

For Broadcast: 5th April 2020

FACING THE UNEXPECTED

Conversation with Noel Due, Celia Fielke and Richard Fox

Celia: Yesterday, I had my day off, and I wanted to get organised for the week ahead. I went to the shops, and I'd heard all about the craziness going on in shops, but when I actually physically was in there trying to just do my normal week-to-week shopping, I was incredulous at the fact that there were empty shelves. All I wanted to do was cook this recipe I'd googled but I couldn't get chicken! I'd heard about toilet paper, I'd heard about sanitizers. But not chicken. What am I going to have for tea tonight. There wasn't any chicken. No frozen vegetables. It was mental. And people were looking at each other and going, "What is going on?"

Richard: Things are just crazy, aren't they? They're really crazy.

Noel: I was at my local GP office, and by 10am they had received 800 phone calls yesterday morning.

Richard: Wow.

Noel: By 10:am!

Celia: No wonder everything is so ... like people are at capacity. 800 phone calls!

Richard: A friend of mine travelled to Italy, going away for three months before the virus broke out. While she was there, the virus broke out, and she had some symptoms so she thought, "Oh, I'll self-isolate myself." She called the authorities to see if she could get a test. They said, "No, you're not old enough." And yet she's retired! So it kind of made her feel young again. So she just had to ride it out. And then she said, when she finally got to go out, all the shops were shut! Except the supermarkets but they had to line up and wait to go into the supermarket. They had to wait for someone to come out before the next person could go in. She said it felt like wartime. If this was war, this is probably what it could have felt like.

Celia: There were so many people in the shops, and this was in the middle of the day. Normally there's not that many people. And I'm thinking, "Where are they all coming from in the middle of the day to actually be in the shops?"

Noel: What was your response to that?

Celia: I could not believe it. I just ... I was almost in shock that this is how people are reacting. How can these people, in a community that I know, that I live in, it's a relatively small community, how can people be acting like this? It just didn't make sense to me.

Noel: It is a wartime response, isn't it?

Richard: Yeah. And what does this say about ourselves? These kinds of times?

Noel: It is remarkable that so many of our national and international leaders are using war language and talking about declaring war, fighting a war, forming a war cabinet. So those feelings that you described and the impression that your friend had over in Europe-

Richard: Yeah, it's very dramatic.

Noel: They're very dramatic things. And that idea of this being a warfare plays into the deepest loss of control, personally and as a society, that we could imagine.

Celia: And it is that feeling that you've got no control over it and I think it's that not knowing what's going to happen tomorrow, what's going to happen next week, what's it going to look like in two weeks time? It's that feeling of the unknown.

Richard: Well, I know I love going to the footy and the cricket. And I love travel. And now, not having any of that, I'm thinking, "What does this mean? Where do we go?" Where's the joy that you get out of life. What does that mean?

Celia: What have we got to look forward to? And people are feeling that, aren't they?

Noel: They are. But I suppose if you think about it, what we take pride in as our power of control is actually very limited. We don't have as much control as we really think we do over events and circumstances.

Richard: And taking things for granted that we think we have control on. Like we're just going about our lives and all of a sudden having them ripped away makes us really sit up and take notice. And we get fearful. And then when you start talking about people dying as a result of this illness, like people over 65 and people who are vulnerable with illnesses, it makes it really real.

Celia: I like that analogy of the war that you were alluding to earlier. It has that echo of it, doesn't it? I suppose, lack of rations and things like that. That's what I'm feeling like. If I reflect back to the supermarket, it feels like this is a world that I haven't seen. I haven't been through war and it's not something we're used to.

Richard: So where do we find hope in this kind of a situation that we find ourselves in?

Noel: Well, it is asking ourselves big questions, isn't it? It's asking questions of us personally and as a society.

Celia: Yeah, I'm not liking, necessarily, all the things that I'm seeing in society, the way we're reacting.

