

## **Sunday Reflection of the Readings of the 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

As I write for you today some 647,358 people around the world have died so far from the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic. There is currently over 16 million confirmed cases in 213 countries. I don't know about you but I find it difficult to get my head around such numbers and such an unfolding tragedy. Each life lost is a person like you and I, a person with a history, a person with hopes and dreams, a person with those that loved them and who are now left to mourn their passing.

Just one convent in Michigan, USA , home to the Felician Sisters, has lost thirteen of its Sisters to COVID-19. The sisters were aged between sixty nine and ninety nine and had dedicated their lives to serving different areas of important social need. Such is the isolating nature of this virus that social distancing measures prevented most sisters from even being able to attend funerals of their peers, neither were they permitted to gather as they would normally do in groups for prayer. One member of the community is reported as saying; *"The normal faith we share with sisters as they are dying, the prayers we share with sisters as they are dying: ....We missed all that! It kind of shattered our faith life a little bit,"* she said. Closer to home we have watched the daily reports of hundreds of people in Victoria acquiring this virus and we have been warned that the numbers of deaths will inevitably increase, although thankfully there are signs that the latest lock down is having a positive impact.

There is really no way to sugar-coat the enormity of the challenge that this pandemic presents to the world. When we feel anxious, which I think many people do right now,( and I think it would be unusual to not feel a little anxious), the seeming antidote to anxiety is, more often than not, the seeking of greater control. I am no expert in sociology or human behaviour, but I can't help wondering whether this need for control over something, that by its nature is very difficult to control, leads to some of the activity such as the hoarding of things deemed important to our lives at this present time, for example, like the interest in toilet paper, hand sanitiser, food basics and lately face masks. I like to think that these behaviours are not that of bad people or perhaps even selfish people, just the social and psychological response of anxious and even scared people.

Pandemics, viruses and plagues and great human disasters have been a constant companions to humankind down through the ages, and the one thing that history teaches us is that as social beings, living through times that are uncertain, do what they do best, and that is to look at what other people are doing for cues and directions about what they should do in the circumstances they find themselves. While that is entirely a natural response to confusion and lack of clarity it can also lead to irrational and unhelpful behaviours.

I put it to you today that we Christians might prefer to ask the tried and tested question 'what would Jesus do' and respond as best we can to those directions. My feeling and sense is that Jesus's focus would always be directed towards reinforcing the primacy of connection to others and greater responsibility to the

community and the greater good, whilst at the same time trying not to diminish the intrinsic dignity of the individual.

All through history Christians have had to decide how to live with these imperatives. They lived through times when knowledge of the causation of their misfortune was very limited, for most of history all they knew was that God allowed (or sends) plagues and pestilence for a reason, and that reason was usually punishment for something they or someone else had done. You didn't argue with God, so cause was largely subsumed by the importance of an adequate Christian response to a perceived angry deity, and this response was normally penitence. There have however been notable exceptions.

One was in England in 1665, bubonic plague breaks out, not a virus but still a deadly time that would eventually kill one third of the world's population. In the small village of *Eyam*, 259 km north west of London, there was a cloth merchant who orders samples from London. The cloth samples bring fleas, fleas bring plague and people start to die. And then the people in that village do something which earns them a place in the annals of the Christian history. Two of the village's pastors, William Mompeson and Thomas Stanley, of opposing Christian faith traditions, who normally disagreed on most things, came together, and agreed that the plague was so dangerous that they would ask the people of the whole village to self-isolate, to cut themselves off from the rest of the world, even at the cost of their own lives, and this is what they did, the people of that village understood a response that put the broader communal responsibility and love of their fellow, albeit largely anonymous, women and men first, and as a result most people in that village lost their lives. Today when we hear and live the experience of

self-isolation and social distancing, our thoughts can take consolation from the action and response of a small Christian community that put others first and they did this with a strong sense of a greater power at work in their lives, despite great suffering and loss.

