



Being church during Covid-19

Part 1: The church as a spiritual house

As you come to him, the living Stone – rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him – you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says:

‘See, I lay a stone in Zion,

a chosen and precious cornerstone,

and the one who trusts in him

will never be put to shame.’

Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

‘The stone the builders rejected

has become the cornerstone,’

and,

‘A stone that causes people to stumble

and a rock that makes them fall.’

They stumble because they disobey the message – which is also what they were destined for.

1 Peter 2:4–8 (NIV)

Reflection

The apostle Peter wrote 1 Peter to an audience suffering discrimination for confessing the name of Christ. He wrote so that they might be reminded of their hope of salvation and, being so reminded, might stand firm in it.

Peter uses the image of building a house that was well known to his readers. In the construction of a house, the cornerstone is key to the integrity of the foundation. The rest of the building relies on the accurate placement and structural soundness of the cornerstone. Once the cornerstone is in place, the rest of the building would conform to the angles and size of the cornerstone. If the cornerstone were removed, the whole building could collapse.



In this passage, Jesus is described as the living cornerstone, rejected by people but chosen by God (1 Peter 2:4). Jesus is the most important stone in the living building that God is creating – his church. Jesus is the foundation of the church as well as for each individual Christian's life. In the present Covid-19 crisis, that is extremely reassuring. Because Jesus is the cornerstone, we can know that we will not collapse, despite the storms of Covid-19. Yes, even if we suffer during this crisis, we can know that God is with us. He will help us to get through.

The building constructed on that cornerstone is the church itself but note that the building is made of living stones – individual Christians. Each believer is set apart from all of the other rocks in the field, then prepared and fitted into a spiritual house, the dwelling place of God. We are being built into a temple along with other believers and being transformed into a suitable dwelling place for God – individually and as an institution and church. This begins to place responsibilities on each of the living stones that are set apart and made a part of the dwelling place for God.

The church is built up as the house of God for a purpose. The church is not merely an ornamental or decorative structure with no functional purpose. The church was never designed to be a place to hide away from the world. People can see it. In the present Covid-19 crisis, the world must see Christians as living stones with the church as a spiritual house in which God lives, built on the cornerstone that is Christ.

Reflection questions

1. Discuss the significance of the cornerstone when building a house. In this passage, Jesus is compared to a cornerstone. What is his importance in building our lives?
2. How does Peter describe the cornerstone in this passage?
3. Peter talks about the church being a spiritual house, with Jesus as the cornerstone. What does this say about the nature of the Christian church?
4. If the church is a building, who is the builder? God the Father, Jesus, the Holy Spirit or the people?
5. How could Christ be the cornerstone to Christians and to their communities during the Covid-19 pandemic?
6. How could Christians be living stones in a spiritual house during the Covid-19 pandemic?
7. How could the church be seen as a spiritual house during Covid-19?

Prayer

Dear Jesus, thank you that you are our cornerstone during this crisis. Help us to be living stones as part of the church and a spiritual house in the midst of the crisis. May the church impact communities today.



Being church during Covid-19

Part 2: The church as a royal priesthood

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

1 Peter 2:9 (NIV)

Reflection

At the time when Peter was writing, the priests in the Jewish faith acted as go-betweens between God and the people of Israel. They maintained the buildings, took the people's sacrifices, presented them to God on the altar and gave the people's tithes to the poor. However, we are 'to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ' (1 Peter 2:5; and see also 1 Peter 2:9 and Exodus 19:6). The Israelites had to offer physical sacrifices of bulls and goats in order to worship God, but now through Jesus we offer the spiritual sacrifice of lives in service to the Lord.

Peter explains that we are that royal priesthood who need none but Christ to stand between us and the Father. As all believers are priests, no believer had greater access to the creator than any other. All of us who trust in Jesus alone for salvation have free access into his presence, and all of our occupations are set apart for true God-honouring service. The street cleaner who does his work to the Lord is in no worse a position spiritually than the most gifted preacher on the planet, for all Christians have been declared righteous servants of the creator God.



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Being God's priestly people is intended to bless us so that we can bless others and lead them to a saving knowledge of Jesus. We can intercede for people before God. Having encountered the reconciling mercy of God, we are called to 'declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light' (1 Peter 2:9).

