

# Where Is Jesus When It Is Corona?

Priya Jijo



## INTRODUCTION

Delhi was bloodstained while fighting its battle against communal hatred when the world woke up to this nightmare and realized Corona virus is here and is here to stay for a while. Suddenly everything seems new, unbelievable and overwhelming. Who would have known visiting your loved ones would no more be an act of love and not hugging and kissing will become expressions of love? When nature reclaimed the earth, humans are to be locked down realizing many things that we considered inevitable in life are trivial. With Corona, the narrative of our race has taken a detour, one we never thought we would take. It now takes a conscious effort to transfer our minds to this new normal. Of the many things that this virus has reminded us, the greatest reminder is that- we are one and the same species. The 'Chinese Virus' as a world leader called it, is not Chinese after all. This virus does not consider the divergences that we claim we have; be it race, caste, class, colour or religion. The virus is here to tell us that we human beings share the strongest bond, the bond of being the same species. Ironic as it sounds Corona looks at human beings as God does, as one. Examples of collective failures around us and the sad truth of world leaders failing to give genuine answers have made us realize that we will win this battle only if we fight it as one single race. This crisis has also distilled what we value and what we do not. Consequently, while being resilient we make sure we give our children and the elderly the best of our existence, to ensure that they are the safest and most comfortable of all. So here we are pulling up our socks, withdrawn into the comforts of our homes with plenty to eat and drink (most of us, if not all of us), saving the world from our couches, making sure the virus doesn't reach one more human being. Yet many of us are also feeling that surge to help those in need and are serving the disadvantaged who cannot afford to stay at home.

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## THE PANDEMIC UNDER THE POVERTY LINE

For the millions of Indians living under the poverty line, there is no life without the streets. For those who live hand-to-mouth, life in all its guises is in the public space and the lockdown has brought a sudden scarcity of income. This outbreak has brought to the forefront a tension between the need to protect health and the need to eat food for these millions. As a consequence, with no income from the public space and with the only hope to find at least the feeling of safety of their own homes and family members around in this time of crisis, thousands of migrant workers began the walks to their own villages in absence of any means of transport. While many died falling down out of sheer exhaustion and dehydration on the streets after walking or cycling several hundred kilometers, while others became victims of road accidents and some were mowed down on the railway tracks. These migrations are clear portrayals of failure of our system in planning to ensure their wellbeing. The plight of millions of homeless in India poses even a bigger risk. While staying safe and infection-free for the homeless is a Herculean challenge, managing to feed themselves even once a day is another battle altogether. Among these homeless are the most vulnerable in our society, the children we call Street Children, sometimes without even the slightest prick in our consciences. And while we were still in lockdown there went by a day which some of us probably were not aware of, the International Street children's Day (12<sup>th</sup> April).

## THE PANDEMIC ON THE STREETS

India has the largest child population in the world. According to the founder CEO of Save the Children-India, Thomas Chandy, there were 2 million children living on streets in India in 2018, many without an identity and a name to call their own. We must note at this point that studies on the implications of the lockdown suggest that it has very adversely affected nearly 40 million poor children. The worst affected

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among them are the children who work as rag pickers, street vendors or those who sell knick-knacks at the traffic lights of cities. These are the children whom the government of India and UNICEF term 'Working Children' or 'Street Children'. These children who live under flyovers, on the streets or in narrow lanes and bylanes are the most susceptible ones. Poverty, urbanization, familial issues, peer pressure and other causes that contribute to the phenomenon of Street Children generate for them a lack of social identity, absence of adult supervision and scarcity of protection. Studies have revealed that many of these children sleep empty stomach and even if they manage to get a meal, they do not have nutritious diets. The Institute of Human Development has identified that these children suffer malnutrition and other disorders of diet, skin diseases, respiratory tract diseases, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV, Hepatitis, parasitic infections, Cholera, Tuberculosis,

Leprosy, etc. They are also susceptible to many injuries because of their work load and work environment. Due to the lack of access to the health care system and vaccinations these children suffer many preventable viral infections. These pre-existing conditions add to their defenselessness to the Corona virus infection and their morbidity rates would be higher than that of the general population, if exposed to it. Since, with the lockdown most of their sources of livelihood have been suspended, many of them are dependent on the government and NGOs for their survival now. But as these children don't have any identification cards and as they prefer to stay away from government functionaries, many government services cannot reach them. This makes them even more vulnerable.

News reports suggest that there has been a sudden increase in the number of calls to the child helpline number with tens of thousands of these children asking for help. Helpline officials suggest that a large number of children may lack opportunities to report their distress as they may not have access to any mode of communication, or friends or other caring adults. Reports also indicate that with the lockdown, child laborers are under bondage with minimum or no provisions for their existence while bearing the brunt of the lockdown much worse than their employer. There need to be extensive raids by the government to rescue these children, but in the run to save the falling economy, do their lives count? Will the government use this opportunity to free them from the bondages? These seem to remain as rhetorical questions. Their employers are not going to release them on their own. Cheap labor is going to be in demand once the lockdown is lifted and child laborers are the easiest to exploit.

