

# Reflections on Covid-19 from St. Patrick's College Maynooth

## Decoding the stories we tell ourselves about COVID-19 by Dr. Jessie Rogers

We are meaning-making creatures. We have a strong urge to find a narrative - a story - that will make sense of the Coronavirus crisis that has engulfed the whole world. As Christians, we are looking for a God-sized story, but the tendency is always there to construct a story that shrinks God down to the size of our own hopes and fears. Such stories remake God in our own image so that God's agenda perfectly matches our own. In these scenarios, most tellingly, God ends up disliking the same people that we dislike!

There are a lot of stories on offer at the moment. Some of them are conspiracy theories which invite us to channel our fear into aggressive or impotent rage. Many entrench divisions between 'them' and 'us', however we draw those lines. The most common stories to reach for in a time of fear and powerlessness are scapegoating stories that blame individuals or groups whom we label, probably subconsciously, as 'dispensable'. If we can put the blame on 'them' and then somehow exclude them, the problem - we tell ourselves - will go away.

You may have heard that the new Coronavirus was deliberately manufactured or that it is part of a global plot to undermine human rights and religious freedom. It is sometimes called the Chinese virus. Common to all these kinds of stories is that they make us afraid, they invite us to circle the wagons, and they close off our hearts.

It can be hard to navigate the different narratives out there and to assess them wisely. Jesus gave us one good barometer for judging what we see - by looking at the fruits (Matthew 7:15-20). Here are some fruits which are *not* the result of the Spirit of God at work in the world and in our hearts: an anger that paralyses us or makes us hate others; a selfish concern for 'me and mine' that lets the rest of the world 'go to hell'; a despair that kills off hope; a complacency that leaves us with our heads in the sand; a numbness that makes us stop caring.

You can add to that list anything that closes us off and diminishes our compassion. Conversely, the fruit of any God-inspired narrative will produce greater love for God and for others. It will open up our hearts and inspire a costly but joyful solidarity. It will make us more Christlike. I am reminded of the slogan often repeated by Dr Mike Ryan of World Health Organisation: "No one is safe until everyone is safe." If we take that to heart, we will treat everyone as our neighbour and place the most vulnerable at the centre of our concern. That is Christian discipleship!

Our explanations and meaning-making stories are always going to fall short of capturing all that God is doing in, through, and despite this calamity. Still, our story-making urge is planted in us by God, so we need to keep weaving those stories.

When they are the product of human pride, our stories will shrink God down to a little deity that fights our battles for us, or a cartoon character that rewards and punishes according to our own simplistic calculations. But when they are God-inspired, they will call us to journey along the path where God's Spirit beckons.

That is why it is so important to bring into prayer the Coronavirus stories we hear and tell ourselves. As followers of Jesus, we need to submit them to the Gospel story that we hear in the Scriptures and celebrate in the Liturgy.

When we bring before God the stories that have taken hold of our imagination, the divine light will illuminate their contours so that we can begin to discern what is of God and what is not.

May the Lord grant us wisdom and deliver us from being seduced by the wrong stories.

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