

SET FREE TO BE THE HANDS AND FEET OF JESUS

Georgina Coster

GEORGINA COSTER FROM THE CHRISTIAN MEDICAL FELLOWSHIP SHARES THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF WORKING IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Am I the only one who has developed an aversion to supermarkets? I used to rather enjoy the 'big shop' - picking out a rainbow of fruits and vegetables, snapping up a bargain in the reduced aisle, trying out a quirky new flavour of tea. The worst that could happen was leaving your bags for life in the car and having to fork out for more, despite knowing you have at least a year's supply in your boot. All that low-risk fun has been replaced with a queue outside, a mile long, and the dread of realising you've walked past something you need and facing the dilemma: U-turn and steer your trolley in brave rebellion against a one-way system, avoiding all eye contact with fellow shoppers (if I can't see them, they can't see me), or dutifully follow the arrows all the way back to the start. This week, something even worse happened. As I reached to grab unsalted butter from the fridge, a woman shouted, "Two metres!" at me with real anger. I was aghast. I wanted to shout angrily back and tell her that I'm an NHS nurse who has moved out of my home to protect my husband while he shields for 12 weeks and if I did invade her two metre cordon then it's because I was distracted trying to buy food for

him and work out how much unsalted butter he needs to bake cakes for the staff of our Children's Intensive Care Unit. I am entirely conflict phobic so I held my tongue and continued to shop, rehearsing in my head all the reasons I was right and she was wrong. When I got into my car, the Lord reminded me of Hebrews 2:15. Jesus came to 'set free all who have lived their lives as slaves to the fear of dying.' What made that woman shout at me? My best guess is that she has lived all her life, and is living now, as a slave to the fear of dying.

One of the greatest challenges for healthcare professionals in this pandemic is that our lives are in danger. As I write this, almost 200 brave health and social care workers have died of COVID-19 and by the time you read it there will doubtless be more. Breaking the two-metre rule in the dairy aisle was my fault and totally avoidable, but in the hospital, how can we stay two metres from a patient who cannot drink unless we hold the cup to their lips? Whose teeth won't be brushed unless we brush them? Whose body won't be clean unless we wash them? We can't. Healthcare workers are scared, and understandably so, because the risk is real. Tim Chester observes that in almost any phobia - from fear of heights to fear of the dark - the underlying cause is the fear of death. I can honestly say that working in the NHS during the COVID-19 pandemic has made me more thankful than ever before to have been set free from living enslaved to the

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fear of dying. 'But with Jesus, death is no longer something to be feared. Death is not the end... The worst that can happen has become the gateway to life.' (Tim Chester, 'Enjoying God', 2018, p92). It is a wonderful thing to be up close and personal with infectious patients knowing the worst that can happen to me as a result is an eternity face to face with Jesus my Saviour, experiencing the fulness of joy found only in his presence. But what about my colleagues who don't have any eternal security? How do they do it? The honest answer is, I don't know. I am in awe of their courage and sacrifice. They risk their lives to look after patients, not knowing what would await them if they were consequently to die. Church, we should be praying for healthcare workers across our nation and our world, exposed to a deadly virus

and acutely aware of their mortality. God loves to save, and he can use this time of undeniable danger to awaken a desire to turn to him. Pray for the healthcare workers who do know Jesus to be so evidently liberated from the fear of death that their colleagues still trapped in bondage have to ask questions about why, and find for themselves the reality of the answer.

There is another huge challenge for those currently working in our hospitals. As a measure to prevent further spread of Coronavirus, no visitors are allowed in. This loneliness can be heart-breaking for patients. It is important to remember that not every patient in hospital has the virus. Cancer is still being diagnosed. I work on an emergency surgery ward where patients frequently present with abdominal pain. Often this is easily fixed in the operating theatre - a ruptured appendix or a perforated gallbladder. Sometimes, scans reveal a problem of a different nature, where the cause of the pain is an undiscovered cancer. When delivering news like that under normal circumstances, family would of course be called in. Nobody needs to hear that without somebody they love beside them. However, the no visitors policy means that patients are receiving devastating diagnoses alone. Cancer is only one example. Road traffic accidents, heart attacks, strokes - they are all still happening. And their victims are alone in their most vulnerable, terrifying moments. For their relatives, it's equally harrowing. I think about telephone conversations in the last few weeks alone: a wife told that her husband is being rushed to theatre and may not come out again; another wife told that her husband has incurable cancer; and a son told that his dad is likely to be passing away in the next few hours and he won't be able to come and say goodbye. I cry secret tears.

