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Palm Sunday in lock down

Dear Friends,

Greetings from Lahore under lock down. How the world has changed in a few weeks!

Pakistan has over 11,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and over 200 deaths to date (24th April). The Sindh provincial government, where the cases first appeared, was quick to impose lock down but Punjab was much slower and has now overtaken Sindh in the number of cases. Crowded city slums make social distancing impossible and large numbers of people dependent on daily wages make lock down difficult. The government recently relaxed the rules to allow the construction industry to resume work, which is a major employer of daily-paid labour.

When I was still going into the OTS office to work – walking the two miles as there are no bus services running – I would see lines of workmen by the side of the road, with the tools of their trades, hoping for someone to employ them so that their families could eat that day. It was very sad, and made Jesus' parable of the labourers in the vineyard come to life (Matthew 20, especially verse 3-7). As well as these people, many others who were employed are now out of work, as employers have closed factories and other businesses.



Live transmission from St. Andrew's Church

There is no concept of "furlough" here, so if you are not working you do not get paid. Many Christian women work as maids or domestic cleaners in people's homes, and they are out of work now, and not being paid. The Open Theological Seminary has started a Compassion Campaign to help the most needy families, both in Lahore and other areas. A report of that ministry is attached.



Palm Sunday service on the roof tops

All church services are cancelled since the middle of March. It was strange to celebrate Palm Sunday, Good Friday and Easter in isolation. Many churches, including my church, St. Andrew's, are broadcasting their services on-line for those members with internet, and others are holding their services on the roof-tops of their homes, where there are several Christian families in the immediate vicinity. There is an advantage of the typically Punjabi houses having flat roofs, which are used as extra living spaces – to catch the sun in the winter months, and to sleep in the cool air in the long hot summer.



All educational institutions have been closed since 16th March, and will not re-open until 1st June at the earliest, after the fasting month of Ramadan. Some schools have organized various forms of distance learning, sometimes using modern technology such as Zoom and Skype, or just producing worksheets for the students to complete at home. But most schools are unable to make any such provision. As the 9th and 10th class Board exams had just begun when the lock down was called, all those students will have their Matriculation (school leaving) exams postponed until a later date. There is no suggestion of calculating grades according to past performance as is being done in the UK. When schools resume, they will have to continue throughout the summer months in order to catch up, which will be very hard on students and teachers alike.

Almost all OTS classes have been suspended, as the key element is the group discussion time. Students can study the books at home but we have not yet been able to put anything in place to enable the group discussion to take place in other ways. OTS staff are continuing to work at their desks for the time being, taking reasonable precautions such as frequent hand washing and social distancing, but I am mostly working from home. I am checking the translation, editing and adding questions (programming) to a new course on Christian Theology that is being written by a German professor who taught for many years in Pakistan, at the Zarephath Bible Seminary in Rawalpindi.

Lock down has affected my students, those in my regular weekly class, those on the MACS (Master of Arts in Christian Studies) programme and at Zarephath Bible Seminary, as it has hindered them from completing their practical research assignments. Please pray for them as they try to complete their work by the extended deadline of 30th April. The next MACS module, on Hermeneutics with the OTS Director, Dr. Qaiser Julius, is scheduled for the end of June, but as yet we do not know if it will happen, due to the uncertainty caused by COVID-19.

I am fortunate to live where I do with two small general stores within 2 minutes walk, for basic commodities, and fresh fruit and vegetables available as the sabziwalas and fruitwalas come every day with their barrows. The weather is pleasant because we have had rain from time to time, which has delayed the onset of summer. On Saturday (25th April), the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan began. The breaking of the fast is normally celebrated by *iftar* parties in the evening, which have officially been banned because of the lock down, so we shall see what happens.



Sabziwala passing below my balcony

Please pray

For God to have mercy on our world, and provide healing and protection from COVID-19.

For the Pakistani government, at federal, provincial and local levels, to have wisdom in dealing with the present crisis, and for the official *Ehsaas* (Favour) campaign, that is may benefit the most needy and be administered with integrity and transparency

For the OTS Compassion Campaign, to reach the most needy, and for the staff to be kept safe as they do this distribution. Please pray for the health of all staff and their families, especially for Rev. Nadeem, Field manager, who is suffering severe back pain from a herniated disc.

For all students whose studies have been disrupted, including my students at OTS and ZBS, and the Increase Course Writers' Training trainees in Russia doing their research. Please pray for wisdom as the planning team try to re-schedule the next workshop.

Thank you for your fellowship, prayers and financial support.

With best wishes,

Freda