

Guilt and gratitude—review and reflection from New Zealand

Grace Pietsch-Pamungkas

Part 1

James 1:2–6 (NIV), Trials and Temptations

² Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. ⁴ Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. ⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. ⁶ But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.

Every now and then I struggle to have a strong faith in God. I seek the perseverance that James has prescribed above to face the unbelief. However, despite agreeing that ‘being blown and tossed by the wind’ can be really exhausting, I find it is not easy to believe in God’s power in a pandemic situation without doubt. Covid-19 confronts us with a new challenge beyond our knowledge and understanding before we can apply God’s given wisdom.

The task to review and summarise the lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic would be insufficient without talking about the virus, a type of microbe—tiny single cell organism which cannot be seen by naked human eye—among the other microbes that inhabit our oceans, soils, plants, human and other animal bodies. At this point I vividly remember the microscopic image of Covid-19 is everywhere, apparently due to the violent behaviour of this virus compared to the older types of corona viruses [that have been around between 10,000–300 million years ago](#) without causing such major problems. For this reason, I really hope this opinion piece could be a contribution to save lives.

To do so based on my knowledge and understanding of sustainability, I must share a grim message that our food security system could possibly have a serious issue in providing food for the world population in the long term. How did this idea come to my mind? And what has it to do with Christian faith?

When researching how SARS-CoV-2 made its way from animals to humans, Christian Drosten, whose lab in Germany developed the first diagnostic test for SARS-CoV-2, says: [‘There is going to be an industry involved in this somehow.’](#) He was talking about the role livestock appear to play as a bridge between bats, which are coronaviruses’ natural hosts, and humans. Does it mean we could find out how the privilege of eating our fellow animals could be the source of a disaster in humanity? Even though it can be argued that the

problem might be the industrialisation rather than domestication of specific animals, I think we are still responsible for the act of industrialisation and its consequences.

This leads to my question to our Creator who has acknowledged us as the wisest among the creatures. Do we really deserve to bear God's image? Maybe if we chose to be guided by the birds and the ants, we would have never been too greedy and invented the industrial system. What was God's plan when he decided that we humans would be the chosen ones? Or was this idea of human-led stewardship truly God's plan? Surely God knows the very nature of each of his creatures. Why were the greediest chosen to lead the others?

The questions above are probably not appropriate to be asked in a faith-based community, so I will continue with discussing the fact that the Covid-19 pandemic is clearly problematic whilst the knowledge and the understanding of the virus are still in question. Every day we can hear new findings and we realise how much we do not know about this virus, as we are only six months into this pandemic.

On the day I received the invitation to contribute this opinion piece, New Zealand had spent three weeks without any new cases of Covid-19, and we were going to achieve elimination success. Although a week later this celebration was delayed by two new cases at the border, there is still no community transmission and no serious outbreak such as those that other countries are trying hard to control.

The subsequent economic recession is most felt in many undeveloped societies without welfare systems in place. One of these countries is Indonesia, where my family and friends are still facing the serious threats of Covid-19 including economic and political unrest. As I watched the number of cases increasing in Indonesia and many countries around the world, I shamefully thought to myself how lucky I was not to live in my own country. I can go to the supermarket every week instead of stockpiling. No need to wear a face mask or keep the social distance. I can meet friends at a café and give them hugs. Everything feels normal again, the usual and actual normal rather than that ubiquitous 'new normal'.

Although the Covid-19 attacks have been a lot worse elsewhere and more people have died globally, Australia and New Zealand have been reasonably successful in controlling the virus, so far. To reflect and learn from the pandemic requires a special effort, even to remember the fears we felt and how differently we lived just a few months ago. The lockdown in March and April was our recent past, almost not worth mentioning while we are excited to enjoy the normal life again.

Clearly, I have developed a behaviour to value convenience rather than be content with the essentials. I have completely forgotten the lesson from the lockdown about what really matters in life. It was the essential: food, shelter, and clothes at a basic level for survival, accompanied by kindness to our fellow human beings. Maybe if these were always our guiding principles no one would be left behind, given the abundance of Earth's resources. And maybe I would never feel lucky to live in New Zealand, as everywhere in the world would have the same degree of risk and protection to any disease including Covid-19.

[Millions of Indonesian kids are stunted](#) and children in developing countries are acquiring an antibiotic-resistant infection due to their regular contact with poor sanitation and limited

clean water. This means, when they do fall ill, there is more than a 50% chance an antibiotic treatment will fail. In undeveloped countries children as well as the aged are vulnerable to serious illness and death from Covid-19. It is believed that [hundreds of children in Indonesia have died from Covid-19 by June 2020](#).

My mind has flown to a utopia where such inequality does not exist, and I ask the question whether the Covid-19 threat is purely caused by the virus rather than poverty, hunger, and any other ‘economic comorbidity’? It is the guilt mixed with gratitude that lets me question who decides the level of trial and temptation in each human life. What have I done to deserve the safe life in New Zealand compared to everyone else who was created by the same God and worships him as much as I do?

Part 2

Acts 2:1 (KJV)

And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place.

