If the government does not let us go out on the streets, I do not know what we are going to do to eat.'

Across the city of Barranquilla, Colombia there are more than 15,000 Venezuelan families like Ana's. Most of them depend on being able to work in order to put food on the table, but now they can no longer leave their houses.

To try and stop the spread of coronavirus, the Colombian government has ordered that everyone should stay home for the next three weeks. However, relief agencies such as Tearfund and local churches have been given special permission to carry on supporting people.

### **The need remains great**

Before the lockdown, our local partners distributed food parcels to 600 Venezuelan refugee families in Barranquilla. But there are many more people still in need of food.

'Children and families have been suffering from lack of food for a long time now and are at high risk because of how impossible it is to get food,' says Rosa Camargo de Bravo, who leads Tearfund's work in Latin America and the Caribbean.

'We expect to increase our support for families with elderly people and those without any means to earn an income during the quarantine.'

### **PLEASE PRAY:**

- Pray for Venezuelan refugees in Colombia, that they will be able to access food during the pandemic and be able to feed their families.
- Ask God to protect people who are likely to be particularly vulnerable to the virus, especially the elderly. But also women and children who are at risk of violence and abuse when confined to their homes.
- Pray for a quick end to the outbreak, so that people can start to rebuild their lives.

*\*Name has been changed to protect identity.*

## A NOTE FROM...

'For most of us the quarantine has meant going home; a return to God, our families and to stillness. Unfortunately, there are people like Ana who cannot go home. Our call in this crisis is to be light in the lives of those who do not have a home to shelter in or food to eat. The time to act is now.'

**Andrea Villareal, Latin America and Caribbean Team**

## **GOOD THING, WHERE HAVE YOU GONE?**

*A reflection from Tearfund's Tarryn Pegna*

**Coronavirus, conflict, disaster, climate change... the list goes on. Distress wrapped up in different names. It all got me thinking about a group of people long ago, escaping through a wilderness, who started to be killed by venomous snakes. Fear. Panic. Loss. And then God told the people to look up. (Numbers 21)**

'So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.' (Numbers 21:9)

A foreshadowing of Jesus in the time of Moses. Death defeated. Hope.

Of course, we don't live unaffected by what happens in this world. Just because we know Jesus doesn't mean we don't face disease or hardship. But in the midst of a world that seems full of fear, panic and loss – not just of lives but of livelihoods and of hope – let us look up.

As I read messages from friends, colleagues and online school communities, as well as posts on social media and the news in general, I realised I am not the only one feeling a little overwhelmed (or a lot) at the scale of what is going on in our world. The worry of what the future holds for us and for all those we care about, both close to home and across the planet.

The Bible has some very practical advice for us:

**'Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.'** (Philippians 4:8)

**In light of that, let's remember the lovely things...**

Consider Lutiya in Malawi who can feed her children and pay their school fees because of the way she's learned to farm. Beating hunger and opening up new possibilities for her children's futures.

Think of Jamal\* and Hussein\* in Jordan who are seeing hope in their own lives and also building up other men who have fled the violence in Syria. Conquering depression and hopelessness through exercise groups and conversation.

Let's remember Claude in Rwanda who – through finding the grace and love of Jesus – is reconciled with a community where he killed people during the genocide. He has been restored and has found true freedom.

### **The admirable things...**

Think of each of our partners who work so bravely and so compassionately to meet the needs of people. The amount of love behind the commitment of each church as we work together in communities to see justice, beat poverty and respond in times of crisis.

### **The excellent things...**

Think of every volunteer, every fundraiser, every supporter who has given of their time, prayers or finance. Think of the overwhelming pool of kindness this adds up to.

Think of the children educated, the bellies filled, the comfort brought, the moments of new hope in whole communities – because people have been willing to show love to one another and reach out across nations. To step in and be the hands, feet and voice of Jesus where it's needed most.

These are good things. Let us not stop doing them and thanking God for them.

### **Right here, right now**

On the other hand, these things – as wonderful as they are – can seem slightly removed from us as we live the reality of our own moment to moment. As we worry about our own child's cough. Our own bills. The politics in our own backyard. (Or even where we might find some loo roll, pasta and paracetamol at this stage!)

So... to remind ourselves that there are good things everywhere, even though they're sometimes not as loud as the challenging things, I took a walk around the Tearfund office in Teddington (just before we all moved to remote working) and got everyone who was in at the time to talk about one thing that was good in their world right then. It was surprising how difficult most of us found it to think of something initially... and incredible how much better we all felt having done so.

