

A homily on prayer, hope and compassion at this time

This week the decision has been made to suspend public Masses until things improve. And there is a real and deep sadness and sense of grief in this. But Mass will continue to be offered day in and day out for the church and for the world, as has for centuries. And the faithful will continue to unite themselves spiritually to this great saving work of Christ, as they always have when they have not been able to get to Mass. This fast from access to the Mass places us in the company of the Catholics of penal times in this country, the peoples of remote missionary lands and those who cannot approach the sacraments because of complex family situations. But it is the start and not the end of our work of prayer.

Much has been said, and rightly, about the practical measure that we should take to help lessen the impact of the Coronavirus, but I would like here to focus on three of the spiritual things which might help us understand what God is calling us to do in this present time. There is more that can be said, including on practical support for our neighbours but that I will leave for another time.

The first is that, throughout human history, men and women have prayed to God in their need. And if there are fewer now who do so it only highlights our particular calling from God to share in Jesus's work of praying for the world. The Scriptures give us many fine examples of such prayer:

Among the most beautiful is the prayer of Queen Esther for people exiled in Persia and condemned to death. We hear it each year in the early part of Lent. Having set aside her royal robes and humbles herself she pleads to the Lord, concluding "save us by your hand and come to my help, for I am alone and have no one but you O Lord."

The Psalms are full of this same heartfelt and spirit filled prayer: "In you O Lord I take refuge, let me never be put to shame; "The Lord is my light and my help, whom shall I fear"; "Out of the depths I cry to you O Lord"; "The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want". Indeed, most of the psalms prayed every night on behalf of the church and the world are the voice of those in distress.

Christian prayer has often sought the added help of the saints – how many have made pilgrimage for the healing of the sick, or approached the statues in our churches or made use of holy pictures stored up in their prayer books? How many rosaries prayed at the bedside of the sick and dying, or in places far away from loved ones? If you travel around Europe you will often see statues of St Roch the 14th century pilgrim saint and patron of those afflicted by the plague. A reminder of how the saints have helped heal and protect God's people in times past, even if for many tourists such statues are now no more than historical artefacts, they are for us powerful reminders of our communion with the saints.

The second is that this prayer is not in vain. It is a way of cooperating in the care that God wishes to show us. God has made promises and he is faithful.

When Bishop Richard met with our confirmation candidates a couple of weeks ago he led them through a prayerful reading of the Calming of the Storm. St Mark tells us of

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how the disciples had set out with Jesus across the Sea of Galilee when a storm blew up. We find Jesus seemingly asleep in a storm while the disciples panic. When he awakes, he calms the sea and wonders at their lack of faith.

He tells them that those who ask always receive, those who knock always have the door opened to them. He tells them about how, just as no parent would give their children a snake when they asked for a fish nor a stone when they asked for bread, so the Father will not fail to give us what we need. He tells them parables about the need to pray continuously and never lose heart. And when he rises from the dead his first word to his disciples are “peace be with you” and “do not be afraid”. Words he has to repeat on more than one occasion.

St Paul tells us, with some conviction, that nothing can come between us and the love of God. And I could go on.

God heals the sick, sometimes by miracles and often through the gifts of wisdom and understanding given to those who care for the them. And he does so in response to our prayer.

The third is that in this we are experiencing, in an unwished-for and unwanted manner, a share in the in the compassion of our God for his children. The letter to the Philippians tells us about how Jesus leaves his Father’s side to embrace the fullness of the human condition. It is a theme I remember well as one of the real gifts of the Year of Mercy: of God-with-us, and most especially alongside those in most need. The coming weeks and months may well be difficult for many, even without life-threatening sickness. But there are many in our world – refugees, those living in war zones, blighted by floods or drought, or in places too poor to know the most basic healthcare and medicine – for whom this is their existence day by day and year by year. It is right that we pray that this cup may pass us by, but if it comes our way, we might recognise that it places us closer to the poorest and in that place where Jesus himself is always to be found.

We are not alone. God is with us. And he will protect us and bring us safely home.

It is appropriate, I think to close with the words of the *Memorare*, one of prayers to Mary, the mother of God and comforter of the afflicted that became popular in England and France in the nineteenth century:

*Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known
that anyone who fled to your protection, implored your help,
or sought your intercession was left unaided.
Inspired with this confidence, I fly to you, O Virgin of virgins, my Mother.
To you I come, before you I stand, sinful and sorrowful.
O Mother of the Word Incarnate, despise not my petitions,
but in your mercy, hear and answer me.*

Our Lady of Lourdes, pray for us.

St Joseph, pray for us.

Fr Jonathan How

Solemnity of St Joseph, 19th March 2020,