

A Reflection for Holy Week: The Way of the Cross

Here in Asia we were the first members of the Society to begin the celebration of Holy Week. In Cebu, because of the pandemic, Palm Sunday was celebrated in a way we have never experienced before – within our community, our doors closed to our friends and neighbours; it will be the same for the rest of the week; we cannot welcome our neighbours into our house and, like them, we cannot go out and join a congregation in a parish church or minister to the communities of sisters nearby. In most dioceses the liturgies will be televised from empty churches. In our parish in Malalag the confreres celebrate in a side chapel with a tiny group and livestream the service.

It is probably the same for all of you wherever you find yourself during these weeks and may be months of lockdown. What is normally one of the busiest times of the year in parishes will be the quietest time. Maybe in some communities some of us are isolated in our rooms by social distancing - with no common celebration at all. How do we manage and make use of quiet and solitude? How do we make use of time on our hands?

Social distancing is easy enough for the rich in every country; they live isolated and insulated lives anyway. It is easy here for us and our neighbours in Santo Nino Village. But it is an impossibility for our neighbours at the back gate in Poulton slum and for the millions of large families in small houses or in overcrowded slums in the cities of India or Africa, Europe or The Americas. Wherever you are appointed in our Provinces, in formation houses or parishes, you can name your own neighbourhoods. Many of you are familiar with such living conditions in your home areas.

In recent years we have become used to celebrating forms of the way of the Cross which make it more meaningful and relevant to our broken world. This Lent, the way of the Cross has become real in a strikingly new way and on a vast scale because of the pandemic.

The loneliness and abandonment of Christ in his passion is experienced by many who suffer and die alone in isolation wards in hospitals or in self-isolation at home.

Far more distressing than not being able to participate in a liturgy is the experience of helplessness of those not able to comfort and care for loved ones who are sick in hospitals, not allowed to be with them as they are dying, nor mourn for them and bury them when they are dead. We have seen the images on tv of cities where

social services are overwhelmed and the bodies of those who have died at home are left for days in houses waiting to be collected, or coffins are left out in the streets.

Then there is the incompetence, injustice and harshness of the authorities. Caiaphas said it is better for one man to die for the people than for the whole nation to be destroyed. Several governments, including Britain had a policy for dealing with the pandemic by isolating the elderly to protect them to some extent, but keeping schools open, keeping people working, letting them socialize as usual and letting the virus spread in the young and healthy. The projection was that once most people 60-70% caught the virus and it, hopefully recovered, the virus would die out once there were too few people left uninfected. Immunity would build up in the population and protect against further outbreaks in the future – and, more importantly, the economy of the country would be protected.

The computer models used by the British Government estimated the cost at 250,000 lives – a price the government considered well worth paying: until statistics became real people dying, people with names, with families and friends; people whose lives had a value, until it became clear that it was not just the old and weak who were dying but also the young and healthy - and the doctors and nurses who were caring for the sick. So the government changed its policy and went for lockdown along with most other countries of the world.

But now the price has to be paid in damage to the economy, unemployment, hardship, insecurity; in the loneliness of single people cut off from companionship; in disruption to children's education; in damaging stress levels in families with children cooped up in apartments for weeks on end; in an increase of domestic violence; in mental health problems among medical staff who still have to risk their lives every day. And the number of deaths remains enormous.

The policy of forcing people to stay at home takes no account of those who have no home and live on the streets: In Europe it takes no account of the tens of thousands of migrants and refugees crammed into holding camps. In India, stopping all public transport has left migrant labourers with the choice between sickness in the cities where they are working or starvation on the long walk back to their home states.

The danger remains that whatever policy is followed, across the world the fabric of society will be torn apart. Mending and healing it will be a long and painful road.

The indifference of bystanders as Christ dragged his cross through the streets of Jerusalem is mirrored in the refusal of people to act responsibly, give up their own short-term interests and consider the effect of their actions on the lives of others; people who imagine that bad things only happen to others and do not care. How many of us are like Simon of Cyrene, uninvolved bystanders as others struggle with burdens too heavy to bear, going about our own business and then suddenly finding ourselves dragged unwilling and unprepared into a situation over which we have no control.