**Sometimes it really is the small things that make a big difference... May you be blessed, encouraged and uplifted as you find the small things (or big things) that are good in your own world, right where you are today.**

**And let us remember who our God is.**

PLEASE PRAY

Dear Father,

Thank you that you don't stop being good even when the world seems like it's falling apart. Your word promises that you never leave us, or abandon us. Help us to remember the good things, to be grateful for them and not to become discouraged or give up doing good. Amen.

**Click here to [find Tearfund Teddington's list of good things...](#)**

*\*Names have been changed to protect identity.*

## **DECODING CORONAVIRUS: SIN, JUDGEMENT AND (NOT) THE END OF THE WORLD**

**Dr Ruth Valerio and Gideon Heugh explore the questions that Christians might be wrestling with during the coronavirus crisis.**

*How to beat coronavirus:*

*Stay at home. Keep your distance. Wash your hands. Have a good theology.*

Wait, a good what?

Theology is our understanding of the nature of God. This in turn influences the way we see the world. In times like these, when life as we know it has been turned upside down, it's crucial that we have a good Bible-based theology.

To help, we've put together answers to some of the questions that Christians might be wrestling with at this time:

Will God protect us? Why is this happening? Is the virus God's judgement? Does sin cause illness? Are these the end times? And, how should the church respond?

And the church, of course, means all of us. We are one in Christ, and no amount of social distancing can sever that connection. Speaking of which...

### **Will God protect us?**

Having the right theology can save lives. Literally.

Most churches around the world have stopped meeting in person – for obvious, sensible and necessary reasons. Some, however, have not, citing their belief that God will protect them from the virus. This is bad theology, and it might cost lives.

God does protect. God does heal. Yet we are his hands and feet, and it's vital that we play our role, listening and acting upon the advice of experts.

I trust God with my health – but I also try and make sure that I exercise and eat well. If I break my leg, I'll pray for healing – but I'll also go to the doctor.

Trust God, but take action too.

### **Why is this happening?**

To answer this question, we need to go back to the beginning.

God created a world that he declared to be very good (Genesis 1:31) – a world in which everything exists in harmony with God. Relationship with God, with others, with ourselves and with the rest of creation is central to God's loving purposes.

After those relationships go wrong, the Bible then tells the story of how God works to restore them – a plan that finds its ultimate fulfilment in Jesus.

Poverty, conflict, suffering, climate change – all these are the result of those broken relationships. The Bible is clear that God, people and the natural world are deeply interconnected, so if one aspect of that is broken then everything will be impacted.

As hard as it is to hear, the outbreak of coronavirus is not a ‘natural disaster’. It is a disaster of our own making. Viruses jump species and get into humans, and environmental destruction makes this more likely to happen as people are brought into closer contact with virus-carrying animals. Deforestation, mining, animal trafficking and unsustainable farming practices are all likely factors at play.

### **Is this God’s judgement?**

God’s original intention was peace between all things – but this is not how we’re living. He created a world in which everything is connected, and there are natural consequences when those connections are broken.

This doesn’t necessarily mean that God ‘caused’ or ‘willed’ the pandemic – it is to recognise that the brokenness of creation ultimately causes us harm.

In some cultures, misfortune is seen as directly linked to that person’s sin. But biblically, these links are rarely as simple as that. For example, in the story of Job, Job’s suffering is not a result of his sin, but of the existence and work of Satan.

In Luke 13:1-5, Jesus is told about Pilate’s massacre of some Galileans who were in the process of offering sacrifices. He responds by pointing out that those who were killed were not greater sinners than those who were not killed. And he makes the same point about the people who were killed when the tower in Siloam collapsed.

Jesus is clear that the existence of disasters doesn’t mean that those who are affected by them are worse people than anybody else. Such events should never be an invitation to judge others.

### **Does sin cause illness?**

In John 9:1-5 Jesus meets a man who was blind from birth. The disciples ask about the sins that have caused this blindness – was it his sin or that of his parents? But Jesus tells them that his blindness has nothing to do with sin. Not only that, but it provides an opportunity ‘that the works of God might be displayed in him’.

The Bible does present links between sin and suffering in a broader sense. Our physical suffering is part of a chain of brokenness from Genesis 3 onwards. Also, there are lifestyle choices we can make that either promote or neglect our health and wellbeing. However, there are no biblical grounds for directly linking a person’s illness with their sin. Even when Jesus heals the paralyzed man in Mark 2 saying ‘your sins are forgiven’, he did not explicitly say that the sins were the cause of his paralysis. And nowhere else does Jesus heal by saying ‘your sins are forgiven’.

