

# Engage



Quarterly comment from the Jubilee Centre

April 2020



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# Coming to terms with Covid-19

Jonathan Tame

**T**he coronavirus pandemic is putting everything to the test.

Almost **every public institution** is coming under immense pressure. Medical services, especially intensive care units, must cope with unprecedented demand. Public health officials have to predict how the healthcare system will cope, government advisers must recommend far-reaching decisions about social isolation and ministers have to manage the overall economic response and keep the public informed and reassured.

Covid-19 puts **every business** to the test – facing drastically falling demand on the one hand and staff absence on the other. Many directors must weigh up the legal, ethical and especially relational demands on them as

they make tough decisions about the survival of their organisation.

The virus puts **every household** under pressure with multiple challenges: obtaining food and basic supplies, accessing childcare if parents are still working, making ends meet if someone goes unpaid. Long periods of staying at home together will increase tensions and strained couple relationships may reach breaking point.

And **every individual** needs to face the uncertainty of what lies ahead. Some are anxious about the threat to their physical health, while others worry about their education or livelihoods. Any mental health struggles will be exacerbated by weeks of uncertainty and social isolation – especially for those who live alone.

We are being challenged in every way; the fabric of our society, our institutions, our relationships, the quality of our leadership and strength of our characters are all being put to the test. This is a time that's unprecedented in the post-war era.

How are we to think biblically about all this? Well, what I've written here does that – for the starting point for considering any issue from a biblical perspective is to take a long, hard look at what is *actually* happening. It's not biblical to look only at what you would *like* to see, nor to spiritualise everything or glibly say, 'Well, at least Jesus is in control!' to absolve us from confronting difficult realities.

It's also biblical to own what we feel and experience – which probably includes anxiety, fear and a sense of bewilderment. For many there is a looming sense of grief and loss: not just bereavement for people losing a loved one to the virus, but also the imminent loss of a job, a business, investments or pension. We need to be sensitive to how this end of much 'normal' life affects others, the specific challenges different people face, and the dilemmas for leaders in front line services and government.

Rather like Job's friends, we need to sit with this for a while, listening and observing,

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# Heeding the prophets: then and now

Guy Brandon

*Given that the warnings of the biblical prophets routinely went unheeded, what does that tell us about what we should expect of modern-day prophets?*

**The Old Testament prophets were, almost to a man, staggeringly unsuccessful in their own lifetimes.** Measured in terms of obvious key performance indicators like national repentance, they were nearly all abject failures. Does that failure to resonate with their audiences suggest a broader purpose?

**Career vs freelance prophets**  
There was more than one type of prophet. There were the 'sons of the prophets', who appear to be an official group of prophets attached to the Temple apparatus and/or royal court. While they would originally have enjoyed independence, their proximity to power had the predictable effect and over the centuries they degenerated into little more than religious 'Yes men'. Their job was essentially to tell the king what he wanted to hear. One of the best examples is found in 1 Kings 21, when Jehoshaphat consults 400 tame prophets belonging to the King of Israel, before going to war against Aram. "Go," they answered, "for the Lord will give it into the king's hand." This, it seems, is the best way to be respected and listened to as a prophet: accept that he who pays the piper, or in this case the prophet, calls the tune. History did not treat them kindly, even if their employers did.

Then there are the independent prophets who are not attached to the temple but

who experience a calling to warn the king or society about their sins and impending judgement. Their books constitute a significant proportion of the Old Testament. Again, 1 Kings 21 provides a good example. 'But Jehoshaphat asked, "Is there no longer a prophet of the Lord here whom we can inquire of?' The king of Israel answered Jehoshaphat, 'There is still one prophet through whom we can inquire of the Lord, but I hate him because he never prophesies anything good about me, but always bad. He is Micaiah son of Imlah.'" True to form, Micaiah prophesies doom and ends up in prison for the rest of his days.

It's the same throughout the Old Testament. Isaiah's call recognises the reality that he will be ignored (Isaiah 6). Ezekiel experiences the decline of Judah, with his ministry beginning in exile, and warns of the destruction of Jerusalem. God tells him not to be afraid of the people he will speak to, and cautions him that failure is distinctly possible: 'The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn.' (Ezekiel 2:4) As he prophesies, Jerusalem is destroyed a few years later.