When I read the passion narratives, one of the most striking points for me is the blindness of the apostles to the reality that was in front of their faces, despite the warnings that Jesus gave them again and again before they reached Jerusalem. To paraphrase the famous poem of Rudyard Kipling: *'If you can keep your head when all around you are losing theirs' ... you don't know what is going on!* When reality hit in the Garden of Gethsemane, the apostles lost their heads and fled in panic.

This world crisis can - and has - brought out the worst in people; when reality hits close to home, the fear leads to desperation and selfishness. Panic buying is universal, irrational and often ridiculous - who could ever imagine people fighting over toilet paper?? But on a more serious level, nationalism, xenophobia and violence are rife, with Asians being blamed and attacked in Europe, Europeans being blamed and attacked in Asia.

But the crisis can also bring out the best in people. A common danger provides an opportunity to demonstrate kindness and conviction and break down barriers and divisions in our world, an opportunity to cultivate a greater awareness and acceptance of our common humanity. Who was it that wiped the face of Jesus on the road to Calvary? Who were the ones who followed Christ all the way to Calvary and remained, standing at the foot of the cross?

Who does that ministry in today's world? A close friend of mine works in the hospital in north London where I used to do my pastoral work during theology. Out of about three thousand hospital staff, nine hundred are off sick. Nurses are working twelve-hour shifts in intensive care wards without proper protective clothing - and they are genuinely terrified, but they keep on working, putting their lives at risk every day. Thousands of volunteers are supporting the social services, thousands of retired doctors and nurses have gone back to work in hospitals. I have a niece at home who is a nurse, now suspected of having caught the virus while

treating patients, another niece who is a consultant pediatrician; her husband, a doctor, has also symptoms.

In contrast, our churches are closed to the congregations and we cannot celebrate the liturgy with them; their homes are closed to us, and we cannot carry out pastoral ministry to the sick and the dying in hospitals and bring comfort to the bereaved. St Peter Damien is a great example to us of love and courage. Like him, we want to bring life and hope, and like him, we may even be willing to risk sickness and even death ourselves, but we are cannot imitate his example. Without protective clothing there is too great a risk not just that we will catch the virus, but that we will spread it to others, bringing sickness and death rather than comfort and consolation.

How many of us feel useless and even guilty because we are helpless in this situation? This is a question that rightly troubles many of us us; it challenges us to examine our understanding of our identity as missionaries and ministers. It certainly challenges the tendency towards clericalism. Do our ways of ministering make lay people dependent on us and undervalue their role as ministers of the love of Christ in their communities?

We are blessed by belonging to our Society, by having communities to provide us with shelter, support and security wherever we find ourselves. But we are not and should not be immune to the challenges, the social problems and the suffering that are all around us in our parishes and in our families. The blessing and the curse of modern communications is that cannot easily we shut our eyes and ears to what is happening outside our walls – and in this situation our walls and social distancing are no guarantee of protection and immunity.

Three years ago I gave an advent recollection to the community of Little Ealing Lane in London and I quoted from a poem **A Song for Simeon** by T.S. Eliot

*My life is light, waiting for the death wind,
Like a feather on the back of my hand.
Dust in sunlight and memory in corners
Wait for the wind that chills towards the dead land.*

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*Before the stations of the mountain of desolation,
Before the certain hour of maternal sorrow,
Now at this birth season of decease,
Let the Infant, the still unspeaking and unspoken Word,
Grant Israel's consolation
To one who has eighty years and no to-morrow.*

One confrere, over 80 with multiple health problems, remarked that those words: 'one who has eighty years and no tomorrow', were true for him. Three years later, he is still alive! But just take a look at our personnel book and the age and vulnerability of the majority of our confreres in Europe and The Americas. I began writing this on Palm Sunday, amazed that so far, I know of only one confrere in Europe who has died of the virus.

Now those words strike home to me.

