

“THE LORD HAS COMFORTED HIS PEOPLE”

A REFLECTION FOR HOLY WEEK

Rev. V.G.B. King was one of Anglican Family Care’s forebears. Health historian Warwick Brunton imagines how he might have reflected on his ministry during the 1918 influenza pandemic and its relevance to the Covid-19 pandemic had he been alive today.



Rev. Vincent George Bryan King (1879-1945) photographed in his robes as an Anglican deacon.

This excellent organiser and indefatigable worker was Dunedin’s “city missionary” for many years and local hero of the influenza pandemic of 1918. Dunedin gave him £1,000 and a car in grateful appreciation.

His leadership of local branches of the Red Cross and St John Ambulance Association was recognised by the award of the OBE, the French medal Reconnaissance Français, the Order of St John, the Red Cross Society's Jubilee Medal, appointment as a Justice of the Peace, and honorary life membership of the Returned Soldiers' Association.¹

The eerie silence and emptiness of our normally bustling streets so resembles Dunedin in November 1918. The topsy-turvyness of the month we celebrated the end of the war to end all wars and wrestled with the catastrophic influenza epidemic brings to mind *A Tale of Two Cities*. “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.”

I came from a dynasty of clergymen. Although a priest since 1909, the ministry I immersed myself in most deeply was that of the deacon I was ordained in 1904. Deacons have a special responsibility to ensure that those in need are cared for with an often prophetic Christ-like compassion and humility. Social work can be Christian servanthood with its sleeves rolled up. I first felt called to such a ministry when I was 18.

The Mission House in Filleul Street was home base for me rather than a parish church. The Mission found caring homes for children, tried to mediate in difficult and abusive domestic situations, took poor people to hospital, assisted people to get pensions, found work for men and women, and supported people appearing before the courts. We distributed food, clothing and furniture to needy people and families. Our help was free to anyone and everyone in need. Other churches ran similar social services or residential programmes.

Community outreach was a pivotal part of ministry, so I involved myself in chaplaincy to public institutions, Boy Scouts, the Red Cross, St John Ambulance Association, City Relief Association, the Hospital Helpers Association, and an “etc.”¹ that masks my modesty. The demanding work periodically exhausted me and affected my health.

Having such an extensive network thrust me into prominence during the epidemic when Dr Faris, the Public Health Department’s man in Dunedin, asked me to head up a central bureau where anyone could apply for medical attention or nursing care.² The central scheme worked so well that it was copied in 7 suburban bureaux until demand tailed off in mid-December and the bureaux closed.

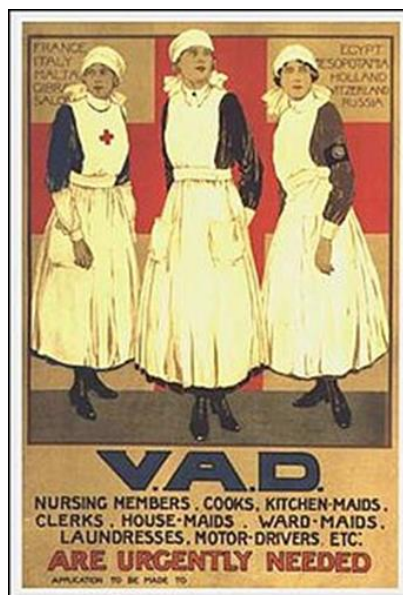
“It was the best of times”

That scheme brought out the best in Dunedin people. They were used to doing their bit for the war effort. In those days of single income families and gendered roles of male breadwinner and female home-maker, I confidently appealed to “womanhood [that] never fails in an emergency like this.”³

¹ DES, 31/10/18, p.2, 10/11/18, p.9.

² DES, 14/11/1918, p.6.

³ LTE DES, 11/11/18, p.4.