Noel: Well, I think if you read the stories of people who've come through warfare ... One of my close friends, many years ago, spent three and a half years in Changi prisoner of war camp during World War II. And the same emotions and feelings emerged then. The irrationality. We think that we're a very rational society, but in fact we are very deeply insecure, fear driven, with a bit of a layer of rationality over the top. But the deepest fears suddenly come forward. The selfishness, the self-preservation at all costs, the elbowing people out of the way to get the piece of toilet paper or whatever it is. At the same time we will see, and have seen, heroic stories come through. Many of

our medical staff in the days to come, or presently, may suffer as a result of their service. So it will highlight both the best and the worst in us.

But there is another side to this, and that is that if you were to read any of the biblical accounts of God's dealings with his people, it's not just that he teaches us to trust Him. He actually holds a mirror up to us through the circumstances of life, through the issues that we have to face where we're not in control and can't regain control. And in holding that mirror up to us, He says to us individually or as a whole society, "What have you valued most? Where have you put your trust? What do you think is the most important thing for you as a society?" And I think what this is doing, this current crisis, is saying to us that we probably have become a quite self-centred, individualised, every-person-for-themselves type society.

Celia: I was just thinking, "What would that mirror actually say? What is important to me?" And I think probably, as you were saying before, oh that holiday that I was saving for or looking forward to or that-

Richard: Going to the footy.

Celia: They were the things and you think, "Yeah, that's great." And there's nothing wrong with that. But probably, in the bigger picture, this is making us look at the bigger picture stuff, isn't it?

Noel: The friend I mentioned before, who was in the prisoner of war camp, tells a story about people in the camp collecting tin cans. Because if you had a tin can or two tin cans you could put stuff in them.

Richard: So they were empty tin cans?

Noel: Empty tin cans. Yeah. And so this strange system that the more tin cans you had, the richer you felt.

Celia: Even though you didn't have anything to put in them?

Noel: You didn't have anything to put in them. But if you could collect tin cans, it sort of gave this false impression that you were one step further ahead of the game than the people who only had one tin can.

Celia: Because there's hope for what you can put in them.

Noel: Exactly the case. But we put our hope in all sorts of things. Empty tin cans is just the extreme. But I think this crisis is revealing to us as a nation that we've put our hope in all sorts of stuff, which is essentially self-centred rather than God-centred.

Richard: Maybe there's opportunities to re-frame our world rather than live with the fear, the selfishness, and the hoarding, but actually to get on the phone and call someone who is in self-isolation. Maybe ring them up and say, "How are you going?" Reconnect with people that are close to you that, in a way God's bringing past your path. Someone comes up on your conscience, give them a call. Maybe there's a positive way we can use social media rather than tearing people down, but there's a way that we can actually....

Celia: To actually use it for what it's made for in connecting people.

Richard: Yeah, bring peace and hope and just say that we're there. Just like God is here for us. Enact that with each other, to love one another.

Noel: Crises like this do actually strip us back to the very bare essentials of what's the most important. There's a well-known story of a great German preacher during World War II. His name was Helmut Thielicke and the cathedral in which he preached had been bombed. When he came to preach the next Sunday he was in this bombed-out shell of a place with his congregation. And in that week of bombing, 50 people had been killed in the cellar of the church. But he met, during the week, one of the women whose husband had been killed in the bombing. And she said to him, "I just want to thank you that you've prepared us to face eternity." You know that, this isn't the end, we're not finished yet. That even though our world as we've known has collapsed, this isn't the end of all things. God is still with us even as we pass through death into life. So I think it does, as you're saying, it does give us an opportunity to rethink, recalibrate, realign ourselves, re-evaluate what's important.

Celia: What if you don't have that? I can't imagine what it would be like in this sort of a situation if I didn't actually have that bigger sense of what's underneath it all. It's really not just me. That there is something in control. Because of my faith, I can be frightened of what's happening and I can be anxious, but I'm actually not afraid.

Noel: I guess the bottom line is that God doesn't condemn us for our anxiety. He knows us and He knows as well. But it is an opportunity to ask how do we want to try and put that anxiety to rest? Are we going to turn back in upon ourselves and try and find all of the answers within ourselves? And then we end up scrabbling in the supermarket lane over toilet paper! Or is it a call for us? God's saying, "No, look outside of yourselves. Turn yourselves over to me. Trust me." Many generations have had to come through this before, even worse than we have, and He's brought them through. He'll bring us through as well. I'm sure.

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