Illness must never be used as a basis for stigmatization and rejection. The Pharisees did that – Jesus didn’t. His message was one of acceptance, inclusion and compassion for all.

### **Are these the end times?**

Widespread conflict in the Middle East. A plague of locusts spreading across Africa. Flooding around the world. Surely these are signs of the end times?

If there's one thing that we can say for certain, it's that no one can know for certain. If Jesus himself did not know when the end times would be (Matthew 24:36), who are we to try and say?

It is important to keep a wider perspective throughout all of this. Christians have been trying (and failing) to predict the end of the world since the early days of the church. Although the word 'unprecedented' keeps being brought up, this is not the first crisis of this scale – indeed, there have been far, far darker times in human history. The great plague of the 14th century is estimated to have wiped out nearly two thirds of Europe's population. I'm sure they were convinced that the end times were upon them too.

War, disease, natural disasters – these are, sadly, nothing new. Jesus said his return would be sudden and unexpected, and he said we were to ignore anyone who thought they knew about specific dates and times, likening people who look for scare-mongering stories to vultures (Matthew 24:28).

The answer is that there is no clear answer, and that we should ignore those who think they have one.

### **How should the church respond?**

The church should be the light of the world (Matthew 5:14). As the shadow of coronavirus falls across the land, the church's mission is to shine as brightly as it can.

We must follow Jesus in showing God's love, bringing healing to a broken world and responding to people's needs: economic and emotional, spiritual and physical, both locally and globally.

We can and we must act.

When Ebola ravaged West Africa in 2014, it was local churches that helped lead the fightback. In Sierra Leone, Christians used video and radio broadcasts to spread vital health messages. Tearfund trained pastors and gave them phones so they could call people suffering with Ebola and pray with them. Churches gave practical help to people in quarantine and church members provided food, water and toiletries.

We are already seeing the church rising to the challenge of coronavirus. In many communities around the world, it is Christians who are coordinating local care, creating neighbourhood WhatsApp groups, dropping off food and toiletries to those who are self-isolating, and being there to provide emotional response.

In Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh – the largest refugee camp in the world – life is becoming even more miserable. Sanitation and hygiene facilities are already inadequate, and the streets are narrow and crowded. But Tearfund's church partners are distributing hygiene kits and leaflets to educate people about handwashing, social distancing and recognising the symptoms.

### **Creating a better world**

If we lean deeper into God's love, choosing faith instead of fear, we may find that new opportunities emerge. There is the potential for communities to come together more than ever before; for families to re-discover themselves; for busy people to slow down and build a rhythm of rest into their lives; for people to reconnect with God and his world; for nations to re-tune into

God's word; for churches to learn how to use digital technology to enhance ministry; and for us to develop more local, environmentally-friendly economies.

One day, we will make it out of this crisis. But what sort of world do we want there to be on the other side? Can we repent of the world we have created, and instead look to build one without such a huge gap between rich and poor – a world where we live in harmony with creation, in which we understand that the well-being of one is bound up with the well-being of all?

In Christ, there is always hope. We can let that hope motivate how we live our lives today as we hold on to God our rock. And, with the love of Christ in our hearts, let us continue to reach out with compassion and determination.

### PLEASE PRAY

God of love and light,  
 In this time of fear, give us your peace.  
 In this time of isolation, give us your presence.  
 In this time of sickness, give us your healing.  
 In this time of uncertainty, give us your wisdom.  
 In this time of darkness, shine your light upon us all.  
 In Jesus' name, amen.

*Dr Ruth Valerio is a theologian, environmentalist and author, and leads Tearfund's global advocacy and influencing work. Gideon Heugh is a poet and naturalist and is the Senior Copywriter in Tearfund's communications team.*

### PRAYER POINTS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

-  This week we launched a new report, *The Burning Question*. It shows how burning plastic waste is causing sickness in poorer communities, as well as climate change. Please pray for people who are being made more vulnerable by plastic pollution, and for companies to make significant changes that will help people living in poverty.
-  Thank you for continuing to pray about the swarms of locusts threatening farmer's crops across East Africa. Praise God: the Scottish Government are funding projects in Ethiopia that will help combat this, and Tearfund has been granted funds. Please keep these projects in your prayers as they are set up, and pray for God's provision for farmers that are still struggling to feed their families.
-  Give thanks for *Tap Twinning*. This new scheme will teach people how to wash their hands correctly to help communities living in poverty better protect themselves from the spread of the coronavirus. Please keep these people in your prayers during this time; pray for their protection and provision.