

Bishop Martin Seeley writes in Bury Free Press (June 2023)...

Something odd happened at the end of the coronavirus pandemic.

It was as if we were meant to forget it had happened, and just get back to whatever 'normal' might be, even though all the way through the pandemic we kept saying to one another things will never be the same again. We seemed to be subtly or even directly encouraged to put the unprecedented experience out of sight and out of mind. To somehow operate as if the traumatic two years for our planet had not really happened, in this country from the first case identified at the end of January 2020, with the first lockdown later in March, to the final easing of legal restrictions in England in February 2022, just over fifteen months ago.

Yet for many, and I suspect if we are honest, for most of us the pandemic has never really been out of sight or out of mind.

To date more than 227,000 people have died in the UK from the disease, and the grief born by families and friends – and we remember particularly those whose loved ones died without their family present – is ongoing. For many too Covid continues with the burden of long Covid, and the debilitating continuing effects of the disease are being experienced by about two million people in the UK.

But now the pandemic is back in the news, and maybe this will mean we can have a more realistic approach to what the true impact has been. It is back in the news because the public hearings of the UK Covid Inquiry have begun, and evidence on how well prepared the UK was for Covid up to January 2020. It is also back in the news because of the House of Commons Privileges Committee report on whether former prime minister Mr Johnson had deliberately misled MPs over lockdown parties in Downing Street. They found he had. And that was compounded by the release of another video of such a party, portraying the sickening disregard of the rules by political activists partying at Christmas 2020.

So for good reasons – the Inquiry – and bad – the parties – the pandemic is back in the news. And maybe that means we can begin to have the sort of conversation we need to move forward, recognising the impact that the pandemic has had and will continue to have for many years to come.

The personal and social effects of the extended trauma of the pandemic cannot be overestimated. We need to recognise the grief, and the complex grief of so many in our country, and around the world, who lost loved ones, and lost them in circumstances where they could not be directly involved in supporting them. We need to recognise the impact of long covid on such a significant number among us. We need to remember the depth of sacrifice and the trauma involved for those on the front line, and particularly those in the health service. We remember stories of nurses who deliberately did not go home to avoid and possible infection of their families. Stories of the distress experienced by nurses and doctors at not being able to comfort the dying in the ways they would wish to. And of the wearying routine of putting on and taking off PPE – and the stress of knowing whether there was enough, and whether it would actually work.

Then there is the economic impact – despite the generous packages of support provided by the government – particularly on small businesses has been huge and sustained, and of course many businesses did not make it.

We know too that the pandemic exacerbated existing social and economic inequalities, which the cost of living crisis has magnified. And the impact on mental health, and particularly the mental health of young people, is still becoming apparent. And there are the deeper underlying questions of what sort of society are we now.

I wrote a weekly column for this paper from the middle of March 2020 until the middle of August 2021, providing me with a reminder if one was needed of what life was like for us through that time. And one of the themes that is consistent is the good we discovered in ourselves and in our communities, rising to the challenge that Covid brought. We reached out as individuals, communities, churches and charities, to support those in need.

We became incredibly aware of the people who actually kept our day to day life going. Yes, that was the nurses and health care professionals. And the teachers who worked phenomenally hard providing resources for children to learn at home. Or delivery drivers who kept us fed and provided for. And all the key workers who maintained the fabric of daily life for us in the most extraordinary of circumstances, amongst so many others too. We even caught a glimpse of what a differently ordered society might be like.

And then the pandemic ended and it was as if we had forgotten all that – both the depth of suffering and pain, and continuing suffering, and the insights of what a caring society could be like.

Maybe, just maybe, now is the time to look again, to recognise the continuing impact of the pandemic, and to ask how we might yet order our society differently.