A British World War I poster appeal for Voluntary Aid Division workers.
 Photo: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voluntary_Aid_Detachment#/media/File:VAD_poster.jpg

Phone 376 was the number to ring. Flying a white flag was the signal that help was needed. Every day, volunteers ran the office and answered calls or messages from households offering or needing help. Volunteer St John Ambulance nurses visited sick patients, took their temperature and sat with them patiently till the doctor arrived. Fifty individuals or members of the Motorists' Association loaned their cars or taxied our courageous band of volunteers around.⁴ Garages mended punctures gratis. Thirty Boy Scouts ran errands. A team of volunteer senior medical students, with their professors as supervisors, visited flu victims at home.⁵ On "Hurricane" day (17 November) we responded to more than 500 calls, twice the number two days earlier.⁶ Volunteers prepared invalids' food in the kitchen for despatch. Staff and students at the Home Science School constantly provided jellies and made 650 masks.⁷ People donated copious quantities of soup, jellies, disinfectant and coal.⁸ We also asked for groceries, blankets, underwear, towels and sheets.⁹ Commercial donations of bulk tea (Bell Tea Company), flour (Harraways), lemon cordial

⁴ ODT 19/11/18

⁵ ODT 23/11/18, p.6.

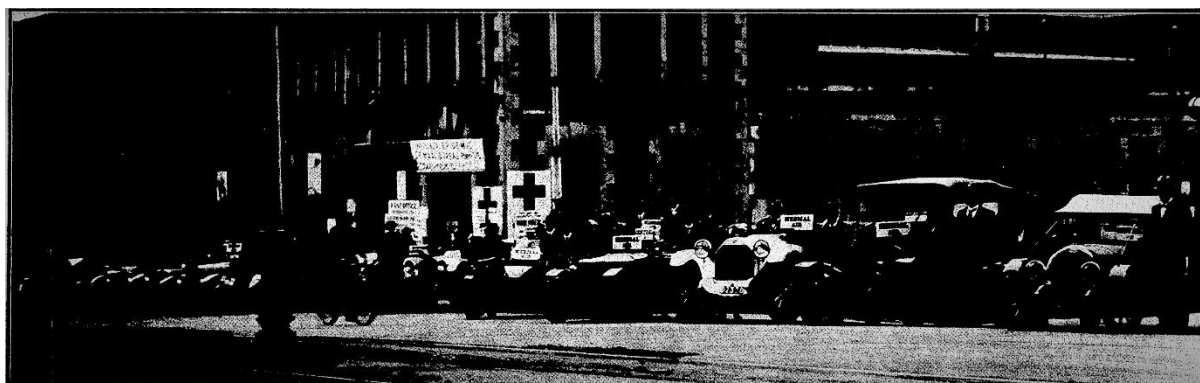
⁶ ODT 19/11/18, p.5 and, 20/11/18, p.5.

⁷ ODT 5/12/18, p.5.

⁸ ODT 28/11/18, p.5.

⁹ ODT w29/11/8, p.4

(Thomson and Co.) and condensed milk were most welcome.¹⁰ People dug deeply into their pockets and gave £1,700 (\$181,000 today) to help people affected by the flu.



Motor cars placed at the disposal of the Central Bureau at the old Post Office, Princes Street, by their owners during the epidemic. Photo: *Otago Witness*, 4 December 1918, Supplement, p.28.

“It was the worst of times.”

Along with the prolonged suffering of the Great War, the pandemic’s death toll (273 Pakeha in the city area), widespread suffering, orphanhood and financial pressures or job insecurity that forced people back to work before they had fully recovered, were all downsides. So were the absence of any national plan and belated official intervention. Selfish economic opportunism during the tragedy alarmed me. I exposed the profiteering of funeral directors¹¹ and took aim at local fruiterers who sold lemons at exorbitant prices until the government imposed price controls.¹² We bought and distributed 40 cases of oranges at that price of 3d (3c) each.¹³ The Government stepped over private pharmacists to make cheap disinfectant readily available through local councils and a standard influenza remedy at a bob (10c) a bottle or free to needy people.¹⁴¹⁵

¹⁰ ODT, 30/11/18, p.7; DES, 2/4/19, p.6..

