

## **Pandemic or Plague**

Good Morning my Dear Friends,

I hope this message finds you in God's peace and comfort. I pray that each of you are well and growing closer to Him in this dark and uncertain time.

Now may God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit fill you, and bless you with Good News, of His grace, His love and His mercy.

Today is the fifth Sunday in the season of Lent. Next Sunday is that joyous Holy Day known as Passion Sunday, or more recently Palm Sunday when Christ triumphantly entered into the city of Jerusalem to shouts and songs of praise, acclaiming His Kingship. Hosanna in the Highest!

Sadly there will be no overflowing church sanctuaries with palm waving smiling faces, nor choirs resonating the refrains.

Never before in the two thousand year history of the Christian church has there been a shutdown of public services. We are experiencing an unprecedented, historic moment, unlike anything any of us has ever experienced. It will be a sad sight indeed to see empty pews; however, I want you to know two things. First, I will bless palms as I've always done on Palm Sunday morning in the church garden. It will not be a public event. But I will leave palms upon the outdoor altar for any who wish to come later in the day or week to receive them.

Secondly, although we will not be gathering as a congregation, and will probably be isolated in our homes, we should all the more celebrate His Holy Day with prayer and petition, with praise and adulation, perhaps more than ever before. Maybe some of us could evaluate what it is we believe? And why?

Certainly this will be a "memorable" Palm Sunday. Perhaps it could actually be the very best, most significant, profound and revolutionary we've ever experienced. Why not? God is with you.

Today's lectionary readings could not possibly be more timely or relevant. (see Ezekiel 37, Psalm 130, Romans 8 and the Gospel of John Chapter 11)

They all speak of mankind's greatest, most existential fear = death. As we limp through these dark days of this uncertain pandemic, we see the daily death counts, the disease casualties, both locally, nationally, and globally. It's an eerie sight indeed, of staggering statistics. We are today, because of this, more acutely aware of our mortality than perhaps at any time in our recent history. Certainly for many, in their entire lifetime.

I grew up in the Nuclear Age of air raid drills, where we would regularly, without notice or warning, hear the alarm and duck and cover under our desks. A terrifying time for many. Yet although it was a serious and very real threat, I was never afraid that the Russians would nuke us into annihilation. (I usually laughed and played tricks on my classmates where the teacher couldn't see me.)

The lasting lesson I learned during that dismal era occurred one day when my father took me to see his friend's newly constructed underground fallout shelter. It was so cool! Scary and exciting at the same time. I remember crawling through a concrete tunnel from a basement porthole hatch into the cylindrical bunker, fully stocked with food and water, bunkbeds and blankets, guns, games, and medical supplies. It even had a periscope! (1st generation prepper)

On the ride home I excitedly asked my dad "when are we going to build ours?" I was only 6 or 7 at the time, yet to this day recall his response; After a short pause, he said, "We're not," then added, "were going to put our hope, trust, faith in God." Maybe that's why I never feared anything.

Today's global pandemic has exposed unprecedented fear in many people who maybe never gave much thought to their mortality. This might be a good thing, a very good thing.

Many are calling this a war, and certainly for good reason. But it's not at all like any conventional conflict. This enemy is unseen, doesn't wear a uniform, nor march under any flag, and this enemy is indiscriminate and lethal. Our defenses against it are quite insufficient; self quarantine, isolate, wash your hands? Our weaponing is inadequate and ineffective. And the casualties continue to increase.

St. Benedict told his monks to "Remind themselves daily that one day you will die." (Rule of St. Benedict Chapter 4)

This may seem morbid, dismal, and disconsolate, but facing such an often ignored reality can vastly improve our outlook and disposition. After all, we are all here for a very limited time, and tragically too many of us waste far too much of that precious time in our gift of life.

We are now suddenly and unexpectedly face to face with this most uncomfortable reality. And for many, it's a very fearful revelation. Because we've been conditioned to see death as the enemy, the irrevocable end of living.

Our faith teaches us differently. Today's gospel we see Jesus doing the unthinkable, unimaginable, stunningly miraculous act of raising from the dead Lazarus!

It is true that physical death is inevitable this side of Heaven, but neither was it God's original intent. Death is not the end. The soul never dies.

Jesus would demonstrate this shocking truth to the world when, on Easter Sunday, he stepped out of the tomb = ALIVE!!

For those who have not this great faith, this glorious promise of their own Resurrection, death is dreaded fearfully. This fear is circumventing the globe.

Spending countless hours watching the negative, partisan, pessimistic finger pointing of the news media is both unproductive and detrimental to one's well-being.

Jesus said we should seek first the Kingdom of God. (Matthew 6:33) Sadly, most do the opposite, we seek first CNN or Fox News. As a result, we're beset with fears, worries, anxieties and anger. Unfortunately, fear brings out the worst. During one of our nation's darkest hours, the then president F.D.R famously said, "We have nothing to fear, but fear itself." Jesus reminds us over and over to Fear Not!

Medical staff in Italy are reportedly calling the situation the Apocalypse because of the biblical scope and its devastation. IS IT?

On Sunday, January 26th of this year, I preached a sermon on the so-called "Doomsday Clock". I mentioned that the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists had just that week reset the clock to 100 seconds to midnight! This iconic doomsday clock began in 1947 and is used as a gauge to indicate how close the world is to a "catastrophic existential danger". Their resetting it in January was to show (warn) the world that we are closer than ever to a "global catastrophic calamity" = Doomsday Annihilation! (I was looking over my notes from that yesterday, and was surprised to see I had written the word "coronavirus," but hadn't at the time realized why.)