It seems to me that the people of *Eyam* understood about the story of the loaves and fishes. The scripture passage tells us that the people ate but they didn't understand. They didn't understand the power of God. A power so unlike 'worldly power', not an angry power, not a dominating or self-seeking power, but rather a power that is forever seeking the higher good, despite the experiencing of suffering and misfortune, this was the struggle played out in the lives of the people of *Eyam*, and despite our greater knowledge and supposed sophistication this is the same struggle you and I face today.

Such a small offering only five barley loaves and two fish, what good was that, so little food ...so many people, the sense of inadequacy is palpable. But then Jesus asks them to bring the loaves and fish to him. He blesses what little they have and commands his disciples to distribute it. The point of the story is precisely the hopelessness of the situation. In essence, the resources of the Gospel seemed hopeless by the worldly standards, yet there was still no need to go off and buy more resources, in fact we hear that Jesus is saddened by such a response. Christians understand that no matter their situation in life, their anxieties, their fears, their sense of inadequacy, they are in the presence of that which is unlimited and infinite, Jesus the Christ, Triune God, Second Person of The Trinity, All powerful, Full of abundance, our Highest Good. Isn't this precisely what we should behold in Jesus? Who are we,

followers of Jesus in 2020? The answer to this question is still being written, for now we know more about the response of Christians of an obscure village in medieval England than we do about how future historians will record how we too responded to the virus scourge that began in 2020.

Today as always we are called to work with the Power of God present in our lives. How is this to manifest itself? In ancient times Christians personally and heroically went out to assist patients and sufferers. Today we know that this is the worst thing to do in cases demanding quarantine or isolation, in fact we know that this behaviour is the most effective way of spreading the virus and killing greater numbers. It must remain the preserve of health specialists and we applaud their heroic efforts and assist in ways we can. I don't pretend to have all the answers to our times but I always begin by turning to scriptural resources and looking for different ways of expressing trust in the hope of the Power of God. This power can be expressed in the sacrifice of our own freedom of movement and behaviour, for the sake of the highest good. Respecting the privacy of the individual, the power of God can be communicated with people who might be alone or isolated. We can look at those we know around us and find out about people who are in need and try to get them the resources or comfort they need while following absolutely all of the protections that are necessary for these times. It seems to me that Christians can be perfectly proactive in finding out about situations like that. How would we want our Christian story to be written, how will we show and share the love of Jesus in the midst of this crisis?

Historically one of the most influential texts that Christians have referred to during times when they perhaps feel anxious or

inadequate in the face of the invisible but deadly foe is Psalm 91. As this week's reflection concludes I recommend this scripture passage to you today, as I do further prayerful reflection of our Sunday readings. Psalm 91 is about not being afraid of the pestilence that walks at night nor the arrow that flies by day. It's a song and hymn about confidence and trust in God!

### ***My Refuge and My Fortress***

*91 He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High  
will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.*

*2 I will say<sup>[a]</sup> to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress,  
my God, in whom I trust."*

*3 For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler  
and from the deadly pestilence.*

*4 He will cover you with his pinions,  
and under his wings you will find refuge;  
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.*

*5 You will not fear the terror of the night,  
nor the arrow that flies by day,*

*6 nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness,  
nor the destruction that wastes at noonday.*

*7 A thousand may fall at your side,  
ten thousand at your right hand,  
but it will not come near you.*

*8 You will only look with your eyes  
and see the recompense of the wicked.*

*9 Because you have made the Lord your dwelling place—  
the Most High, who is my refuge<sup>[b]</sup>—*

- <sup>10</sup> *no evil shall be allowed to befall you,  
no plague come near your tent.*
- <sup>11</sup> *For he will command his angels concerning you  
to guard you in all your ways.*
- <sup>12</sup> *On their hands they will bear you up,  
lest you strike your foot against a stone.*
- <sup>13</sup> *You will tread on the lion and the adder;  
the young lion and the serpent you will trample  
underfoot.*
- <sup>14</sup> *“Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him;  
I will protect him, because he knows my name.*
- <sup>15</sup> *When he calls to me, I will answer him;  
I will be with him in trouble;  
I will rescue him and honour him.*
- <sup>16</sup> *With long life I will satisfy him  
and show him my salvation.”*