An awareness of our identity as 'the people of God' who 'have received mercy' (1 Peter 2:10) should compel us to be a missional church. Rather than seeing our identity as a matter of exclusivity or pride, we should embrace our call to proclaim God's love and mercy to a world in desperate need. In the present Covid-19 crisis, this is essential. People in communities are asking questions about the meaning of life. The church as a royal priesthood can intercede for our communities in prayer and be instruments of God's blessing to them.

Reflection questions

1. What was the role of the priesthood according to the passage?
2. Discuss why Peter says that all believers are 'royal priests'.
3. What are the spiritual sacrifices we are to offer as believers?
4. How could Christians be priests in communities affected by Covid-19?

Prayer

Dear Lord, help us to be your priests and bless our communities in word and deed during the Covid-19 crisis.



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Part 3: The church as a holy nation

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

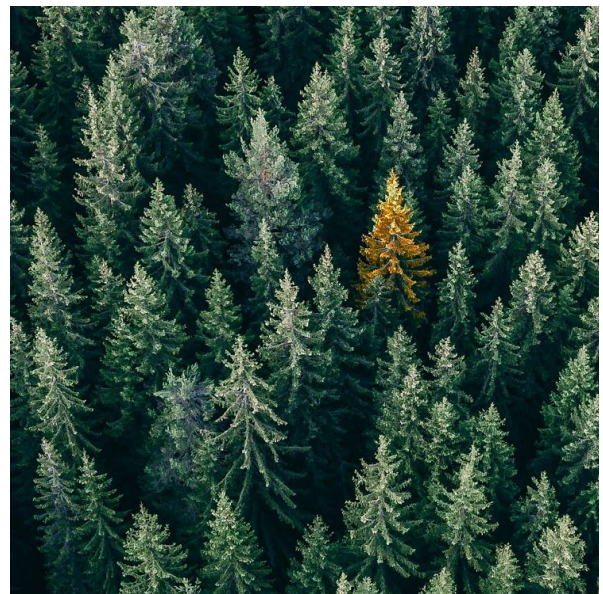
Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

1 Peter 2:9–12 (NIV)

Reflection

By using the term 'holy nation', Peter reminds his Jewish readers of their own history. God has saved the nation of Israel from slavery in Egypt and taken them to the Promised Land. They were to be the light, or an example, for the rest of the world.

Peter therefore uses language that had been used to describe God's special relationship with Israel. Unlike Israel, though, the church today is not a race in the sense of our family, ethnicity, skin colour or country of origin. We are a spiritual race in the sense that, in Christ, we have the same spiritual Father. In that same sense, we are a 'holy nation', a specific group of people called out and set apart from all other nations to declare and live out God's praises. He has called us out of the darkness of meaningless life, and an eternity apart from him, and into his wonderful, marvellous light. Because we belong to him, we belong to his light.



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As Christians, we are a holy people. Like Israel, we have been set apart from the world for relationship with God and to fulfil his purposes. Our holiness consists, not just in our being different from our neighbours, but also in our devotion to God's mission through us. To be holy where we live and where we work includes being people of integrity and compassion, reflecting the truth and love of Christ in our daily work. It means that we will see the places where we live and work as the context for us to live out our calling to serve the Lord.

During the Covid-19 crisis, it is essential for the church to show that we are different from the rest of society. It is easy to look after only ourselves or our families. But, as a holy nation, we are set apart as God's special representatives to serve God and the people in need in our communities. While Covid-19 is undoubtedly causing horrible suffering and loss, it also provides the church with a wonderful opportunity to be God's holy nation!

Reflection questions

1. What do you understand by the term 'holy nation'? What was the role of Israel towards the Gentiles?
2. In what ways is the church different from the rest of the world?
3. What is the purpose of the church being 'different'?
4. How could Christians be 'a holy nation' during the Covid-19 pandemic?
5. After bringing together all the answers and discussion from these first three studies, consider the characteristics of:
 - The ideal church in the midst of a crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic
 - The ideal priesthood of believers during a crisis
 - The ideal nation during the Covid-19 pandemic

Prayer

Thank you, Jesus, that you set us apart to be your holy nation. Help us to live out this calling of sacrificial love and service in our communities during this time of crisis.



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Part 4: The ministry of Jesus – Repentance

In those days John the Baptist came to the Judean wilderness and began preaching. His message was, 'Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.'

Matthew 3:1–2 (NLT)

From then on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.'

