

The Fourth Sunday of Lent, 22 March 2020

*Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.' John 9.39*

Perhaps you saw the social media posts from those Italian citizens who are currently confined to their homes who offered messages, to themselves, their past selves, just 10 days ago. Obviously these messages are in many ways meant for us. They are offering us insight into something they are now experiencing, in a way a revelation. They are providing a glimpse of the seriousness of this virus and the impact it is having on their lives and the whole of Italian society. As I write, it was announced that now more people have died in Italy than in China.

There has been no Lenten season in my life where sacrifice has been imposed upon us by circumstances like these. We are being forced into a practice of sacrifice which will cause us to look at our own lives and our world in a different way, and for those of us who have not yet experienced a situation like in Italy, we can only listen to the stories and testimonies of others, such as those whose lives have been impacted in China and Italy.

Our gospel reading this Sunday speaks to the power of a different kind of virus coming to the world. When Jesus mixes his saliva into the dirt to open the eyes of the blind man, he is infecting him with a divine healing power, with his Spirit, which he has brought into the world. When Jesus tells the man to wash in Siloam, which means "sent", he is sending forth the blind man infected with a testimony to infect others, not with a disease that blinds, cripples and kills, but rather, with a life-giving virus of healing, that gives sight, liberates and brings life.

Paul's own testimony in some ways reflects the blind man's experience of receiving sight which is why he describes the Ephesians as children of light who once lived in darkness. Often the stories such as these that we encounter in scripture will find patterns in our own individual and shared experiences.

Right now what is being revealed before the whole of humanity, although confounding, is something we must all be willing to see: the interdependence of the world, the fragility of our economy, the increasing inequality and instability within what once seemed to be prosperous and safe societies. The best and worst aspects of a fallen human nature are now on full display, as examples of selfishness and denial of concern for others are contrasted with examples of self-giving and sacrifice for the sake of others. For us to move from blindness to sight, we have to be willing to confront the most frightening thing which permeates all of this: life's impermanence, the fact of our own mortality.

On Ash Wednesday during the imposition of the ashes, we are reminded to "remember you are dust and to dust you shall return." While Christians believe in the promise of eternal life, we also accept that death is a threshold through which we all will pass, no matter how much we try to avoid or ignore its cold dark presence which hangs like a fog in our world.

During these days, we are being forced to retreat from the normalcy of our lives. For some of us this will mean spending much time in confinement with those closest to us and for others isolation and being alone, this is especially true for the elderly.

I am sure most of us now are only just beginning to appreciate the importance of the once routine rituals of our daily lives. We now have a greater appreciation for the importance of small common gestures such as a hug or a kiss or even a simple handshake.

Now we perhaps like the blind man, have been given sight of the importance of human connection, which we value too little, the importance of family, friendships and community that has been gifted to us; we appreciate the sacrifices those many people, whose work and toil goes unnoticed (medical personnel, engineers, police and other public servants and workers in service industries) who keep our societies running, and also hopefully we empathize and have compassion for the displaced seeking refuge who are still left standing outside the gates of society.

While we are separated, we have in many ways never felt so together, because we now realize how much we miss and need one another. As believers, we can now better appreciate the privilege of being able to gather in communion through the breaking of bread and the sharing of the cup of wine.

As we proceed in this Lenten season on this solemn journey, on the path toward the Cross that leads to the tomb and as we pray for the virus to subside, to be stilled. Let us also and just as importantly pray that we and the world would be infected by the life-giving virus of the Spirit of God that provides vision and imbues us with love. May our eyes be open to the needs of those around us and to presence of those who we have not seen because of our own blindness!

Christ has come into the world to open our eyes to new life, and for now we are being called and sent to truly contend with the power of the dark powers that surround us:

‘Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.’ Ephesians 5.14

The Revd Mike Waltner, 20 March 2020