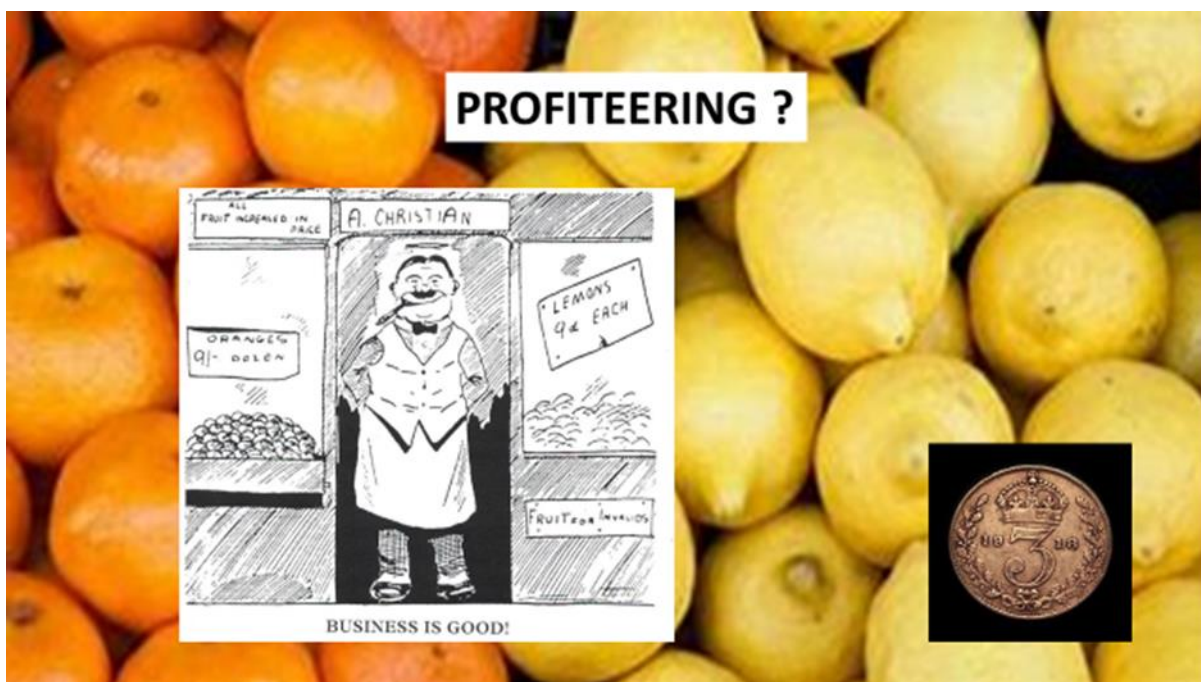
¹¹ ODT, 26/11/18, p.6. (£27)

¹² ODT 19/11/18, p.5.

¹³ ODT 25/11/18, p.5.

¹⁴ ODT 13/11/1918, p.20.

¹⁵ ODT 15/11/18, p.3.



The Missioner was instrumental in getting the government to control the price of citrus fruit.
Cartoon: *Observer*, 23 November 1918, p.16.

"It was the spring of hope."

People hoped things would be different and better after the war and the epidemic. The dark clouds of November 1918 passed over in time to anticipate the hopes and joy of Christmas and peace on earth through the League of Nations. The *Otago Daily Times* called editorially for a tax-based State fund, drawn from 'the contributions of the whole of the people' as the appropriate and, in fact, the only proper source to relieve widespread social and economic distress. "The Government should itself unhesitatingly accept the responsibility instead of endeavouring to throw it on to the shoulders of private people."¹⁶

I lived long enough to see two Otago University graduates, Rev. Arnold Nordmeyer and Dr Gervan Macmillan, breathe fresh political life into that idea with the bold comprehensive social security scheme of 1938. Nordmeyer wrote, "The normal Christian attitude of life of helping those in need, whatever the cause of their need, should be carried

on into the community life, enabling the joint resources of the people to be applied for assisting in banishing distress and want.”¹⁷

“The season of Darkness” and “The season of Light”

Nineteen-eighteen was then; now is now, but as I fast-forward to 2020’s pandemic, Dickens’ juxtaposed seasons remain.

