

## 7th Sunday of Easter, Year A (2020)

The Covid-19 pandemic has been described in many different ways, some of which are now becoming cliché. Take the adjective ‘unprecedented’, for instance. We hear this word being used constantly in relation to the Coronavirus. Strictly speaking, this is not true. We *have* had a precedent for a deadly virus sweeping from country to country, though it didn’t take place in any of our lifetimes. The year? From 1347 onwards until around 1351, with successive outbreaks in 1361–63, 1369–71, 1374–75, 1390, and 1400. This plague, which was to become known as the Black Death, on account of one of the most visible symptoms upon victims, was thought to have been carried by rodents, infested with plague-carrying fleas, which travelled on trading ships, sailing from the Far East to the various ports of the Mediterranean and throughout Western Europe. It ravaged the known world at the time, and by 1351, some 25 million people are thought to have succumbed to the plague - a death toll that was proportionately greater than arguably any other single tragedy up until the Second World War.

Today we are living through another tragic infection – a virus that is largely indiscriminate in its choice of victim, be they young or old, healthy or already infirm, rich or poor, black or white. Over the course of the last four months, from the end of February until today, almost 37,000 people have tragically lost their lives in the UK alone. There have been more than 5 million cases identified worldwide, with a present death toll of some 340,000 people, and rising.

Unsurprisingly, many people are asking the question ‘why’? Why is this happening to us? Some people are ascribing its cause to the wrath of God. Why, though, would an all-loving God, who created us in His own image and likeness, as His adopted sons and daughters, permit the loss of so many innocent lives?

Ultimately, this is not a helpful or spiritually-edifying line of questioning.

A more mature Christian response is the acknowledgement that none of us is free from suffering – it is part and parcel of being alive, of being human – and those of us gathered here, who try to follow the teachings and example of Jesus Christ, are not exempt from it either. It is one of the great mysteries of our faith. If we believed that our existence ended at the moment of physical death, it would indeed be tragic, and depressing. Rather, as Catholic Christians we believe that this world is a pale shadow of the world to come. The current liturgical season of Eastertide, which comes to a climax next week with the Solemnity of Pentecost, is one that focuses on life after death, on the glory of the Lord (as we see in our Gospel passage from St. John, chapter 17), on the power and grace of the Spirit. Jesus himself suffered for us on the cross – a form of suffering much worse than any of us will ever endure. His mother Mary also suffered in an unimaginable

way, watching her son, naked, ridiculed by a laughing crowd, nailed to a cross and slowly dying of loss of blood and asphyxiation. No other should ever have to endure such pain. Yet we know that the depths of Christ's Passion are swept away by the glory of the Resurrection. Simon Peter knew this first-hand. Unable to witness the crucifixion through his own shame, and fear for his life, he was at least able to see the Resurrected Christ, and to realise – finally – that death is not the end, but rather the beginning of a new, glorified life with God for eternity.

Thus, in his pastoral letter (our Second Reading at today's Mass), Peter is relying on his own experience and his authority as he writes the following words: "If you can have some share in the sufferings of Christ, be glad, because you will enjoy a much greater gladness when his glory is revealed." Peter knew what he was talking about. Not long after writing this letter, he was to share again in these sufferings, by dying on an inverted cross in the circus of Nero in Rome. What of those who gathered together in the Upper Room after the Ascension of Jesus, who joined in continuous prayer with His Mother? What was going through their minds? These followers were also not exempt from suffering for the sake of their faith. Simon the Zealot and Philip were similarly crucified; Andrew was crucified on a saltire, or X-shaped cross; James was beheaded; Jude son of James was clubbed to death; and Bartholomew was – quite horrifically – skinned alive; A gruesome list indeed.

What was it that emboldened these men to go forth, literally to the ends of the earth, to preach the Gospel message, and to die willingly for it? Quite simply, it was the Resurrection. The Resurrection of Jesus changed everything. With His death on the cross and His Ascension to Heaven, Jesus accomplished His divine mission. This is why He asks the Father in our Gospel to glorify Him, so that He in turn might glorify the Eternal Father in Heaven. Jesus has made His name known, He has taught His followers, and they have accepted that He came from the Father. Now, Jesus' task is to pray for those who come after Him. To pray for us. Because we, too, belong to the Father. In our faith, in our belief in Jesus, in our imitation of Him by the way we live our lives, we show the depth of our love for the Father. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, as we saw in our Gospel last week, we are given the strength, the courage, the wisdom, the grace, the love, and every other divine gift, to continue that mission of salvation here on earth. The words of the psalm should resound in our ears today: "The Lord is my light and my help; | whom shall I fear? | The Lord is the stronghold of my life; | before whom shall I shrink?"

It is natural to fear suffering, it's human to want to avoid tragedy, but in times of grief let's remain firm in the conviction that the Lord loves each one of us, more than we can possibly comprehend. "Hope in God, I will praise Him still, my Saviour and my God".