Although it was heart-breaking, the most recent outbreak in Victoria somehow seemed helpful to remind us in New Zealand that the Covid-19 crisis is not over yet. But how long must we live in fear and uncertainty? Nobody knows how long, so we can only learn how to live with it by learning some lessons from here and there. How church architecture adapts to the existence of the risk in the long term will be discussed below.

In February 2020 the World Health Organisation decided to give a name for Sars-CoV-2, the Covid-19, not only because it is different but also very dangerous. Hence it could subsequently change the way we live including how to safely gather as a congregation. When the pandemic is pulling communities apart by social distancing measures, can churches help bring people together?

In most other countries, congregations of worship have become infectious hotspots, while this has not been the case in New Zealand or Australia. Now with the opportunity to plan before future outbreaks, our church leaders can start preparing the congregations in many ways according to the possible restrictions and different levels of the future threats.

During lockdown we have experienced the most obvious change, the shift from going to church to attending the virtual Sunday service in the living rooms of our homes. This shows how important it is to have members in the congregation who are prepared to assist pastors to make the service recording ready every week, with a camera installed in the church for the recording to be done whenever it is needed. Many of us quickly realised that it was an opportunity to learn about more things that we could do at home as a family and as a congregation. Our lesson number one is: worship at home and virtual church are both possible and enjoyable.

The quietness of lockdown makes it so much easier to contemplate at home and be connected to the world at the same time because we are more exposed to YouTube, Zoom, and other technologies. We prayed for those who were suffering and dying from Covid-19, not only in New Zealand at that time, but also as far away as Europe. We

remembered people in Italy and Spain as these were the epicentres of the pandemic in March and April, when Lent and Easter were observed and celebrated with the most extreme sadness and fears. We could attend the virtual Easter mass in the Vatican and in churches everywhere else, sharing their pains and hoping for the spiritual resurrection of those Covid-19 victims together with Jesus as they meet Him in the kingdom of God.

I started ringing my mother in Indonesia every day, which I would normally do only once a week. I need to make the most of this time and tell my family how much I appreciate them just in case the virus arrives at their home. The need to pray with congregations in Indonesia become a priority as soon as more than twenty pastors had contracted the virus, and two pastors and several members of the congregation had died of Covid-19 by mid March. So, this is lesson number two: it was easier to be sensitive and globally connected in lockdown.

In what ways has Covid-19 affected the LCA/NZ from these perspectives and what does this mean for the future of our church? This question reminds me of a [quote from Confucius teacher Xun Kuang](#):

Tell me, I forget. Show me, I may remember. Involve me, I will learn.

Members of the Lutheran church can ask the question to themselves, ‘do we want to forget, remember, or learn something from this pandemic?’ I have explained how it was easy to forget the trials when we are so used to a convenient lifestyle. The church leaders can ask whether they want to tell, show, or involve the congregation in response to the global pandemic.

To be involved with others suffering elsewhere requires special preparation and extra work. Fortunately, we in New Zealand and Australia have more time compared to any other part of the world to be prepared and hopefully learn to be compassionate to those who live outside of our countries. Otherwise, we might grow a new way of global disconnectivity [predicted by the Singapore Prime Minister](#) at the end of the country’s circuit breaker (lockdown) in June; ‘countries will strive to become less dependent on others, they will have less stakes on each other’s wellbeing, and will fight more over how the pie is shared rather than work together to enlarge the pie for all.’

As mentioned before, I hope to contribute this opinion piece in order to save lives, so these are my practical suggestions. Reflecting on what the future church might look like when considering the pandemic’s impact can be divided by the physical and spiritual improvements of its architecture.

In order to reduce the risk of the spread of the disease, we will not be allowed to gather in the church building unless social distancing is possible. This will need a special plan to open the walls of the church to outdoor areas, preferably courtyards, to maintain the spatial enclosure that is necessary for the acoustic and the sense of togetherness in an open space. The highest level of ventilation would reduce the number of small microbes to linger in the air just in case someone is infectious. Another physical improvement is contactless taps, buttons and doors, as these are the most frequently touched surfaces.

Finally, the spiritual improvement is the opportunity to build a more internationally connected church by having an International Church Sunday Service. Our churches need a large screen so that many congregations in different parts of the world can worship together at the same time on Zoom or YouTube, with an online streaming connection. Although the screen is technically a physical element of the room, it becomes a sign of connectivity and exposure to the other side of the world where congregations might share a vastly different reality in dealing with the same pandemic.

The sound of a fantail in our backyard reminds me that lockdown was a peaceful time that brings more birds into the city, while it was a dreadful time for many people who live with fears of the virus and questions of how they would provide food for their families when they could not leave their homes. Is this the experience of being with everyone with one accord in one place when the day of Pentecost was fully come?

Dr Grace Pietsch-Pamungkas grew up in church communities in Java, Sumatra, Sulawesi, and Moluccas in Indonesia. Her father, grandfather and great grandfather were Dutch Reformed ministers. She is an Indonesian architect who came to New Zealand in July 2009, was awarded a scholarship from the New Zealand Foundation for Research Science and Technology in 2011 and gained a degree of PhD in Architecture with a focus on Sustainable Development in May 2016. She is a member at St Paul's Lutheran Church Wellington, New Zealand.