**Unsympathetic audiences**  
Speaking to people who don't want to listen is a thankless task. This idea apparently occurred to Jeremiah, who, like Micaiah, conducted his ministry in the narrow gap between a rock and a hard place. Denying his calling caused him intense emotional, and maybe physical, distress. 'Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the Lord has

brought me insult and reproach all day long. But if I say, "I will not mention his word or speak any more in his name," his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.' (Jeremiah 20:8-9)

And so it goes on. In fact, Jonah, one of the few successful prophets in the Old Testament, is such an outlier and his experience so at odds with that of his colleagues that many critics believe the book is a parody designed to satirise Israel's constant unfaithfulness.

**Modern prophets**  
Israel's prophets talked, but their audiences didn't listen. What about the 'prophets' of our own time – those who speak out against injustice today? This might include warnings about specific or collective instances of sin; abuse and oppression, the environment, extremist politics, war or greed, among other things.

Little has changed in 3,000 years: telling people they're behaving badly and need to change is never popular. Like the prophets of the Bible, anyone who tries this nowadays is likely to be ignored or derided at best, if not silenced in a variety of ways. Given how little the Israelites listened to their prophets, how should we view the purpose of such a ministry (whether or not we consider it a divine calling)?

*1. We bear responsibility*  
Ezekiel was told that if he didn't deliver his warning, the blood of others would be on his hands. In that respect, his ministry wasn't just about other people: it was about his own integrity and guilt. The prophets were tasked with bringing a horse to water, not forcing it to drink.

*2. Even one listener is enough*  
While the Israelites as a whole ignored the prophets, we have to assume that a minority did listen to them and change their behaviour. Presumably some people did act – and those who were prepared for exile would have been grateful to Jeremiah. Some human misery was avoided as a result.

*3. Prophecy is for future generations*  
The fact that we still read the prophets' message millennia later should be reason for encouragement. Their words weren't just for their immediate listeners, but for billions of future readers over a hundred generations to come.

Change doesn't happen overnight, and is a process that will not be completed this side of the world to come. The fact that we are the latest in the line of beneficiaries of the biblical prophets who were ridiculed, imprisoned and murdered for speaking out should give us pause for prayerful reflection.

# Vision requires trust: a perspective on the European Union

Dr Gabriela Urbanova



Credit: Thijs ter Haar CC BY 2.0

Gabriela is originally from Slovakia and has spent the last five years working in Brussels as the Head of Cabinet for an MEP. She's a board member of Sallux, the political foundation for the European Christian Political Movement (ECPM) and is currently a guest researcher at Jubilee Centre.

**2020 is a time when we hope for new beginnings, not only for ourselves, but also for our societies, cities and nations.** The European Union is no exception. 'A Union that strives for more' is the title of the proposed agenda for the European Commission over the next five years. The agenda is ambitious and confident, in part because it was published following the last Eurobarometer survey, which indicated that 61% of EU citizens were in favour of their country's membership—the highest rating in ten years. The

agenda contains several guidelines for the transformation of the EU, including: the already proposed European Green Deal, an 'economy that works for people', a 'transition strategy to make Europe fit for the digital age' and 'a new push for European democracy.' To achieve these ambitious goals and include EU citizens in the process, the Commission has also introduced the Conference on the Future of Europe to run for two years.

This strategy is intended to be the fire that will drive the EU forward. However, fire is a good servant but a terrible master. These statements about the future of the EU are noble and visionary, but the EU is predicated on good institutional relationships between member states—and unfortunately the quality of these relationships is not factored into these ambitious plans for the future. This is the long-term challenge for the EU.

Although the Eurobarometer results point to increasing support for the EU, further analysis suggests uncertainty and ambivalence. For example:

- 50% generally perceive that the EU is moving in the wrong direction, up by 14% in 4 years.
- 27% of respondents believe that the EU is 'neither a good thing nor a bad thing', an increasing number in 19 countries.

