

1. Introduction – Crisis Everywhere

Crisis is an overused word. On many occasions journalists in need of a good sounding word for a really bad situation or problem will think for a moment and then say “I know we’ll call it a crisis”.

Open any newspaper and you will find countless examples. Over this past week in the UK we have had: Health Service Crisis, BBC crisis and my personal favourite, X-Factor crisis. More generally we often hear people talk about a mid-life crisis, a personal crisis, a marital crisis and so on.

(Introduction: A Crisis of Definitions)

So it is worth taking a moment just to clarify what we are talking about. The Greek word “*krisis*” meant “decision”, “judgment” or “choice” and the term came into English usage through medical Latin as the decisive moment in the process of a disease. The crisis is the turning point when an important change takes place leading to either recovery or death.

Only later did crisis started to be used more generally, in literature as the decisive moment in the development of the plot (though clearly this happened after Shakespeare since he never used the word), in society when there was an unstable state of affairs when decisive change was impending especially if there was the threat of an undesirable outcome, and more generally for any situation which had reached a decisive or critical moment.

So we might define crisis more generally as “a crucial or decisive moment in the course of events that may affect an individual, a group, a community or a whole society”. Crises almost always come unexpectedly, generating instability, a sense of threat, individual or social trauma, highlighting a need for change.

2. Europe in Crisis Today: One or Many?

Over the last five years the word “crisis” has been applied more than anything else to the economic situation in Europe. But in fact Europe faces crises on many different levels. We have, what one author has called, a “polycrisis”. I want to suggest to you that we can identify five discrete crises in Europe today.

Yes there is an economic crisis, but there is also a political crisis, a social crisis, an environmental crisis and a religious crisis.

Over the next couple of days we are going to look in detail at each of these crises but with what purpose? Why spend time thinking about this? Surely we would be better just getting out there and preaching the gospel?

Well it's my conviction that broad and multi-dimensional understanding of the current crisis can help us to identify the "times and the seasons" in which the church is currently operating. As Ecclesiastes 3 reminds us, the "time under heaven" in which we are living does impact the way we should live as God's children. Understanding the crisis in Europe is vital to the way Evangelical Churches across Europe live and do mission, and to plan how to live and do mission tomorrow.

3. Europe in Crisis: A history

But before we do that I think it is crucial to contextualize our present crisis in terms of Europe's history. And when I do that I find myself asking myself the question: has there ever been a time when Europe has not had to deal with a crisis in at least one of these five dimensions? Certainly this selection of history books stretching from the middle ages right through to the Second World War suggest that crisis been an almost constant feature of Europe's history.

So before we look at our current crisis we are going to take a moment to look back and apply this multi-dimensional analysis to the history of Europe. And as we do so be on the look out for the way in which a crisis in one of these dimensions provokes a crisis in another.

In the 14th and 15th Century Europe was suffering from overpopulation (social) due to the inability of feudal subsistence farming to provide enough food for the population. With the onset of the "little ice age" productivity dropped and food shortages became chronic, famines were very common – over this period there were 95 years of famine in Britain, 75 in France. Added to this was the impact of the Black Death which further reduced productivity. Meanwhile conflict between the various nations of Europe was endemic, and many of the stabilizing structures of the medieval era were starting to fracture, particularly

the Holy Roman Empire. And the medieval Western church was mired in a moral crisis: the contrast between the fabulous wealth of the church and the abject poverty and misery of most of Europe's people, the church seemed more concerned with ensuring its temporal power than bringing spiritual comfort to a continent in crisis.

Moving forward to the 16th C and the time of the Reformation. The crisis in the church comes to a head with Luther's 95 theses. Over the coming decades wars of religion break out across Central and Western Europe. And also in the East, for at the end of the previous century Islam had been pushed out of the Iberian peninsula but before long it returns in the east pushing across the Balkans and laying siege to Vienna. New developments in farming see the decline of feudal method and its replacement by capitalist methods and in the meantime imports of gold and silver from the New World cause an economic crisis, cutting effective wages in half and causing popular unrest. Technological advances, in particular the printing press, fuel both the political and religious conflicts, and the dissemination of ideas which would ultimately lead to the Enlightenment.

