

MAKING SENSE OF DIFFICULT TIMES

- Homilies for a Time of Pandemic –

*** Fourth Sunday of Lent ***

To say that these are unsettling times is something of an understatement. In a country that seemed so secure, we now find

- we are facing a disease over which we have absolutely no control
- freedoms we have taken for granted, such as gathering whenever and with who we please, being taken away
- our national self image – ‘We are one, we are many ... we are Australians’ – battered by TV images of grocery hoarding and people fighting over toilet paper
- grand parents and grand children being isolated from each other.

For many, Australia feels something like a yacht in a storm that has lost its keel.

Natural reactions

The national regulations we are now following to prevent the further spread of the coronavirus have come as a bolt out of the blue. Who would have imagined them three weeks ago? Necessarily, they are leaving us shocked.

People now are realising the seriousness of our situation. Inevitably, over coming months, many will begin to reflect on their lives” ‘Where am I going with my life?’ ‘How can I reconcile with others after neglecting relationships?’ ‘Do I have the right life priorities?’ ‘What are the meaning and purpose of my life?’ ‘Should I be getting more from life?’ These are five of the countless possible examples.

We have been told too that some will die as a result of this virus. This will be disturbing for those who fear death. So often we find people trying to sugar coat grief and the reality that eventually we will all have to account for our lives by speaking in terms of ‘celebrating the person’s life’.

The regulations inevitably will show the pace of life. People will have more time to think. New opportunities for love and doing good will emerge. People will have more time to ‘get in touch’ with themselves.

Life will change.

Remember who we are: children of the light

St Paul reminds us in the Second Scripture Reading of this Mass that we are ‘children of the light’. The ‘light’, of course, is God. We are God’s children because, through Baptism, we share in the divine life of Jesus himself, the life of God.

The contrast is darkness – a life without a relationship with God and the subsequent loss of Christ’s guidance and power through the Holy Spirit to help us. This darkness is growing across our land – around a third of all Australians, for example, declared themselves ‘atheist’ in the last national census. The decline in Christian values across the country is obvious. The decline in worship and other religious practices show that many are no longer relating with God in the ways Jesus taught.

As a result, many Australians will be facing heart questions and other challenges without Christ’s guidance or power for their lives. This will have consequences for their personal lives, their relationships and how they cope with difficulties such as physical distancing.

Live as children of the light

St Paul urges us to live as children of the light. Jesus told us that ¹

**... your light must shine for people, so that they may see your good work
and give praise to your Father in heaven.**

Take opportunities to love

Let us first behave as children of the light by taking every opportunity that we can to love others in this time of crisis – especially those who need help getting food; those whose loneliness we can relieve with a phone call. These are our neighbours, even if we have not yet met them. There will be other opportunities if we keep alert to them.

Share a Gospel perspective

As people face their human heart questions, we need to share with them the insights of our faith. We do so in a spirit of sharing, never imposing. Let me take just two of many possible examples. I will suggest others over coming months.

Two examples

The first example is the gradual biblical revelation that God brings good out of evil. A well known example is the last story of Joseph, who had been sold into slavery by his brothers but became like the Prime Minister of Egypt.

In the scene of Joseph’s death, his brothers feared he would have them killed for their betrayal. However, Joseph says ²

**Do not be afraid: am I in the place of God? You planned to do me harm,
but God has turned it to good ...**

So often, believers going through crises have said to me: ‘I could not have survived without our faith’. They experienced personally the presence, guidance and strengthening of God.

Others suffering tragedy, such as the death of a child, have discovered friends and others coming forward to help in surprising ways. Whenever there is love and goodness, there too is the touch of God - even though those moved by God may not be aware of this.

¹ Matthews 5:16

² Genesis 30:19-20

We need to be people of hope, therefore, for God is with us and will remain with us no matter what unknown we have to face.

The pandemic is not a punishment from God

Some, of course, may not know well the God revealed gradually over the books of the Bible. They may suggest that the pandemic is the punishment of God on people who have turned from their Creator.

This is a similar mind set to those in today's Gospel who asked whether the man's blindness was punishment for sin. ³ Jesus quickly dismissed this idea and focussed upon giving the blind man sight.

We too need to be quick to dismiss any suggestion that God caused the pandemic to punish people. Such a suggestion shows little actual knowledge or personal relationship with God.

The meaning of death

The fact that Australians will die as a result of the coronavirus will cause fear in many. None of us can afford to ignore this possibility or fail to prepare ourselves.

From Christ's teachings, we know that the destiny planned for all by God is the relationship with God called 'heaven'. It is oneness with the God of infinite love and goodness which brings with it ever growing happiness.

However, even God cannot force a person into a relationship he or she does not want. People can only choose heaven freely.

Making this choice is the ultimate purpose of our lives in this world. We can all choose, therefore, not to accept heaven and experience instead the eternal separation from God called 'hell'.