The founding father of the EU, Robert Schuman, understood that, 'statesmen can propose far-reaching plans, but they cannot put them into effect without far-reaching changes in the hearts of people.' How can the EU address the decreasing trust in its leadership from the people who are most affected by its ambitious policies and vision for the future?

In any relationship, when one party feels misled or frustrated as a result of unfulfilled promises, the first thing to do before moving to the next project is to be honest and admit failings. Only then will they be able to listen and accept something new. For example, although the EU recently experienced a significant departure from one of its most important member states (the UK), there has been no proper reflection on this from its leaders. Likewise, there has been no attempt to understand why the number of Eurosceptic MEPs increased in the last election; rather, the Commission's vision describes an *even closer union*. Trust is the currency of relationship, and trust has been eroded through years of ideologically motivated decisions and a political culture that works against honesty.

How then can the leaders of the EU expect not only the national leaders, but also the citizens of each state, to engage with the Commission's proposals if people do not first experience the healing power of honesty and truth from their leaders and genuine repentance from those years of ideologically motivated decisions? To reimagine the EU, its leaders must first take responsibility for the political decisions that have undermined trust in their leadership, and the institution of the EU as a whole. Genuine listening must accompany this honesty—especially to the voices of ordinary citizens.

Sallux and Jubilee Centre's sister organisation Relational Research have been working on concrete proposals for improving the relationships between member states and EU leaders. Called 'Confederal Europe', it proposes a political and societal vision for stakeholder nations based on a new model, a *covenant* of nations. This would significantly reduce tensions and disparity in the EU's current structure and institutions:

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# God's Good Economy

by Andrew Hartropp

Reviewed by Philip Powell

**A**ndrew Hartropp, who worked as Research Associate with the Jubilee Centre in 1986–87, has recently published *God's Good Economy: Doing Economic Justice in Today's World* (IVP Press, 2019). He deals with the complex and sometimes confusing subject of economics in a comprehensive, balanced and theologically-grounded way, and proposes practical ideas for companies, churches and individual Christians to do economic justice in today's world.

Hartropp starts by defining *economic justice*, and argues that the roots of economic justice are found in the character of God revealed to us in the Bible. He makes the crucial point that economic justice should be understood as the quality of relationships and involves reciprocal responsibilities. He also argues that in the allocation of resources, everyone must be allowed to participate in God's blessings, including material blessings.

The book is divided into two parts; Part I explores economic justice in our relationships, starting with the individual consumer and moving out into the wider circles of workplace and church communities. Part II covers economic justice in wider society, including corporations, banks and financial institutions, both nationally and globally.

There were some stand-out pieces of advice in Part I. Consumers often find it hard to know how to do economic justice; purchasing a simple object like a lightbulb means participating in the global economy, but it's difficult to trace the journey an item has made along different supply chains before reaching our home. Here Hartropp gives a simple principle: if

something you buy is substantially lower in price compared to an equivalent item, then this should act as a warning sign. While this isn't foolproof, it highlights how low prices are only possible through substantial underpayment of workers somewhere along the supply chain. Economic justice means paying a fair price and not simply buying the cheapest product. The author concludes the first part of the book by suggesting how local churches can practice economic justice, for example by helping job seekers with CV writing and interview skills.

In Part II, Hartropp's section on banks and financial institutions is both engaging and helpful practically. People seldom talk about banks as institutions that exist for the sake of doing economic justice. This is almost a joke, especially after the 2008–09 financial crisis. And yet without banks and other financial institutions, life in the modern world would be impossible. From a Christian perspective, how would the banking sector look if it was driven by an *ethic of responsibility* instead of an *ethic of greed*? What if financial institutions treated the economically weak (the poor and vulnerable) in ways that protected them from harm instead of exploiting them through schemes like pay-day loans? Hartropp believes that large financial institutions have the potential for doing economic justice despite the challenges of greed and pride. Biblical thinking which prioritises right and just relationships is like salt and light (Matthew 5:13–16) and has the potential to bring about long-term societal change for the better. For anyone who wants to be more informed and engaged in doing economic justice, Andrew Hartropp's book *God's Good Economy* is well worth reading.



