

When the present pandemic began to take hold, a passage from the writings of Martin Luther went the rounds on the internet. With his usual combination of down-to-earth wisdom and practical piety, Luther insisted that preachers and pastors should remain at their posts. As good shepherds, they should be prepared to lay down *their lives for their sheep*: “If God should wish to take me, he will surely find me,” he wrote in a letter to a pastor friend. “*I have done what he has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others. If my neighbour needs me, however, I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely.*”

As restrictions on gatherings begin to lift around the world, some churches are being allowed to reopen for small gatherings, while other religious leaders are unsure of whether that is the right thing to do. There are two quite different things which need to be said about opening churches (as often happens in Christian theology). We need to hear them both.

First, church buildings are not an escape from the world, but a bridgehead into the world. A proper theology of “sacred space” ought to see buildings for public worship as advance signs of the time when God’s glory will fill all creation. Christians should therefore celebrate every way in which the living Lord whom they worship in church buildings is out and about, bringing healing and hope far beyond the visible limits of church property.

Jesus does not need church buildings for his work to go forward. Part of the answer to the question, “*Where is God in the pandemic?*” must be, “*Out there on the front line, suffering and dying to bring healing and hope.*”

But there is a second point. In those countries such as my own where churches (and other places of worship, including synagogues and mosques) have been shut, for thoroughly comprehensible reasons, there is a danger of accidentally sending the wrong signal to the wider world. For the last 300 years the western world has largely regarded “religion” (the very word has changed its meaning to accommodate this new viewpoint) as a private matter: “what someone does with their solitude.

The Christian faith as a whole has been reduced, in the public mind, to a “private” movement in the sense that – so many say – it should have no place in public life. Thus, I can still go shopping in the crowded little off-licence (in America, the liquor store) on the corner; but I cannot go and sit in the ancient, prayer-soaked chapel across the street. Worship becomes invisible. Shutting churches will appear to collude with this. By saying that we will temporarily abolish corporate worship and join with others only on live-streamed services from the vicar’s living room, we may seem to be agreeing that really, we are just a group of like-minded individuals pursuing our rather arcane private hobby.

Interestingly, the signs so far are that many people have “been to church” in that virtual reality who would not have come to a church building. But our churches have been for centuries physical and often audible reminders, on main streets and in town squares, on city blocks and in suburban developments, of the vital dimension to life that Western modernity has tried to

crowd out. We will no doubt learn many things in this time of enforced “exile” – which is what it is. But we should be praying towards the day when our buildings will function within our society as they were designed to do. I find myself caught between these two viewpoints, both of which seem to me right. I totally understand that we need to be responsible and scrupulously careful. I am appalled by reports of would-be devout but misguided people ignoring safety regulations because they believe that as Christians they are automatically protected against disease, or that (as I heard someone say on television) “you’ll be safe inside church because the devil can’t get in there.” (I wanted to say: Trust me, lady, I’m a bishop: the devil knows his way in there as well as anybody else.)

That is the kind of superstition that gets Christian faith a bad name. Equally, the debates about locking churches can easily stir up lesser controversies, between those for whom the building and all its bits and pieces has been a vital part of their spirituality, and those for whom all such things are irrelevant since one can worship God anywhere. Both sides here may learn from the present crisis, and we do well to hold one another in charitable prayer.

Part of the answer to that prayer, as many have seen, might be to recognize the present moment as a time of *exile*. We find ourselves “by the waters of Babylon,” thoroughly confused and grieving for the loss of our normal life. “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” as in Psalm 137, translates quite easily into “How can I know the joy of the Eucharist sitting in front of a computer?” Or “How can I celebrate Ascension or Pentecost without being with my brothers and sisters?”

Of course, part of the point of Psalm 137 is precisely that this Psalm is itself a “song of the Lord.” That is the irony: writing a poem about being unable to write a poem. Part of the discipline of lament might then be to turn the lament itself into a song of sorrow.

Perhaps that is part of the way in which we are being called right now to be people of lament – lamenting even the fact that we can’t lament in the way we would normally prefer. We need to explore those questions, and the new disciplines they may demand, in whatever ways we can.

Perhaps this, too, is simply to be accepted as part of what life in Babylon is like. We must, as Jeremiah said, settle down into this regime and “seek the welfare of the city” where we are. But let’s not pretend it’s where we want to be. **Let’s not forget Jerusalem. Let’s not decide to stay here.**

This essay is adapted from N.T. Wright’s new book, [God and the Pandemic](#).

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