The pandemic in Leicester has been especially tough. Even though there have been momentary periods of some respite, we have essentially been in one sort of lockdown or other since last March. Cathedral Gardens immediately outside the Deanery usually is only ever empty on Christmas Day but the view from my study window continues to remain empty. My brain still really can’t compute that.

It has been difficult personally and the challenges of leadership are significant. I have to try new vocabulary to express what hope might mean in meaningful ways without sounding shallow.

However, the concerns which occupy me in the middle of the night have now changed from furlough and risk assessments and redundancy to grief. Most people now know others who have had Covid or long Covid and know people who have died. By the time we mark the one year anniversary of lock down, we foresee something like 2000 people will have died in our city and county. Our plans to light a candle for every lost life at an online Memorial of Lament at 7.00pm on March 23rd (free to view via Leicester Cathedral YouTube channel) will bring a fiery awareness of the scale of grief.

We are very aware of the impact of Covid19 on our mental health. Beyond that there is a corporate grief from living a suppressed life where crucial aspects of social relating never mind pleasurable activity like going to see a film or sharing a coffee with a friend are pushed down. Life has been suppressed and there is grief.

The uplift which we have felt in the city in recent years with the Richard III story, the Leicester Football Club story, and a cohesive modern multi-cultural community seems more under threat. We see growing inequalities, more people sleeping in the door ways and more signs of disintegration. I worry what will happen when furlough ends. We’ve seen systemic injustice revealed in low paid factory work; in examples of modern slavery and in an economy which now needs to reinvent itself following Brexit. It is not going to be easy and needs longer term vision and leadership than politicians can provide.

Of course there will be stories of survival and hopeful entrepreneurialism. Local people here have deep reserves not least because faith is still such a feature of our communities. For example, we have a major development project (Leicester Cathedral Revealed) hopefully starting later in 2021. We will build a new centre to welcome visitors and pilgrims and to ensure future sustainability. This will provide some new roles and open up opportunities for the cathedral to play its role as ‘a beating heart for city and county’. It’s part of our commitment to the future.

However, I remain cautious about rushing to hope even if the national conversation is beginning to open up. There is a legacy of personal and community grief. Modern theories of grief tend to emphasise the continuing nature of the bond between those who live on and the ones who are seen no longer. Like trauma we hold these things in our memory. As such grief is like a continual process of learning to live on in relationship with what is lost.

Presently, I’m not at all sure we can even adequately describe what we have lost. So much of it is hidden. So much is yet to happen from job losses to addressing the backlog in the NHS to paying back the debt. I think of how long it took the country to recover following the wars and that is as near an analogy as might be pertinent.

For a community like Leicester, we need to work out how to lament and grieve as part of the process of rebuilding hope. Hiding away our pain will in the end be destructive. The reinvention of new kinds of conversation and partnership are probably going to be needed. Leaders will need to learn to be comfortable with their own grief if they are to help their communities voice and live with our losses, memorialise this past year, and to walk together to integrate the shadows as part of the future.

There will be much pressure from multiple places to shift into reconstruction and new futures but Covid 19 has a very long tail of impact; burying it will be both impossible and deeply unwise.

The Very Revd David Monteith

Dean of Leicester