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1. The entire project is based on voluntary consent – that is, it works within the bounds of recognized commonality
2. Parties are independent and have parity without being required to be equal in size or economic influence
3. Mutual respect and support, and the protection of national sovereignty, are named as preconditions
4. On this basis, existing relations within the wider European framework can be further developed, making it possible for countries such as Norway and Switzerland to participate more fully in the European project
5. A covenant can be witnessed by God (respecting the strong, shared Christian heritage of European nations) and by past and future generations (respecting the 24% of EU citizens with no religious faith)<sup>1</sup>

The Confederal Europe idea offers just one possible vision for the EU. However, any vision requires mutual agreement between EU citizens and politicians—which is hard unless EU leaders recognise and take responsibility for decisions that have led to the current situation. And perhaps this principle applies not only to the EU, but also to the UK, that great member state whose exit we continue to feel.

<sup>1</sup> From *Confederal Europe: A Political and Societal view for Stakeholder Nations* by David John Lee, Dr Michael Schluter and Dr Paul Mills (Sallux, 2019)

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and not rushing to make pronouncements about what God may or may not be doing through this crisis. (It was when Job's friends started speaking that things went wrong!)

Here in Jubilee Centre, we've identified three areas for biblical reflection in our work going forward: the unfolding reaction and policy responses by public leaders; the implications of drastic restrictions to personal mobility; and the potential for social reform emerging from the economic, social and political upheaval going on.

The Bible offers not only encouragement for personal faith in a time of crisis, it also provides wisdom and insight to guide Christians wherever they have public leadership or influence. In these uncertain times may we read it together thoughtfully, prayerfully and faithfully, seeking first God's kingdom and his righteousness.

# 'Birds have nests': Biblical reflections on the housing crisis

Philip Powell



In our latest Cambridge Paper, David Corbett writes about the housing crisis and the different ways Christians can respond. Corbett argues that the dominant supply-and-demand model misdiagnoses the problem and evades confronting the root causes of the issue.

When dealing with a housing crisis, governments repeat the mantra, 'We will build more houses!' They want to offer people (especially young people) the hope of realising their dream of home ownership. But there is more to solving the crisis than simply promising to build new houses.

A Bank of England report concluded that 'nearly all of the rise in average house prices relative to incomes can be seen as a result of a sustained, dramatic, and consistently unexpected, decline in real interest rates.' Changes in the availability of finance have certainly increased demand, alongside population growth and migration. However, interestingly, in the last 50 years in the UK, there has been a significant *increase* in the number of houses relative to the population, and yet we have a housing crisis. This is because households have changed; smaller households are broadly associated with higher national wealth worldwide, and changes in household size and composition rarely receive attention even though they significantly increase demand for housing units. Other factors associated with the housing crisis include: the purchasing of holiday properties, an influx of capital from overseas buyers and the high costs and declining security of the private rental sector.

The Bible offers much wisdom in seeking to deal with the housing crisis. It is important to distinguish between three terms: 'house', 'household' and 'home'. 'House' refers to the physical property, while 'household' refers to the group of people living within the house. However, 'home' is more nuanced: the place where one lives long-term and belongs, especially as a member of a family or

household. More expansively, 'home' from a Christian perspective might suggest a secure dwelling, in which one can live with or near a loving 'family' (conjugal, church, and/or extended), in a thriving local and broader community, and in relationship with God.

The Bible affirms our desire for 'home' and the 'homing instinct' that makes us human. Far from discarding the desire for 'home', Jesus and the New Testament writers seem to enlarge its scope. However, this larger role for 'home' relativises the role of 'households' and 'housing': our houses will only be 'pleasant inns along the way home'. Being locally rooted in a place and community is held in tension with the 'pilgrim principle' that sees Christians as aliens on earth.

Many biblical texts refer to the concept of 'households' rather than just material houses; their emphasis is on relationships, not merely bricks and mortar. The household is a key organizing concept in biblical law, referring to a multi-generational family (*bayit* in Hebrew). At the heart of Israelite life and worship is the household as a relational unit with land stewarded intergenerationally. The Jubilee legislation ensured that every fifty years, all land that had been sold returned to its ancestral owners. In this way extended families were periodically reunited.