Here in Cebu I am respected as a senior citizen, given precedence at immigration, in queues for taxis, in check-outs at supermarkets. But as a senior citizen I am also among the first in line for catching the coronavirus - and of dying from it. I was sick two weeks ago and had a bag packed expecting to go to hospital and isolation. So I am very aware that now that I need to be ready. Then I think of my family at home and how vulnerable they are. My younger brother and sister at home are in a precarious situation; they both live alone and they both have severe lung and heart conditions. If they get sick, they will die.

So in writing this reflection, I have a personal investment that I have rarely experienced before. I remember that when I was in the first cycle and the spiritual year, we prayed from a Society prayer book, not the breviary. That book contained an exercise which we did each month during our recollection: a preparation for death. It required a real effort of the imagination in those days to take the exercise seriously. Today, over fifty years later, it resonates with meaning and relevance.

When eventually this pandemic is over, we might have been careful enough and fortunate enough to have avoided sickness and survived, but we will not be immune to the economic, social and personal fallout. The value of the Society's investments has certainly already been greatly reduced. The reserves will be under threat. The economy of the world will be changed and our way of living, working and traveling will need to be re-examined - by all of us together and by each one of us individually.

One of the most striking presentations of our Plenary Council last December was the one by the Treasurer General. He challenged us in his presentation and in a letter to show gratitude for all we have received through the efforts of our predecessors and the sacrifices of our families and benefactors. He challenged us to show, personally and communally, the same spirit of sacrifice and generosity in our way of living; to take responsibility for the future of our Society. That call is going to become more urgent and impossible to avoid once this crisis is over.

But it does not only apply to finances, nor even mainly to finances.

The greatest resource of our society is not money; it is us, confreres, our candidates in formation and also our families, benefactors who support us and those who share our spirit and the spirit of our founder. And at the end of this pandemic, we may well have lost a significant number. We will have to find new and more effective ways of utilizing, managing and renewing our human resources; have to take more seriously our individual, personal responsibility to care for ourselves and for one another. Above all, both as individuals and as a Society, we will need to be humble enough to be aware of and accept joyfully our human frailty, as St Paul did, and combine that with his faith in God's power available to us. *'My power finds its full scope in your weakness' 2 Cor 12*

We can start now by praying for the confreres, support staff and health workers who minister and care for the elderly in our communities; pray for those who are near death and afraid; take an interest in the health and welfare of those we live with.

Above all, perhaps, pray for the grace to accept a sense of helplessness and inadequacy in our ministry when we are with those who are caught up in suffering so deep and on such a vast scale. Let us not hide behind pious words which are empty meaningless words. Those we minister to deserve better of us. Job's friends started off well when they sat with him in silence because his grief was so great. Then they ruined it by preaching at him. Now to call someone a 'Job's comforter' is an insult, implying that someone is insincere, shallow and uncaring.

"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" will be for many people the only meaningful words in the passion narrative this year. There is a silence at the foot of the cross. Let us learn to bear silence together and for one another.

Kneeling by R. S. Thomas

Moments of great calm,
Kneeling before an altar
Of wood in a stone church
In summer, waiting for the God
To speak; the air a staircase
For silence; the sun's light
Ringing me, as though I acted
A great rôle. And the audiences
Still; all that close throng
Of spirits waiting, as I,
For the message.

 Prompt me, God;
But not yet. When I speak,
Though it be you who speak
Through me, something is lost.
The meaning is in the waiting.

In Church by R. S. Thomas

Often I try
To analyze the quality
Of its silences. Is this where God hides
From my searching? I have stopped to listen,
After the few people have gone,
To the air recomposing itself
For vigil. It has waited like this
Since the stones grouped themselves about it.
These are the hard ribs
Of a body that our prayers have failed
To animate. Shadows advance
From their corners to take possession
Of places the light held
For an hour. The bats resume
Their business. The uneasiness of the pews
Ceases. There is no other sound
In the darkness but the sound of a man
Breathing, testing his faith
On emptiness, nailing his questions
One by one to an untenanted cross.