

# Behind the COVID curtain

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COVID-19 has ironically brought new life to well-worn tales from the Bible. You don't have to be a believer to find resonance in the Easter story of being trapped in a tomb waiting for the stone to be rolled away. Or of Passover: families sheltering in place as a plague of death descends.



But another biblical motif or metaphor may prove more fruitful in the long run: the apocalypse. No, not the end of the world, however appropriate this may feel. It's the apocalypse but not as we know it.

The word 'apocalypse' derives from the Greek *apokalupto* which means 'unveiling' or 'revelation'. We see this etymology preserved in the title of the last book of the New Testament, commonly called in English *The Revelation of John* — or simply *Revelation* — but in the original Greek is literally *The Apocalypse*. And while this text describes many events that are well deserving of the term 'apocalyptic' in common usage — plagues, extinctions, and other disasters up to and including Armageddon itself — that is not what gives the book its name.

What makes it an apocalypse is its framing as a special insight, an exclusive behind-the-scenes peek, that the narrator John is given into reality — a literal revelation. As John describes it, in an ecstatic, visionary state he is invited into heaven itself. From this perspective, what is happening on earth, no matter how inexplicable or strange, can now be given meaning. John sees *what's really going on*.

I'm fascinated by the way some commentators are using this language of apocalypse to describe the societal or global consequences of COVID-19. Expressions like 'uncover', 'laid bare'; or the 'stripping away of layers' have been deployed by journalists, politicians and economists. As new UK Labour leader Kier Starmer said in his acceptance speech: 'This virus has revealed the fragility of our society. It's lifted a curtain... We can see so clearly now...'

The terrible immensity of what this virus has done — and is still doing — should never be glossed over. But perhaps even more significant is what the pandemic has revealed about what was already going on. The UK and USA — two English speaking countries devastated by COVID-19 — are my prime focus here, but many if not most of these points apply to other nations.

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We can see so clearly now such fragility and fracture in the way health care and research sectors are disregarded and underfunded; the marginalisation — to the point of literal expendability — of elderly and disabled people; the cruel links between race, health, life-expectancy and poverty; the disconnect between the money and adulation our 'celebrities' receive and what they contribute to society; the prioritisation — in many circles — of the metaphorical health of the economy over actual human health; the emptiness of the xenophobic cant of 'border protection', or wall building or Brexit; and, perhaps most importantly, the rarity of humane, wise and decisive leadership. In seeing these things, and seeking to uncover their causes, we must recognise that we have going along with them until we were forced to look. And when we search for who to blame, we cannot exempt ourselves.

Our challenge is to retain the apocalyptic insights that COVID-19 has granted us at such terrible cost when we return to normal — so that we *don't* return to normal. As the curve of new infections mercifully begins to flatten in some countries, certain voices are clamouring that now is the time to loosen lock-down restrictions, re-open businesses and permit larger gatherings.

If we are generous and assume they are not simply trying to sacrifice as many people as possible to their market idols, then perhaps we can see that behind their call to open up society lies a desperation to slam shut the apocalyptic window and pretend we never saw a thing. To gaslight us back into going along with it.

Despite our anxiety, our uncertainty, the unexpected busy-ness of our stay-at-home lives — even in our mourning — we need to pay attention to what has been revealed by COVID's lifting of the curtain. We must resolve that what has been seen does not become forgotten in our relief but provides our impetus to action.

Just as in John's apocalypse, not every revelation has been one of horror or devastation. In heaven, John encounters moments of joy and singing, and there have been glimpses of these on earth, too. Literal singing, with concerts on balconies and karaoke on Zoom. The joys of taking a daily walk, spotting bears in windows or sharing videos of how nature is adapting to our unexpected absence. While there is profiteering and panic, there is also the most moving evidence of human decency, self-sacrifice and love.

To me, the most encouraging revelation from our COVID apocalypse is what it has shown about our ability for change, not just at an individual level, but in deep, systemic ways. Neoliberal governments can enact free childcare and widespread welfare reform, new hospitals can be built and functioning within weeks. Even Christian churches — organisations so change-adverse as to be the butt of jokes — can ditch centuries of tradition in days. Across the world, institutions, practices and ideologies that seemed carved in stone have shown themselves written on the wind. Things were the way they were because we made them that way, or we let them be. And we have seen that we can remake them.

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Of course, such volatility is dangerously ripe for exploitation. The question of what kind of world we want when we come out of isolation must be addressed now or other people — those who are accustomed to making such decisions — will answer it for us.

So where to begin? What baselines might we agree on? Apocalyptic language is not only found in the book of Revelation but throughout the Gospels. Jesus frequently uses it when he talks about what the coming Kingdom of God will be like, a now hidden, one day to be revealed society of justice and peace.

Jesus uses the same kind of apocalyptic language in the passage that Kier Starmer went on to quote in his speech, just after his reference to COVID-19 as lifting a curtain. 'We can see so clearly now who the key workers really are,' said Starmer, listing NHS staff as well as cleaners, carers and others working at the frontline of the epidemic or to simply keep things functioning. 'For too long,' he continued, 'they've been taken for granted and poorly paid. They were last and now they should be first.'

Imagine putting the lowliest, least respected and poorest first — or at least something closer to equality. It would mean that nurses were paid as much as football players. That welfare recipients were not treated as bludgers or put through humiliating hoops but were provided with enough to live on with dignity. That we finally stopped making excuses for our racism, whether directed at First Nations peoples or new arrivals. That we accepted, once and for all, that this is such a thing as society and that economic structures exist to benefit humans, not the other way around.

For millions of people, COVID-19 is like hell unleashed on earth. Perhaps by seeing it through apocalyptic eyes, we can change things here to make them just a little bit more like they might be in heaven.



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Main image: Illuminated stage (Getty Images/ Nattapong Wonglounud)

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