Taken together, the biblical themes of home, household and land all strongly support the conclusion that enabling and encouraging people to live in and take responsibility for their own homes is an important part of a biblical vision for a flourishing society. In a culture which often sees house ownership as a route to financial gain without effort, these biblical themes invite a new emphasis on encouraging and supporting 'home-making'.

**Download the Cambridge Paper from our website, or order your copy using the response form.**

## Jubilee blog highlights

### Global protests and the nature of hope

2019 ended with 47 countries in protest. Some demonstrations were sparked by particular events (increases in fuel, food and transport costs), whilst others reflect ongoing political tensions. While each protest is different, they reveal deeper underlying and global issues and articulate the conviction that things can and must be different. The legitimate anger that fuels protest is easier to express than the pain, fear or vulnerability that often drive it. At the heart of these feelings is longing for change, which is another form of hope. In this blog, Mercedes McGuire explores biblical hope as a robust, prophetic and antithetical alternative to naïve optimism. If hope emerges out of lament and honest confrontation with the world as it is, then it can articulate a better vision for the future.

### Good Omens and the problem of the end of the world

'We must get serious about affirming goodness,' says Charlee New in this recent blog. Starting with the TV series *Good Omens*, she reflects on how the wider culture understands Christian views of the end of the world. She challenges an eschatology that Christian salvation is to be found in an exodus from – rather than a redemption of – the world. Instead, she affirms a belief that the material variety and goodness of creation will find its fulfilment at the end of history, and that this understanding is critically linked to our narrative of the good news of resurrection and new creation.

We regularly post new blogs exploring current issues from a biblical perspective. You can read the above posts in full, along with other recent blogs, at: [jubilee-centre.org/blogs](https://jubilee-centre.org/blogs)

# News and events

## Virtual Summer School

Summer School 2019 attendees



We had been planning our annual Social Reformers Summer School when the coronavirus put an end to the possibility of gathering together in Cambridge in June for three days of learning, discussion and application of biblical thinking to a major social issue.

Instead we are going to try and run the Summer School virtually, adapting the programme to an online environment, and making the most of the rapidly improving technology and most people's growing skillset in online collaboration. We also hope that offering the school virtually will make it more accessible globally, so do spread the word!

The School will inspire you with stories of Christian social reformers from the past, equip you with a biblical strategy and principles for transformation in the present, and help you take steps personally towards becoming a social reformer in the future. This year's theme is 'The family in a changing world'.

We plan to begin the Virtual School on Thursday 18th and finish on Saturday 20th June – timings will depend on what time zones participants will be in.

Please register your interest at [jubilee-centre.org/summer\\_school](https://jubilee-centre.org/summer_school) where we will post more details as we work them out!

## Digital Transformation Update

Over the past six months, we've been busy behind the scenes preparing for a digital transformation. This has involved changing several of our key systems and platforms: our database, accounting package, website and online training. Thank you to everyone who's prayed and contributed financially to make this happen. Because of you, we've been able to invest in our future growth, and ensure that we can help even more Christians to connect their faith with public life.

- We're pleased to say that our new website is live. It's hosted at the same address ([jubilee-centre.org](https://jubilee-centre.org)) and we'd encourage you take a look around—and send us your feedback!
- Our training course Biblical Foundations for Public Leadership is also getting a new look, and a new name: 'The Bible and



Public Life'. It will launch later in the spring and offer a new flexible approach to do different modules.

- Although our website is live, this is only the beginning. We've built it in HubSpot, a leading provider of inbound marketing tools and we'll be working to develop a strategy to use these tools to reach new intellectually curious Christians and put the most relevant resources into their hands.

## About Jubilee Centre

The Jubilee Centre is a research and policy think tank that offers a biblical perspective on social, economic and political issues. Through our research, publications, events and training we equip Christians to be salt and light in the public square.

Jubilee Centre is based in the centre of Cambridge, which is ideal for collaborating with local churches, like-minded charities, students and academics in the two universities and our sister organisations Relationships Foundation and Relational Research.

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