The past few weeks have seen an unprecedented surge in interest in this type of speculation. Is this pandemic a plague? Is it biblical? Is it from God? Is this the beginning of the END?

Armageddon, Doomsday, the END of the world worries and predictions are nothing new. We've seen numerous (Y2K, 12/12/2012, the Mayan Short Calendar, planetary alignment, New Age harmonic convergences, etc., etc.)

But this is actual, not imaginary. This is epic and extraordinary.

More people than ever are studying the Apocalyptic texts of the Bible, namely the "Apocalypse of St. John the Divine" more commonly known as the "Book of Revelation," and the Book of Daniel. The questions people are asking are important and frightening, "Is this pandemic of God?" If not then, IF God is God Almighty, then He controls all things; otherwise, God is not God and controls no thing!

Some people (surprisingly even some non-religious) believe that God sent, or is allowing this disease as punishment for our sins, for our ugly, inhumane, greedy or violent

behaviors. Others contend that God would never punish people with a plague or pandemic. The truth (as is often the case) is found somewhere in the middle.

The scriptures certainly record numerous occasions of God punishing people for their actions, using both natural and unnatural disasters. To refresh your memory, here's a few: Sulfur and Fire (Genesis 19:24), 10 Plagues visited upon Egypt in response to Pharaoh's refusal to free Israelite slaves, Earthquakes swallowing thousands and consuming fire (Numbers 16), Venomous snakes to afflict Israel when they murmured and complained (Numbers 21:6), (that, incidentally is where the worldwide symbol of the medical profession is derived, the serpent of the staff.) Pestilence (2 Samuel 24:15).

These and other plagues are not unique to the Hebrew scriptures of the Old Testament. We read of this in 1 Corinthians 11:30 when St. Paul admonished the Corinthians who were receiving communion in a state of sin.

In Book of Acts we see two people, Ananias and Sapphira, who lied and were struck down (Acts 5: 1-11). What we learn is that indeed sometimes God does intervene in the natural order to bring calamity, and sometimes allows it. But we also learn from the Book of Job that sometimes suffering, illness, plague, and death have nothing to do with our human condition. And that we are not in a position to judge why God allows or prevents evil to occur.

As we read in Isaiah 55:9, "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts."

Not every natural disaster or pandemic should be seen as punishment for sin. And not all tragedies and plagues have been attributed to divine punishment.

It should, however, get our attention! Since the Antonine Plague of 165 AD, the number of casualties of all the plagues since combined, is a staggering estimate of 250 million people!

Do not be alarmed by the so-called "doomsday prophecies". There's been numerous since time began. And yes, the Bible tells us about the Last Days, but this isn't it. In other words, if this were the END of the world, it would already be the end of the world.

A warning, perhaps, Jesus said in Matthew 24:36 regarding the end, "that the time or the hour, nobody knows, not the angels, not even the Son, only the Father."

Meanwhile, let us seek God for his mercy for those afflicted and suffering, for all the medical and healthcare workers serving and caring for the ill, for protection. Let us pray for the researchers and scientists working diligently to find both a cure and a vaccine.

Let us pray for our leaders, and let us pray for one another. Let's not forget there's only one race, the human race, of which we are all part.

Let us love one another and extend God's mercy and kindness to all.

You or I may or may not contract this horrible coronavirus; if we do, we may or may not die from it. We may also never know why God allowed some people to get it and not others. What we do know is that one day, we too, shall depart from this world and hear the words of our Savior call unto us from our graves into life everlasting just as He did in today's gospel, as He loudly called out "Lazarus, come forth".

"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he shall die, will come to life." (John 11: 25-26)

Two final thoughts:

Quarantines go back to the 14th century in an effort to prevent coastal cities from plague epidemics. It began in Venice, Italy when ships had to sit at anchor for 40 days before coming ashore. The word quarantine is Italian for *Quaranta Giorni*, which means 40 days.

Our 40 days of Lent are nearing an end, let's hope and pray so too does this pandemic.

Do any of you know that there is a Patron Saint for epidemics? Well, there is.

A young 16 year old girl of great faith and godly virtue was martyred in the year 177 AD according to Catholic records of Saintology. Most people haven't thought much of her, most know little of her, most not sure where exactly she lived. Some say Sicily, some Syria, others France. What is known is her virtues and her name. Now you may be shocked to know the name of this Patron Saint of Epidemics who lived nearly 1,800 years ago. Brace yourselves, her name is "Saint Corona". Yes, it's true! You see, the Latin word "corona" means crown, and due to her martyrdom, she received the crown of eternal life.

The corona viruses - all of them, including COVID-19, takes the name corona, not because of her, but because of the crown-like spires that surround each virus particle.

Saint Corona's Feast Day is May 14th in the Catholic Calendar of Saints. Some believe and hope that it will very well be the day we see this pandemic disappear.

Her relics are enshrined in Germany's Aachen Cathedral where caretakers are restoring the dusty reliquary for public exposition, hopefully soon. There are also two towns named after her in Austria and several churches and chapels throughout Bavaria.

It's no surprise that in recent weeks 'St. Corona' has "Gone Viral!"

Now, may Almighty God bless you all, and keep you in His perfect peace.

Amen

