

**IS IT ABOUT NUMBERS?: A REFLECTION ABOUT COVID19**

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Numbers, numbers, numbers! This is the predominant experience of COVID 19 in the social media and in the daily discussions. As soon as the first person in Kenya tested positive of the corona virus all learning institutions were asked to close down, and students were given a few days to vacate. This was followed by a government lockdown. Since then, the source of information about these COVID 19 numbers has remained the different forms of social media, both in the numbers being infected, the numbers dying and the numbers that are recovering. The country has been greatly impacted by COVID 19. With the lockdown in effect, people are struggling to meet their needs. COVID 19 has come to a context already struggling with events that seem Biblical in scope: an invasion of locusts and heavy rains causing floods and mudslides.

To remain sane in the midst of all this, I have made daily walking a key part of my routine. At least after a long day in the house I put on my mask and go out for a walk out in the field, while maintaining social distance. I am not the only one doing this. Apparently one of the things we have in common across our social classes in Kenya is these daily walks; we're all walking. But, of course, there are differences: for one class, walking is part of routine exercise while those in another class walk to fend for themselves by gathering daily vegetables from the field or to care for their animals by cutting grass for them to eat.

During these walks we engage in discussions about how we are doing. However, the conversation quickly moves to the latest numbers in different countries, especially if the person is from another country. With fellow Kenyans we compare the counties that are most affected. As one who hated numbers in high school math, I find this new reality of COVID19 fascinating since I find myself discussing numbers as part of my daily conversations.

The daily briefings of the government's Ministry of Health is all about numbers. The Minister of Health or his secretary starts the briefings by saying: "Fellow Kenyans, in the last 24 hours we have tested –this number of specimens, and out these tested specimens, this number have tested positive with the corona virus. Out of the positive cases this number is male and this number is female, the positive cases come from these counties and the worst hit county is this".

The numbers give a context to this outbreak, informing about the age, gender, and geographical location of those who have been tested. But the numbers that stick out above all others are of those who have been infected or those who have died. Even when we hear other numbers such as those who have recovered, it is the numbers of infection and deaths that stick.

Not long ago, I missed a daily update and when I entered the house, my 11 year-old niece, Davinah, rushed to me and said, "Auntie Esther you missed the updates." I asked her what was said and she said they have just reported that the number of infections have gone up and two more have died. Then I asked her, "Did they say how many have recovered?" She replied, "They may have but I did not hear. I only heard about the ones who were positive and those who died."



So numbers, numbers, numbers, numbers seems to be what describes COVID 19 pandemic. Is this uniquely Kenyan? Of course not. It is a worldwide phenomenon and each person from their context would have a story about numbers. No country is immune from the pandemic, because on the TV screen, the numbers are displayed in terms of the global situation showing the numbers of the infected, the dead and the recovered. The screen then begins to show the same in each continent, followed by other countries. The numbers show how each place is hit. Some places are worse off, and there seems not to be a light at the end of tunnel. Even when someone offers a glimmer of good news, there is a rider about the second wave.

There are several perspectives on these COVID-19 numbers. Firstly, the numbers are a power game between nations and within nations: Who is more in control? Who has more test kits and protection gear? Who is “in charge” of life? It sounds like a battle field – the war on COVID 19, and those who are on the frontline. There is as well a voice of those in the frontlines, who sadly - have no protective equipment or who need better pay. The language of numbers and of the battle field, reminds me of the story in the Bible about the war between the Israelites and the Philistines in their time. In that story, the Israelites sang out in praise of Saul because “he has killed his ten thousand” and David because he “has killed his tens of thousands.” (I Samuel 18:7) As sad and hard as it may sound, the situation today echoes these thousands and tens of thousands, when one thinks of the numbers who have died and the number of those who are infected with the Corona virus.

Secondly, the COVID 19 pandemic numbers have exposed our loopholes within our nations’ systems; the economic systems of wealth accumulation are the ones hardest hit. The lockdown as one of the measures to limit the spread of the pandemic works well for some social groups and not others. A mother in an informal settlement staying home is not safe as she faces danger in the form of hunger and death. Hence, the comment commonly heard, ‘before Corona kills us, hunger will kill us.’ The COVID 19 pandemic has negatively impacted gender relations as well. For example, there is a noticeable increase of gender-based violence. Gender-based violence is not only evident among the poor but across all classes of people even if the forms of violence are represented differently.

Thirdly the COVID 19 pandemic has brought to light the deep disparities among people in our nations. This is in the form of human greed, inequity, depletion, exploitation, confusion, rage, hate and lack. These are reflected in our communities in different ways including fear, anxiety and suspicion.

