

## **Covid-19-----A Time for Private Prayer and Listening to God's Word.**

The fight against Covid-19 is for real. On the island of Ireland, not surprisingly, even in this matter of life and death for some, health policy differs! For those of us living on the border and my garden is the border, this poses a further difficulty but what's new? However, maybe we can all agree on the Power of the Word of God to inspire us and strengthen us all at this time as there is a spiritual battle going on also.

Every cloud has a silver lining, they say. Every crisis offers opportunities. Now that as Christians we will not be attending public Mass or services at least in large numbers for a while, surely the opportunity must be used to Pray with the Word of God at home. It was the Word that Jesus used during the 40 days in the desert to overpower the devil, the father of lies and half-truths. He said, "Not on bread alone does man live but on every word that comes from the mouth of God".

(Matthew 4:4)

For those who are frightened by the virus and the news, let us look rather on this as a Kairos time to grow closer to the Incarnate God and Lord who not only became weak and vulnerable with us and for us but died for us a cruel death. His Risen Spirit is calling us surely to use this quiet time at home valuably. In using the living Word of God from the bible or from the daily liturgy readings we may choose to meditate alone or in a family group to do the Lectio Divina prayer. Now that we are literally forced to stay away from crowds let us take seriously Jesus words "When you pray, go into your private room, close the door and pray to your Father ..." (Matthew 6:6)

It is well known and widely accepted that we Catholics, led by our clergy, have sacramentalised people but have neglected to evangelise them. In the early church new converts were prepared during Lent for their Baptism at Easter. They were given the Word of God and hungered then for Initiation or Baptism into Christ and His community of believers. These were our spiritual forefathers and foremothers in the faith of the church. They were like our own Celtic saints in the era before the Norman invasion. These also were afire with the love of God's Word as we know from their writings and power to evangelize in Europe. The early Christians were encouraged to know the Lord Himself in the Spirit even before they were baptized into Him with water.

We will not be receiving the Lord in Holy Eucharist for a while, except for those of us who will continue to read the Mass at home as priests. I see this however as an

opportunity to restore the balance between Word and Sacrament in our spiritual formation. Let us celebrate receiving the daily bread of his Word. He is present when we pray his word as surely as he is present when “two or three are gathered together” in His name. That is not to minimize in the least the special place we have given traditionally to the Lord’s presence in the Holy Eucharist.

### **Learning to listen in quiet like Jesus**

During Lent we put the focus on Prayer, Fasting and Alms Deeds. The virus threat makes it a good time to look at what Jesus says on all three concepts. He encourages us not to be like the Pharisees who stand up in the synagogues and pronounce loud and long prayers. (Mathew 6:5).”You should go to your room, shut the door and pray to your Father who is in that secret place”(Matthew 6:6)and in the very next verse he tells ;”In your prayers, do not babble on as the pagans do ,thinking that by using many words they will make themselves be heard.” Surely here and by his own example of praying privately Jesus is referring to simple private methods we call meditation or contemplation where the person quietly finds the holy Spirit praying in their own heart and begins to enjoy the Divine Indwelling of the trinity. No amount of public prayers led by clergy or laity can replace or surpass this. And now we have time to quietly contemplate. What a luxury amid a time of having to stay indoors. The media advice from good people who know no better is Netflix after Netflix and replays of soccer or old golf games. Despite my love for sport, I get up from a quiet prayer time feeling more refreshed, fulfilled and blessed than from most of what I watch on TV. The obvious question then is do the people of God know how to pray this way and have they been taught how to listen to God or the Word of God as food for the soul ? Again, surely now we clergy have a chance to both get to know this ourselves and only then will we be credible and “speak as one having authority” and lead the laity into contemplation.

### **Do we need the Church or God?**

The shock to the western culture presently in the face of this virus is the greater as we have sadly become very proud and acted as if we were in charge. “This is my body”. “I am worth it”. These statements are so like the truth that they are deceptive. They are very much the new age mentality of the “I’m ok, you’re ok” type. That was the title of a book some years ago. As a Christian of course I believe I am not ok, and you are not ok. In Christ we are made ok and children of

our common loving Father. We are a “can do” culture who in our inflated ego spoke and acted in recent times as if we did not need God or a Higher Power. The White Oaks Addiction Centre which we opened 20 years ago practices the 12 steps of AA. These have withstood the test of time since the 1930s. The steps are so like the gospel of Jesus. We refer to them as the scripture for the world of addiction. The first step is “I have come to believe I am powerless over alcohol (this disease) or this addiction.” The humility to accept that we are not self-made men and women and that we need the Higher Power generally comes when we have reached rock bottom. Then we come also to the second and third steps, “I have come to believe in a higher power that can save me from insanity.” I hand my life over each day to the God of my understanding. I suspect many these days will come via these three steps to some serenity and inner peace. Where else can we go?

#### **POSITIVE DISCRIMINATION APPLIED TO THE WORD AND THE SACRAMENT.**

We all accept the important role the Eucharistic celebration or Mass has played in the life of Catholics in the past. The Vatican Council states that the Eucharist is both the apex and source of all spiritual activity. The issue with that theology is that we are left dependent on the ministry of the priest. Against that backdrop we find it difficult to promote a model of church with meaningful opportunities for influential ministries by the parishioners. That is unless there were positive efforts made to give equal time and importance to scripture services to feed the people of God with the Word of God. For this reason, I have headed this paragraph with the phrase Positive Discrimination, the term used to restore balance after one side has been diminished in favour of the other side for far too long. (This term positive discrimination was first used to offer equality of esteem to Afro Americans in the Civil Rights Days, to help restore the balance and parity of esteem due to them in the areas of jobs, housing and social interaction etc In theory we honor the Verbum Dei in the statements from both Vatican Council and Church teachings since then. However, in the average western parish, where until now we have had priests in plenty, the laity have not been encouraged to reverently pray with the word or lead scripture services that give life. This can be the time to use social media to really feed the faithful in their homes with the fresh daily bread of the Word.

Our own Columba Community sees these days as the ideal time to encourage people to view "Christian Meditations at St. Anthony's Retreat Centre", a series on You tube filmed to introduce people to contemplative prayer. Yes, the Lord's hand is always taking good out of evil. I see this plague or virus, Covit19, as an invite to all of us to be refreshed by Him who says, "The Spirit blows where he wills." (John 3:8)

Another relevant scripture to finish with is Jesus' words to the Samaritan woman "The hour is coming and is now here when the true worshipper will worship the Father in Spirit and in truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth." (John 4: 20) Here Jesus is saying that the important thing is that we be led and filled with His spirit and praise. This is more important than if we pray in the temple at Jerusalem, the Holy Mountain or the church. The conscious presence of the Holy Spirit in us who breathes where he will is the great teaching. Do you really believe that each of us is the temple of the Holy Spirit? This brings immense freedom, joy and the possibilities which Jesus who came to set the captive free wants each of us to experience.

Amen to that. Neal