Matthew 4:17 (NLT)

Reflection

Jesus started his ministry on earth by calling people to repent of their sins and turn to God because 'the Kingdom of Heaven is near'. In this, he was in agreement with the message which John the Baptist had preached. At the heart of this message of repentance is the call to turn one's mind back to God. In Israel, the prophets called the people from worshipping foreign idols to a life of obedience to God. This was now what Jesus called for. Repentance is not just saying sorry to save face after being caught doing something wrong. It is a real change in somebody's thinking – a reorientation affecting the whole of a person's thought that is expressed in living a different lifestyle. In repentance, somebody turns away from idolatry, sin, evil, wrongdoing and any other way of life that is contrary to God's word. Repentance is also a prerequisite for entering the kingdom of Heaven. This kingdom is a spiritual kingdom and can only be entered by turning to God and his laws which should then govern the lives of those who have repented.



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The call to repentance set the tone for Jesus' entire earthly ministry and was at the core of his preaching. In Luke 24:47, he sends his disciples to continue with this ministry of calling people to repentance. This ministry should therefore be continued by the church, calling people to turn away from sin and idolatry and towards God and his commands. Following Jesus, therefore, will result not only in people being reconciled with God but also in an ongoing transformation of heart, mind and lifestyle.

Governments around the world are calling people to adopt a different mindset and lifestyle. But it is only the church that can call people to be reconciled with God, turn away from sins and live differently. Covid-19 therefore presents the church with both a challenge and an opportunity. It is a challenge in the sense that the church as the body of Christ must change its mindset and lifestyle and become more like Christ, while also following the rules set out by governments. But with so many people thinking about their lives, Covid-19 also presents the church with an opportunity to call people to repent, turn back to God and live a different lifestyle which would include caring sacrificially for others.

Reflection questions

1. Why do you think Jesus is repeating John's message?
2. What was the content of what John the Baptist preached? (Read Luke 3:7–14)
3. Which particular sins did John stress needed repentance, if people were to be ready for the kingdom of God? Make a list.
4. If John were to preach in our community today, discuss what sins he would stress that people need to repent of. Make a list.
5. From what Jesus and John preached, what are the characteristics of the kingdom of God?
6. Is there anything that you think people should repent of during the Covid-19 pandemic? This is **not** to say that Covid-19 is judgement from God. Rather, as we emerge from the initial extremes of Covid-19 we can ask ourselves what sort of a world we want to build going forwards. 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 that enables us to live in harmony with creation? A world where we understand that the well-being of one is bound up with the well-being of all?

Prayer

Thank you, Jesus, for your challenging call for repentance to us all today. Help us to live a lifestyle that will glorify your name during Covid-19. Help us to model repentance and the way of Jesus to the people around us.



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Part 5: The ministry of Jesus – Healing

When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he left Judea and returned to Galilee. He went first to Nazareth, then left there and moved to Capernaum, beside the Sea of Galilee, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali.

Matthew 4:12–13 (NLT)

Jesus traveled throughout the region of Galilee, teaching in the synagogues and announcing the Good News about the Kingdom. And he healed every kind of disease and illness. News about him spread as far as Syria, and people soon began bringing to him all who were sick. And whatever their sickness or disease, or if they were demon possessed or epileptic or paralysed – he healed them all. Large crowds followed him wherever he went – people from Galilee, the Ten Towns, Jerusalem, from all over Judea, and from east of the Jordan River.

Matthew 4:23–25 (NLT)

Reflection

Healing was one of the key focus areas of the ministry of Jesus. This is understandable because of the context in which Jesus ministered. The structures and practices in the Roman empire during the time of Jesus were bad for people's health and well-being. Some estimate that 70–90 per cent of people experienced varying degrees of poverty – from the very poorest to those who temporarily fell below survival levels. Understandings of hygiene were limited; social stresses were high; water quality was poor and food insecurity was rife. Such factors resulted in widespread diseases associated with poor nutrition (blindness, muscle weakness etc) and a lack of immunity (diarrhoea, cholera etc). These kinds of diseases were a real threat in a world where survival depended on one's



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capacity for physical labour. Most people could not afford to pay for medical treatment. This context is not too different from that in many countries around the world, and especially during the present Covid-19 crisis.