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## THE PANDEMIC BEYOND CHARITY

It has been heartening to see how religious movements including the church at large along with the government and NGOs have been dynamically involved in generous works and are stepping up to lend

a hand to the needy in this time. Ironically, some of us while we feed these children are unintentionally divulging them to the dangers of the streets. The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) reiterated its appeal to organizations and volunteers to stop feeding or distributing food to children on the streets. The shelter homes do not appeal to most of these children as many of these children run away from the detentions of their homes and have chosen to stay away from any such confinements. Yet, these confinements are better than the streets for these children now, although these homes are densely packed and are away from the ideal of social distancing. Hence, in contradiction to what a child should get in such a time as this, these children cannot stay at home nor can they socially distance from others. The NCPCR state that they should not be out in the streets right now, they should be in shelters and if organizations are actually concerned for the welfare of these children, they should report their presence on the streets to the authorities. Therefore, it is depressing to observe that some of our Christian works of charity right now, particularly when we provide food and supplies for these children are only filling the Christian heart's void for doing charity.

### THE PANDEMIC FOR JESUS

So, what can we do for these children in this pandemic? Well, right now, since the virus is already here, we can do only a few things, yet these children will remain the most vulnerable and susceptible to the virus. Thus, a much accurate question is, what could we have done? What could have avoided such a sad plight

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of theirs as this? Well, this is a question we as a community need to ask ourselves. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Cost of Discipleship* elucidates that the responsibility of the church as a community is to stand against injustice, involving in the entire world in 'whatever ways it can'. The call of the church is to be in the world to show Christ likeness to the world in the way He fought against the injustices in the society. What does this Christ likeness mean? Jesus said "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me ... Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:35-36, 40, NIV). There are many such instances in the Bible where He has identified Himself with the poor, hungry, homeless and naked. In these children He suffers, in these children He becomes the most abused and the most vulnerable. This is the oneness that Jesus calls humanity to; this is the oneness Corona virus is reminding us of. The oneness that must invoke a simple question in our hearts, what would we have done if these children were 'our own'? What if the ones we are shielding the most from

the virus were in these children's places today? Would they still have been on the streets, begging for life? Or would we have done 'whatever we can' to restore them? While not undermining or denying the enormous endeavors that we along with the governments have taken to educate, rehabilitate and reinstate these children back to a whole life, the heartbreaking fact that our children live on the streets yells at us "we have not done enough as a community nor as a body of Christ." Children, the most vulnerable and the most in need of care and nurture sleep on the streets, sleep in the dark rooms of their bondages with the minimum to sustain life. No, we have not done enough. This is the cruelest contradiction of our times, when the children of the opulent are the most secured and the least prone to this virus and the street children are the most abused and the most vulnerable to it. This dichotomy screams out the very truth "we

could have as a community, as the church, done better in the prevention of this phenomenon and in the restoration of these children.” Therefore, the actual pandemic is not just Covid-19, but includes all the consequences of what we as a community failed to do for these children. Zechariah 8:5 (NIV) says “And the streets of city will be filled with boys and girls playing there.” When the Lord spoke this verse through His prophet, he summarized the vision he had for a restored Jerusalem. A restored city for Him is a city in whose streets the children are safe and happy. The streets of our nation are just the opposite of what the Lord has envisioned for children. So where is Jesus, when it is Corona? Well, Jesus sure is not staying at home, lying on a couch. The Jesus of the Bible is on the streets.

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### CONCLUSION-THE PANDEMIC FOR A NOVEL NARRATIVE

Any glance at history reveals that crises and disasters have continually set the stage for change. This one too is one such stage where we see the world come together without differences. May this phase not be a comma but a full stop to the history of divides we have created. When Corona virus leaves us giving a new narrative to our lives, may we continue to remember this one fundamental reality to which the virus woke us up - ‘we are one race, one species and all our children deserve the same nurturing and safety.’ May we do all that it takes to see an India without Street Children but with children playing on her streets.

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*The “Christian Mind Series” (CMS) is the TRACI venture to promote Christian thinking and understanding. Our Christian vocation today calls for a critical dialogue between the Word and the world. Only then can we be a people of understanding.*

*In our media-dominated age, the world is too much with us. We derive most, if not all, of our insights from such sources. We are thus totally immersed in the surrounding or emerging culture and are conditioned by it. There is a great need hence, to develop a Christian counterculture. The CMS aims just at this timely task, no matter how dispersed this fellowship may be.*