Fourthly, the COVID 19 pandemic has brought to light a challenge of leadership both in the secular and religious spheres. For politicians, the outbreak seems to have become a perfect space for apportioning blame. In this situation, too many have turned to an all familiar activity—the blame game. They play this rather than working to identify what society really needs right now and working collaboratively to provide it. In some cases, we see religious leaders casting doubts with respect to the truth about the corona virus, using sacred texts to give false hope to people as a prevention against this virus. Sometimes the texts are quoted out of context to tell people that the virus is a judgement from God and that only repentance can help them escape the virus.

The COVID 19 pandemic has caused a social disruption of the practices that were part of the human society. Church services are no longer the same and our religious leaders have to think about what it means to hold a church service. A few have to organize a service and others follow it online. Weddings and funerals that were previously attended by huge numbers are now attended by just a few. How do we accompany each other in times of joy and pain and maintain our “social distance?” These and other questions have emerged.



While numbers are the way COVID 19 pandemic is reported, one thing is ignored: behind these numbers are human faces of grandparents, parents, sisters, brothers, uncles and aunts, and leaders in different spaces of society. These human beings—those who are infected or who have died—are missed by their loved ones.

Reflecting on the COVID 19 pandemic when we have just celebrated Easter and are still in the Easter season, I was led to think about the life and ministry of Jesus and how he dealt with numbers in his day. Just look at his ministry in the Gospel of Luke alone! On the one hand, numbers are essential. After all, he met the needs of crowds and also recognized individuals. He chose twelve disciples (Luke 5:1-11), sent out seventy disciples (Luke 10:1-20), fed thousands (even though only five thousand men were counted; the women and children were not) (Luke 9:10-17). Jesus attended not only to the masses but also responded to individuals in need. Before he could even respond to Jairus' request that he heal the man's daughter, a woman with a flow of blood sought him out for healing. He healed the woman (Luke 8:43-48) and then followed Jairus to his home, where he raised his daughter from the dead (Luke 8:40-56). On the other hand, in spite of all these numbers, Jesus reminded us that the size of our actions—the impact of numbers—held no importance in comparison to the faithfulness displayed by those actions. When rich men made a show of their offerings in the temple, Jesus recognized the sacrifice of a poor widow's offering which was numerically small but represented everything she had to give (Luke 21:1-4).

The numbers in the life of Jesus himself are also intriguing. He was in the wilderness for forty days tempted by the devil (Luke 4:1-20). Jesus was crucified and he died and after three days he rose from the dead and appeared to people whose faith had been shattered after his death. (Luke 21:1-30). Among them was one woman called 'Mary' to whom he appeared while she was weeping at the empty tomb. Confused and afraid, she heard him call her by her name "Mary", and he commissioned her to go and tell his disciples that he was alive? (John 20: 15-16). The Resurrection became the crux of the Christian faith.

The COVID19 pandemic is a painful experience because we are looking not only at the face of death but also at all the spheres of life that are impacted. Christians are an Easter people, a resurrection people, and it is the hope of Easter that we both hold to and share with all in the society. The COVID 19 pandemic has exposed us to the realities of death but at the same time challenged us to live as the people of the resurrection. Friedrich Nietzsche, a 19th Century philosopher, admired Christians but never became one. When he was asked why he did not become a Christian after writing so much about them, and the hope they held out in society, his response was that 'for a group of people that claims to believe in resurrection, none of them looks redeemed'. How will people know that we are a resurrection people if they are not impacted by the way we live?

My mother died four months ago. During this year's Easter service in my home I was talking to members of my family about Jesus rising from the dead at Easter, My six year-old niece Maria asked me why her grandmother had not risen from the dead. It is a journey that I am still walking with her. Resurrection is a gift from God who keeps interrupting all of us, trying to teach us to honor God. As the people of resurrection we incarnate the presence of Jesus confronting what COVID 19 has exposed as shown above.

As Resurrection people we bring and give back hope, accompany others, and restore what is lost. The COVID 19 pandemic will come to an end, as in history no pandemic has lingered on. The challenge for us is whether the pandemic can help us to re-imagine and recreate a new garment with a new cloth, or



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settle for “a new normal” made by patching together the old cloth of our ways of living together before. Jesus reminds us, “No one puts a piece from a new garment on an old garment or else he will tear the new and also the piece from the new will not match the old.” (Luke 5:36). The new garment should be made to fit all.

Numbers of the COVID 19 have a lot to teach us.