

Surviving the Coronavirus – By Jonathan Aitken

The Revd Jonathan Aitken has had one of the most high profile and colourful careers in British public life. His career has spanned the worlds of books, newspapers, television, business, politics, Parliament, prison, theology, charitable service, prison reform and offender rehabilitation. He was ordained on 30 June 2018 and is now a Priest and part-time prison chaplain at HMP Pentonville.

“Count your blessings” is one of life’s wisest axioms, but I never thought it could be applied to Covid-19. Even more surprising is that I am cheerfully doing so after the Coronavirus bug has taken me on a testing journey which included four days of alarmingly high fever, five weeks of debilitating stomach infection, six outpatient days in hospitals for tests and treatments and a heart attack.

But the greatest blessing of all, as the 18th century Abbot of Sieyès famously replied to the question: “What did you do in the French Revolution?” was “I survived!”

Survivors’ stories can have a tendency to be egotistical, so I need to emphasise that I have not forgotten the 50,000-plus Covid-19 victims who have not beaten the clock, including my own brother-in-law. Millions more, including those untouched by the disease, will have wrestled with their own fearfulness, prayerfulness (or lack of it) and asking: “Where is God?” as this pandemic rolls

on. So perhaps this story and its happy ending may be of encouragement to my fellow CRPA members.

My rollercoaster ride through Coronavirus complications was not easy. During the last three months my medical and spiritual travels have included deep experiences of fear, prayer, hospital dramas, exemplary home nursing masterminded by my loving wife and her carer, Jessie Chawda, and the successful insertion of three stents into my blocked arteries – all accompanied by much spiritual searching.

Now that I am on the road to full and energetic recovery, it seems a good moment to try to answer CRPA's question: "What have I learnt from this?"

I am blessed with an optimistic nature. Whether it has been dodging bullets in my youthful days as a war correspondent in Vietnam or ducking punches as a prisoner in HMP Belmarsh I always felt that somehow or other I would come through more or less unscathed.

But when poleaxed by Coronavirus in March, fear and pessimism rose uncharacteristically high on my agenda for a while.

At the start of the Covid-19 pandemic I was worried by the endless warnings from the media prophets of doom. They suggested that as a 77- year-old with "underlying health conditions" which included being an asthmatic, an ex-TB patient and a stroke victim receiving ongoing heart medication, I was clearly in the high-risk category of vulnerability.

When one of my wife Elizabeth's carers went down with the bug, I became much more anxious primarily for Elizabeth who is older than me and the disabled survivor of a brain haemorrhage. However, her immunity system

clearly has the strength of a battleship, for she has sailed serenely on in good health while her husband and carer have succumbed to bad bouts of Covid-19.

I knew that I was in trouble with the bug when my temperature shot up to 104°F accompanied by hot sweats, breathing difficulties and semi-delirious dreams. My GP was attentive but had no remedies to offer other than possible hospitalisation on a ventilator. I was determined to avoid this.

As a recently ordained Priest I remembered the old saying: “Prayer in the best medicine” and did a lot of it, particularly when T.S. Eliot’s eternal footman seemed to be holding my coat at uncomfortably close quarters.

At first many of my prayers were along the predictably self-centred lines of: “O Lord, please save my life!” requests. They did not seem to be working.

But then I turned to the Psalms, the prayer book of Jesus, and found several prayers of surrender. The greatest of these is Psalm 90 which contrasts the frail and ephemeral nature of man with the grandeur and eternity of God.

One particular verse changed the direction of my sickbed prayers: “The days of our age are threescore years and ten: and though some be so strong that they come to fourscore years; yet is their strength then but labour and sorrow; so soon passeth it away and we are gone.” (Psalm 90:10)

Instead of prayers for recovery I switched to prayers of gratitude for the long and full life I have lived. These were followed by prayers of surrender along the lines of: “Lord, it is you who decide the hour of our death. I gladly and totally surrender my life to your will”.

Then in a moment of peace I dreamt I heard a voice saying with a celestial chuckle: “At last – you’ve got the point!”

Soon afterwards my temperature returned to normal and I knew I was out of danger. But that was not the end of the story. I discovered that I had been infected with the gastric or intestinal version of Covid-19. This kept me on my toes. For the next five weeks there were mild days, bad days and terrible days of stomach troubles. As I kept reading in the newspapers, Covid-19 is an infection which recurs and “bites you in the tail” – a most appropriate description in my case!

I became both psychologically and physically debilitated. My haemoglobin or red blood cell count fell to 64 (140 is normal). However, as I was now firmly on the “surrender to God’s Will” track of my deepening prayer life I was never depressed. I drew inspiration from St Paul’s example of struggling with a “thorn in the flesh” (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

Indeed, I managed to become reasonably productive in my priestly duties. These included officiating and giving the address at the funeral service of my brother-in-law, Morgan Rees-Williams – Lord Ogmores; preaching at a virtual High Mass from St Matthew’s, Westminster on the Feast of Pentecost; and attending several prayer group meetings.

The most time-consuming and exhausting aspect of this work was to become heavily involved in a titanic battle at my old and temporarily insane Oxford College, Christ Church where a malign handful of dons have played every trick in the book to try and oust their honourable and saintly Dean.

Their tricks have failed so humiliatingly and expensively (legal fees of £3m so far and rising plus £5m of lost donations) that the day of reckoning is coming for the plotters. Watch this space! I am so glad that lockdown plus

Coronavirus gave me the time to participate in what I regard as a classic good-versus-evil battle.

As I gradually fought off the intestinal version of Covid-19, my excellent consultant, Dr Marcus Harbord, sent me off to hospital for iron infusions and numerous gut tests. They included one heart test. This resulted in the startling news that I had suffered a Covid-19-produced heart attack. As I had felt none of the usual symptoms such as chest pains I was sceptical at first but accepted the advice to have an angiogram procedure. This normally lasts about 20 minutes but while I was on the operating table my surgeons spotted that three of my arteries were blocked or dangerously narrowed. An hour and a half later these blockages had been replaced by three inserted stents.

Later that evening I asked my surgeon, Dr Jonathan Clague: "Does this mean I am living on borrowed time?"

"Not at all," he replied. "Your life span has probably been increased. And you will find that your vitality and energy levels will improve now that your blood is circulating more freely through those unblocked arteries".

What a great result! I feel as though I have been given a new lease of life. In my morning prayers the following day I joyfully recited the BCP's marvellous General Thanksgiving written by Archbishop Reynolds in 1668 which contains the line: "We bless thee for our creation, preservation and for all the blessings of this life...."

So what have I learned from my Coronavirus journey?

To trust God. To be ever more grateful to Him and for the example of others who walk with Him. To resist thinking that God is here to serve us rather than

the other way round. And to concentrate my poor prayers on surrendering to Him, being grateful to Him and joyfully rejoicing in the chance to serve Him.

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