The healing ministry of Jesus was a direct response to the needs of people who could not afford to pay for whatever medical care was available. Through this ministry he showed not only his supernatural power over illness but also, and above all, through healing people, he showed God's love and tenderness that are the true marks of the kingdom of Heaven. Restoration of outward health was proof of the pledge that the Son of Man had come not to destroy men's lives but to save them and heal people fully. In the process he healed every sickness or disease: none was too bad, none too hard, for Christ to heal. These were not only physical illnesses such as leprosy but also mental and spiritual illnesses.

Throughout the centuries, the church continued with the healing ministry of Jesus. In times of epidemics, it was pastors who visited those who suffered illness and prayed for them. When missionaries went to the furthest corners of the world, they shared the gospel but they also established hospitals and other health care facilities. Millions of people were healed as a result.

Covid-19 is an opportunity for the church to live out the healing ministry of Jesus in a special way. There are many Christian medical workers who care for ill people in hospitals and Christian engineers may well have been involved in developing medical equipment to use in patient care. Christian hospitals and health care facilities in especially poor countries will play a major role in caring for Covid-19 patients. We need to pray for them. We can all pray for healing for those affected by the illness and, where possible and where government restrictions permit, we can visit and pray with the families of those who are ill with the virus. In all this, we need to show God's love and glorify him.

Reflection questions

1. What do these verses say about the actions of Jesus?
2. What brought so many people to hear Jesus?
3. What does Jesus' healing ministry tell us about the kingdom of God?
4. What does Jesus' healing ministry tell us about the Covid-19 pandemic?
5. How can the church live out the healing ministry of Jesus during this crisis?
6. How can each Christian live out the healing ministry of Jesus during the Covid-19 crisis?

Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, thank you that you came to earth to heal people. Thank you that the church can continue with your healing ministry during the Covid-19 crisis. We pray that you will heal those who are

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ill with the diseases. We pray that you show the church how best to be involved in your healing ministry during the pandemic.



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Part 6: The ministry of Jesus – Compassion

Jesus travelled through all the towns and villages of that area, teaching in the synagogues and announcing the Good News about the Kingdom. And he healed every kind of disease and illness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were confused and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. He said to his disciples, 'The harvest is great, but the workers are few. So pray to the Lord who is in charge of the harvest; ask him to send more workers into his fields.'

Matthew 9:35–38 (NLT)

Reflection

A key to caring for others is to be touched in your heart by their needs. If that does not happen, caring for them becomes just another duty or task, something that you might even do because you are paid to. In Matthew 9:35–38, we read about the reasons for the healing ministry of Jesus. In verse 35, we read how Jesus banished illness and showed that he was God. But the reason why he healed people was because he understood their ill health, their difficult circumstances, what they endured and their helplessness. He was touched from deep within himself by their circumstances and realised that if he did not help them, nobody else would – not even their religious leaders. Jesus did not heal people out of superficial sorrow or duty or for financial gain, but because he deeply cared for them as they were. Unfortunately, there were not many other people who cared in the same way. Jesus therefore calls on his disciples to experience the



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same compassion for those in need and reach out in the same way he did. That would ensure that the way they helped those in need would not be for their own gain but to show God's deep compassion.

It is essential that the church responds during the Covid-19 crisis with the same compassion that Jesus showed. If the church does not experience what people are going through and identify with those needs, any response might be seen as insincere and shallow. Too often, we hear about preachers saying that they have cures for the virus and then expect people to pay them for healing. Or we see those who are ill without being deeply touched, as if we have it ourselves. Or the church can respond out of duty, as something that the church should do. Covid-19 challenges the global church to respond with the same kind of compassion that Jesus responded with. If Christians responded from their innermost beings, if we felt the same pain as the people affected by the virus, our communities would see God's love expressed through the church as Christians respond in caring for them.

Reflection questions

1. How are the descriptions of Jesus' work in this passage similar to what is described in Matthew 4:23–25? What new things do we learn about Jesus' ministry?
2. What images does the description, 'The people were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd,' (Matthew 9:36), bring to mind for you?
3. How do we respond when we see people in need? How often do we look to see if someone is in need?
4. When we try to help someone in need, is our motivation similar to or different from that of Jesus?
5. Why do you think Jesus' compassionate response to those in need leads him to say, 'The harvest is plentiful but the labourers are so few'? (Matthew 9:37)
6. How should we live out Jesus' ministry of healing and compassion in the context of Covid-19?
7. After bringing together all the answers and discussion from the past three studies above (Parts 4–6) on the ministry of Jesus, consider what we have learnt about:
 - the kingdom of God
 - how we need to change in order to show more of God's kingdom in our own lives
 - how we need to change as a church to reveal more of God's kingdom
 - how we need to change as a church in order to respond to Covid-19.

Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, we can see so many people in need during the Covid-19 crisis. It is so easy to respond out of duty instead of your deep love for people. We pray that you will help the church to experience and show the same compassion you had for people when you healed them.



Being church during Covid-19

Part 7: Salt and light

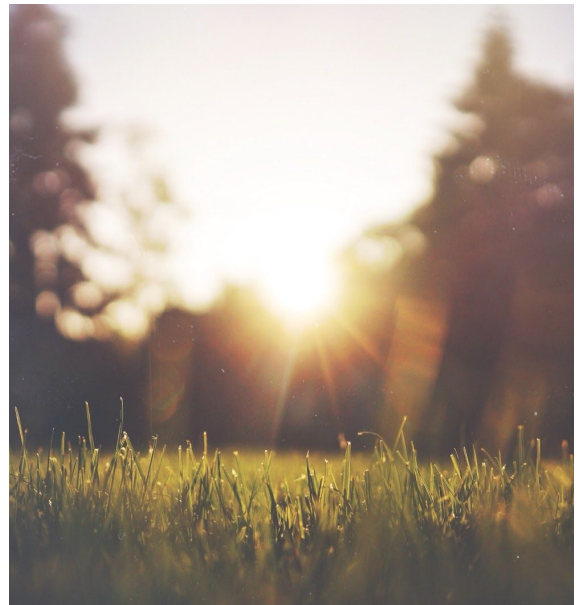
You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavour? Can you make it salty again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless. You are the light of the world – like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.

Matthew 5:13–16 (NLT)

Reflection

Salt and light are important elements in our daily lives, as Jesus underlines. Salt cleanses wounds, preserves food and gives flavour to cooking. However, it is invisible after you have used it. Conversely, light is visible. It is impossible not to see light. Light gives direction, protects and attracts in the dark of the night. Just think about the importance of a lighthouse to protect boats from crashing onto rocks.

Jesus said that his disciples should live lives that cleanse communities, preserve communities and give taste to communities, but in a way that communities might not even realise. In this way, communities will become better places to live and express more of the characteristics of God's kingdom. But there is also a danger that salt can lose its value when it becomes contaminated with other minerals, as was the case with the salt from the Dead Sea. In a similar way Christians could lose their ability to influence communities when they do not live according to the characteristics expressed in Matthew 5:3–12.



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It is the same with light. Christians can give direction to communities, protect communities from harm and attract people in communities to Christ and his kingdom. But there is also a danger that this light can be obscured by the way Christians live and behave. When the characteristics of the kingdom of God are not visible in the life of Christians and the church, the church becomes irrelevant and even harmful to society. Christians therefore need to remain in the true light, Jesus Christ. His light needs to shine through the lives of his disciples.

Covid-19 challenges the church as a community of believers more than ever to be salt and light in society. The world in which we live desperately needs the qualities of the kingdom of God to cleanse, preserve, give flavour, protect, direct and attract communities – as modelled by Christians individually and the church as a community of believers. There are many ways to do that in communities around the world. How are you and your church being salt and light in your community in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic?

Reflection questions

1. What are the natural characteristics and uses of salt?
2. What do we think Jesus meant when he said, 'You are the salt of the earth'? (Matthew 5:13)
3. If salt loses its taste what is its use – in food and in the spiritual sense?
4. What does it mean for the church to be 'the light of the world'? (Matthew 5:14)
5. If we are salt and light, what impact should we be having in our community and church?
6. What things could we do to have more impact on our community and church?
7. What could Christians individually and the church as a community of Christians do to be salt and light in communities during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Prayer

Thank you, God, that you have allowed me and my church to be salt and light in my community in the midst of Covid-19. Help me to understand how my church and I can live out the values of your kingdom when people are so desperately looking for answers and direction.