Although completely necessary to aid our fight against COVID-19, a 'no visitors' policy has devastating ramifications. Yet in the difficulty, Christian healthcare professionals have an opportunity to be the hands and feet of Jesus in a very special way. We alone are permitted to hold hands, to look into eyes and say 'You're not alone. I'm with you.' I am thankful that when I am being called to care for someone so deeply, though I hardly know them, I can ask Jesus to give me a glimpse of how he sees

them. When I'm feeling compassion-fatigued and dry, I can ask him to give me just a portion of his infinite love for them. As I serve them, knowing full well that I am a poor substitute for the family they long to be with, and as I seek to minister to them physically, emotionally and spiritually, I can rest in the fact that God sees every effort I make, and that my work can be a pleasing offering of worship to him.

For the last year and a half, I have worked part time for the Christian Medical Fellowship, whose mission is to unite and equip Christian doctors, nurses and midwives to live and speak for Jesus Christ. When CMF began over 70 years ago it was an organisation for doctors, but over the years has expanded its ministry to include medical students and more recently nurses and midwives too. We know that many in the medical profession have never heard of CMF or have heard of it but never engaged. Therefore, a significant part of our work is on profile raising and seeking to engage with churches so that members of their congregation can be supported, encouraged and resourced to glorify God in their professional lives as well as on Sundays. The Coronavirus has presented us with an extraordinary opportunity to expand our reach. Christians in healthcare are under enormous pressure and working in emotionally exhausting circumstances. They are longing to connect with people who understand what they are going through professionally and spiritually. We received an email from a church leader about a nurse in their congregation in need of support. When I spoke to this precious nurse on the phone, she told me she had never met another Christian nurse before. We talked and prayed together, and she was overjoyed. What a delight that God uses tragedy for his good purposes and is graciously using this awful pandemic to fulfil our vision 'No Christian alone in healthcare'.

At the start of the outbreak we began to stop and pray at 7pm each day, broadcasting a short devotional and prayer time on Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. The response to this has been wonderful. Christians working in healthcare across the country and in other parts of the world have made this part of their daily routine and found great comfort from pausing in the midst of the tumult to commit themselves, our

healthcare service, our nation and our globe to an almighty God who can be trusted. Testimonies have poured in and thrilled us as a staff team with exciting stories: Staff gathering on an Intensive Care Unit to pray at 7pm, many of them never having prayed before in their lives, and Christians having rich opportunities to share the hope they have in Jesus with their colleagues. Several parts of the country have started weekly regional Zoom meetings for peer support, open to any Christians working in healthcare. Burdens are shared and lifted to God, and eyes are fixed on Jesus.

Every challenge presents an opportunity. For Christians in healthcare, the challenge of facing death is an opportunity to rejoice in Jesus' victory over the grave and demonstrate eternal assurance to fearful colleagues. The challenge of patients separated from family members is an opportunity to serve our King by serving the lonely and isolated (Matthew 25:34-40). It truly is an exciting time to be a Christian in a caring profession.

Podcasts and blogs related to COVID-19 can be found on our website cmf.org.uk

For information on our ministry to nurses and midwives or any other queries please feel free to email me georgie@cmf.org.uk.

Georgina Coster lives in Stoke-on-Trent with her husband Matt. She is a staff nurse on an emergency surgery unit and works part time as Associate Head of Nurses at the Christian Medical Fellowship. Her big passion is seeing Christian nurses and midwives use their vocation as a means to worship God, and to enjoy doing so.