The 17th and 18th Century are a period which some historians consider to be worth of the title "The General Crisis". There was a widespread breakdown in society across Europe caused by a complex series of demographic, religious, economic and political problems. Thirty Years War; English Civil War; Fronde; Dutch Revolt; Time of Troubles in Tsarist Russia; Great Northern War in Scandanavia; continued conflict with the Turks across the Balkans; almost every European country was at war with itself or with its neighbours. Poor harvests due to the worsening "little ice age" and widespread conflict caused further demographic decline. Meanwhile, silver imports from the New World continued to stoke price inflation and popular revolts as the tension between "court and country" built inexorably. And of course Europe was still coming to terms with the impact of the Reformation, as countries formally aligned themselves as Protestant and Catholic as well as Orthodox. So as Europe's elites celebrated the first fruits of the Enlightenment, this period of general crisis concluded with the first popular political crisis that brought about a change of regime in the French Revolution.

The crisis of the 19th Century came about as a fruit of the scientific discoveries that flowed from the Enlightenment. The use of machines in industry produced an explosion in productivity but not without a price. The industrial revolution impoverished the guilds and artisans and generated a new class of wealthy techocrats. Rapid urbanization caused enormous social upheaval as a new class of urban poor emerged, along with the first cases of environmental crisis created by man as industrial processes generated pollution and deadly smogs. Industrialization also fuelled the tools of war as the Napoleonic Wars extended across Europe. And in respect of religion, as Europeans drank deeply from the humanist well, the religious worldview came to be seen as holding men and women back from enlightenment and progress.

4. The Church in Crisis: So what's new?

I hardly need to tell you that the first half of the 20th Century in Europe saw more of the same, crises in each and every one of these dimensions. Now perhaps I have laboured the point rather, but the thing is, we have become so accustomed to the peace and prosperity of the last sixty years since the end of the second world war, that we think that that is Europe's normal setting. I am 47 years old but I have never had to pick up a weapon to defend my family. That seems normal to me, but it is not. We look back on the Schuman Declaration and perhaps think that peace in Europe was in some sense inevitable. But the last sixty years are an extraordinary historical anomaly.

For most of Europe's history crisis has been the normal context for the church's life and mission. And now we come to my key point. So if history sends you to sleep but you are passionate about the gospel now is the time to wake up. Despite crisis after crisis the churches of Europe have survived and in many cases thrived during those times. If we have to adapt to this new context of crisis in Europe we can do so in the confidence that previous generations of European believers have done so.

But it is vital that we warn the churches of Europe of the two dangers that beset us in times of crisis, the dangers of nostalgia or fear.

Nostalgia – is wishing we could go back to a mythical past when the churches were full and Europe enjoyed social and economic and political shalom. It is a

myth. It is not only that we can't go back but if we did we would find not no crisis but merely a different crisis context.

But neither should we give in to fear. The proponents of the secularization thesis confidently predict the disappearance of the church in this generation. But we have nothing to fear. The church has faced attacks from without and within, heresy and moral decay, faced the twin dangers of poverty and wealth, and still it is here. We can't go back and we should not have any fear about going forward. In fact, as Philip Jenkins has put it:

"Viewed over the centuries, perhaps the best indicator that Christianity is about to expand or revive is a widespread conviction that the religion is doomed or in its last days... nothing drives activists and reformers more powerfully than the sense that their faith is about to perish in their homelands and that they urgently need to make up these losses farther afield, whether overseas or among the previously neglected lost sheep at home."

Whilst as I said at the beginning we must seek to discern "the signs and the times" our controlling narrative is not this current crisis. Our controlling narrative is the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ who is the Lord over every crisis, and over his church he declared "and the gates of hell will not prevail against it".

Epilogue: Christ the Lord over every crisis - Colossians 1:15-20

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

So this afternoon we will look at current economic and political crisis in detail but I wanted us to have this historical and theological framework to begin with. So to finish, a question to ponder now in groups:

Want you to think of a time in the history of your country when there was a crisis but then to think also of how the church responded faithfully to its calling in the midst of that crisis. It could be a time of polycrisis or crisis in a particular dimension of life. And to share those stories together.