Profiting from adversity seems to be wired into the human condition. Haven’t some businesses or industries tried to elasticise the meaning of “essential” or been accused of price-gouging? How equally shared are wage-cuts and lay-offs between management and their workforce? What do we make of consumer panic-buying or stock-piling of supplies? The same thing is happening internationally. The U.S. has reputedly hi-jacked masks paid for and urgently needed by Germany.¹⁸ Pharmaceutical companies are apparently hiding behind the cloak of commercial confidentiality to withhold their data on potential treatments lest they miss out on the pot of gold that awaits the development of a safe and effective vaccine.¹⁹ The media convey an inward-looking focus on developed nations with precious little comment about the impact on swathes of developing and least developed countries. Haven’t some overseas political leaders and thinkers toyed with the idea of sacrificing large groups of people to achieve herd immunity? That rattles the cage of eugenics. Survival of the fittest in such a libertarian dystopia would hit the low-paid, beneficiaries, disabled and elderly people who are deemed unproductive or expendable.²⁰ Good Lord deliver us. Such thinking is utterly repugnant to Christian belief that everyone is of equal worth and dignity before God and that as a society we are meant to be agents of divine compassion in making people whole.

A season of light also underpins the hope of some recent commentaries. Health sociologist Andrew Dickson suggests that at the moment we are sacrificing wealth creation in

¹⁷ AJHR 1938, I-6, p.11.

¹⁸ https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/03/mask-wars-coronavirus-outbidding-demand?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

¹⁹ https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/02/coronavirus-vaccine-big-pharma-data?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

²⁰ <https://www.newsroom.co.nz/ideasroom/2020/03/28/1103495/survival-of-the-fittest-and-other-cruel-logic# 3/2/2020>.

favour of health salvation. Currently, with our support, he writes, our government is refusing individualism while preserving enterprise through the wage subsidy scheme. The Government is not yielding to the temptation of prematurely backing off the lock-down. He hopes this experience teaches that New Zealand does not need to place individual wealth above collective health.²¹ Sarah Hogan and Todd Kriebel of the NZ Institute of Economic Research add that the low-cost public health measures behind the lock-down will deliver a short, sharp economic shock, whereas hasty re-opening of economies will mean more deaths, lost workers, an overrun health system and loss of social capital.²² Epidemiologists Michael Baker and Nick Wilson²³ hope that the new collaboration among health agencies, public health academics, laboratories and prominent business leaders will continue long after the pandemic has gone. They hope that the present global and national crisis might shift our collective creativity towards a 'major reset' in the way we organise our society and our relationship with our environment. They assert that before Covid-19 the world was on a trajectory towards escalating climate change and environmental destruction. Choosing a health response that minimises net economic harm and uses economic stimulus measures, these epidemiologists hope we can build a better, more self-reliant and sustainable New Zealand, make better use of information technology, use transport far more efficiently, and make public health the heart of the health system. The pair also hope global institutions (like the United Nations system) will be greatly strengthened to lead highly coordinated responses to global health threats.

Paradoxically people of faith and inhabitants of the long white cloud are all pilgrims with "everything before us" and "nothing before us," as Dickens put it. This week, Christians walk with Jesus towards the dereliction of Good Friday and the resurrection life and hope of Easter Day. They are trudging a bubbled Via Dolorosa through solitude, isolation, suffering, death and uncertainty towards new life. So we uphold and pray for our increasingly stretched workforce of essential front-line and back-room workers and care-givers.

²¹ <https://www.stuff.co.nz/opinion/120783305/sacrificing-wealth-creation-in-favour-of-health-salvation-provides-lessons>.

²² <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/health/coronavirus/120589233/good-public-health-is-good-economics>. (30 March 2020).

²³ <https://www.stuff.co.nz/opinion/120819320/coronavirus-five-reasons-why-we-must-fight-and-how-it-will-make-new-zealand-better?>

Hope, faith and love, abide within and among us at this time and always. Surrounded by ubiquitous care bears, the socially distanced lock-down is enabling Kiwis to imaginatively reclaim a new sense of neighbourliness, family life and community. The television news reminds us every night of positive responses to the Prime Minister's exhortation to be kind to one another. Good Lord, deliver us through this pass-over of bubbledom, health risk, financial and employment pain and sacrifice towards the light of a better, different and more equal society. May your kingdom come more nearly on earth as it is in heaven.