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Part 8: Servants of the King

Then the mother of James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Jesus with her sons. She knelt respectfully to ask a favour. 'What is your request?' he asked. She replied, 'In your kingdom, please let my two sons sit in places of honour next to you, one on your right and the other on your left.' But Jesus answered by saying to them, 'You don't know what you are asking! Are you able to drink from the bitter cup of suffering I am about to drink?' 'Oh yes,' they replied, 'we are able!' Jesus told them, 'You will indeed drink from my bitter cup. But I have no right to say who will sit on my right or my left. My Father has prepared those places for the ones he has chosen.' When the ten other disciples heard what James and John had asked, they were indignant. But Jesus called them together and said, 'You know that the rulers in the world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must become your slave. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

Matthew 20:20–28 (NLT)

Reflection

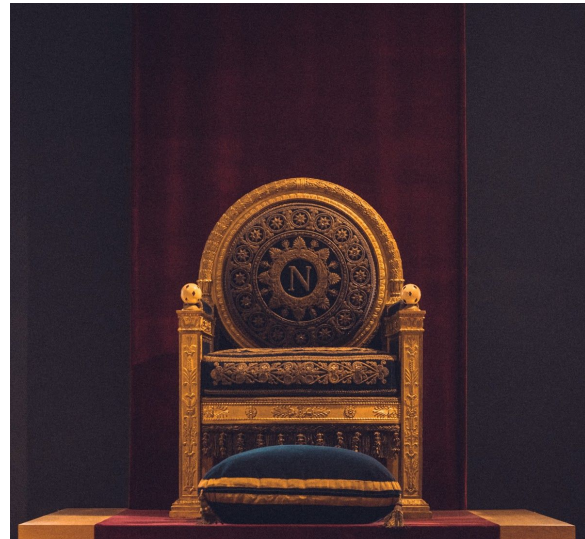
The temptation of pride is something we've wrestled with since the Garden of Eden. This was something the serpent exploited when he told Eve in Genesis 3:5 that she would become like God if she ate the fruit. Since then, people have wanted to be first, the most important, with the greatest access to resources. Pride has resulted in jealousy, coveting and in the end tension and conflict with others. How often do we see that among Christians and churches as well!

Pride was also a problem among the disciples of Jesus as we see when the mother of James and John asked Jesus if her sons could be appointed to the most important places in his kingdom. However, Jesus used the opportunity to explain to his disciples what real life and leadership should be about. In the world, leaders want to have power, authority and greatness. In the process they control and exploit others and enrich themselves. They do not worry or care about others as long as they get the important positions. Coming from and working in Africa, I saw that often: from husbands and local officials to presidents of countries. But how often do we see the same in the church where people look for positions and pastors look for wealth? How often do we see churches even in the same community

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competing with each other to be the largest and most important?

Jesus says that in his kingdom life and leadership are different: they are actually the opposite of pride. Life and leadership mean to be servants of the king. The term Jesus uses means a person who did menial labour such as cleaning up and waiting on tables. Such a person advances the interests of others even at the sacrifice of their own. If you want to be great in God's kingdom, you have to be a humble, selfless servant. And a true servant will sacrifice for the sake of others in the name of Christ. Helping and caring for others so that they will reach their full potential is what is important, not 'what I can get from others'. As servants, we should be willing to give our lives away as what Jesus did when he died for the sins of the world without expecting anything in return.



Covid-19 presents each Christian individually, local churches and the global church with an opportunity to live as servants of the King, people who care for others, who share with others, even giving their lives and resources for others, without expecting anything in return. Many health care workers model this attitude during the crisis. How could the church do the same?

Reflection questions

1. Why do you think James, John and their mother asked for a special favour?
2. How did Jesus respond to their request? What does this tell us about Jesus' idea of life and leadership?
3. What impact did this request have on the other disciples? Have there been similar situations within our work or church?
4. What kind of life and leadership does Jesus refer to in Matthew 20:28? Is this the model of life and leadership we have found in our church?
5. What are the key characteristics of somebody who lives a lifestyle of service and a servant leader?
6. Discuss what this model of life and leadership would look like during the Covid-19 pandemic:
 - in the family

- in the church
 - in the community.
7. How do both we and our church need to change to reflect more of the servant attitude of Jesus during the Covid-19 pandemic?
 8. How could we and our church be God's servants in our communities during this crisis?

Prayer

Thank you, Jesus, for your example as a servant. Thank you that you served us, even to the point of giving your life, so that we can live. Help us to live as your servants in our communities during the Covid-19 pandemic by giving ourselves to others so that they might live.