This certainly is not God's wish. However, like the child who is disappointed by another who does not want to be his or her friend, God has to accept the choices of those who do not want to relate with their loving Creator.

Jesus taught that we show that we accept a relationship with God through Jesus by living his commandments. ⁴ Closeness with God, therefore, is not just a feeling. Keeping his commandments is the objective measure of closeness.

We know too that, though we may accept a relationship with God, we cannot experience heaven while there is any trace of selfishness or wrong in us. God, therefore, purifies us through 'purgatory' so that we can enjoy heaven. We are called to pray for souls in purgatory.

³ John 9:3

⁴ John 14:20

Personal conversation with Christ our Light

Like other Australians, the current crisis will stir questions in our hearts. We will find time on our hands and be more inclined to think about our lives. Grandparents will miss their grandchildren and many will become lonely through social isolation. Many will face terrible financial situations due to the loss of jobs and the closures of businesses.

We too will worry about how those close to us will cope, and even survive. We will be anxious about health risks to ourselves and others

We need to remember always that the Risen Jesus is present within us. We need to recall the challenge St Paul gave the Corinthians ⁵

Do you not recognise that Jesus Christ is in you ...

We need to remember too that, though there are many wonderful religious devotions, the *most basic Christian devotion* is daily *personal conversation with Christ*. It was through conversation with him that the blind man came to understand and recognise who Jesus is. ⁶

He said, 'Lord, I believe', and worshipped him.

For some people, knowing that Christ is within them is like knowing that someone is next to them on a bus. The other person remains a stranger while there is no conversation, much less sharing of life.

We find his light guiding us for our lives and decisions as we grow to 'know' him, not just 'know about' him. We experience him as we share with him our most secret fears, concerns, questions, joys – and the rest of our lives.

This includes too questions about how to respond to the questions, issues and needs of others.

Silent conversation now

Let us pause now for silent conversation with Christ, who is within us. Let us share with him all that is in our hearts as we face the challenge of the coronavirus, along with our loved ones and others we encounter in our daily lives.

And let us do this every day of our lives.

Bishop Gerard Holohan

22nd March 2020

⁵ 2 Corinthians 13:5

⁶ John 9:38

TOP PARENTING TIPS FOR PARENTS AND CARERS IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

1

Reassure your children that your family is your top priority.

Say something like "I'm your parent, it's my job to keep you safe and we are doing everything we can."

2

Maintain everyday family routines.

Keep to usual rising times, mealtimes, and bedtimes. Every family is different. Involve children in working out any new routine (e.g., have a daily plan of activities for school -aged children who are at home).

3

Have plenty of interesting things to do at home.

Busy children are less likely to be bored and misbehave. With your child, help create a list of 20 activities that will keep them busy (not just screen time).

4

Take notice of behaviour you like.

Think about the values, skills and behaviours you wish to encourage in your children at this very difficult time. There are many opportunities to teach your children important life skills (e.g., being caring, helpful, cooperative, getting on well with siblings, taking turns). Use plenty of praise and positive attention to encourage behaviour you like. Give them positive attention letting them know you are pleased by telling them what they have just done ("That's a lovely card you have written to your grandmother. That's so kind. She will really appreciate that.")

5

Make sure your child knows you are ready to talk.

Children need to be able to talk to parents about their concerns and have their questions answered. When a child wants to talk about their feelings, stop what you are doing and listen carefully. Avoid telling your child how they should feel ("That's silly. You shouldn't be scared about that.") Let children know it is OK to be worried. Talking or drawing can help children get in touch with their feelings and figure out what they are anxious about.

TOP PARENTING TIPS FOR PARENTS AND CARERS IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

6

Be truthful in answering children's questions.

Find out what they know about the issue before answering. Keep answers simple. Get information from trusted sources (e.g., official government websites) rather than social media.

7

Have a family plan of action.

Involve children in preparing the plan. As situations can change quickly (e.g., new travel restrictions, school closures), update the plan as needed.

8

Help children learn to tolerate more uncertainty.

The COVID-19 crisis creates uncertainty for everyone. Parents need to find a way to accept uncertainty and, through your actions and words show this acceptance to your children. It's OK to say, "I don't know; let's find out what we can." Big changes to children's lives can be hard and are often scary. They can also create opportunities for learning new skills.

9

Take care of yourself the best you can.

Deal with your own distress by taking actions that give you a better sense of personal control. Stress management skills such as mindfulness and/or deep breathing can help reduce stress. Keep healthy and safe (good personal hygiene, exercise daily, eat well, get enough sleep, avoid using alcohol or drugs to lessen stress). Avoid behaviour that might increase your stress. For example, while it is helpful to keep informed about COVID-19, constant checking on your screens can increase stress.

10

Reach out and connect with loved ones.

Make greater use of phones, online communication tools (video conferencing) and social media to keep in touch with family, friends, and neighbours. Help others in need who are going through a tough time and are more vulnerable (e.g., parents/caregivers with disabilities, older people).

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