

3 Lent A 2020
JN 4:5-43

On the evening of September 11, 2001, I was driving to Church like everyone else. I was on my leave of absence, living in Roanoke, VA. Every home had an American flag displayed on it. And I remember sitting in Church before the impromptu Mass was scheduled, thinking, “What is he, the pastor, going to say?” For on the evening of September 11th, we didn’t even know who attacked us? “What is he possibly going to say?” This is a first. An attack on American soil of this magnitude. It was Pearl Harbor all over again. But for those of us younger than WWII, Pearl Harbor was over there, and so many years ago. And almost 19 years later after 9/11, I don’t remember what he said, but I remember he struggled through his sermon. So pray for me as I deliver these words to you, that the Holy Spirit will speak through me.

Something of this magnitude, a pandemic, is a first in my lifetime. But it’s not a first in the history of mankind. CS Lewis, a British writer and lay theologian, who held academic positions in English literature at both Oxford and

Cambridge, wrote fiction and non-fiction Christian apologetics. He died in 1963. Seventy-two years ago, Lewis wrote the following, which rings with some relevance for us today, but replacing “atomic bomb” with “coronavirus.”

In one way we think a great deal too much of the atomic bomb.

In other words, we think a great deal too much about coronavirus. “How are we to live during this pandemic?”

I am tempted to reply: “Why, as you would have lived:

- ✓ in the sixteenth century when the plague visited London almost every year,
- ✓ or as you would have lived in a Viking age when raiders from Scandinavia might land and cut your throat any night;

or indeed, as you are already living in:

- ✓ an age of cancer,
- ✓ an age of syphilis,
- ✓ an age of paralysis,
- ✓ an age of air raids,
- ✓ an age of railway accidents,

✓ an age of motor accidents.”

In other words, do not let us begin by exaggerating the novelty of our situation. Believe me, dear sir or madam, you and all whom you love were already sentenced to death before the coronavirus was invented: and quite a high percentage of us are going to die in unpleasant ways. We had, indeed, one very great advantage over our ancestors—anesthetics; but we still have death sentences in unpleasant ways. It is perfectly ridiculous to go about whimpering and drawing long faces because there has been added one more chance of painful and premature death to a world which already bristled with such chances, and in which death itself was not a chance at all, but a certainty.

This is the first point to be made: and the first action to be taken is to pull ourselves together. If we are all going to be destroyed by a coronavirus, (which it won't – my addition, but remember I'm paraphrasing his writing about an atomic bomb), let that virus, if it comes find us doing sensible and human things—praying, working,

teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts—not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about viruses. They may break our bodies (a microbe can do that, aka coronavirus) but they need not dominate our minds.

So, as people of faith, as believers, we realize that coronavirus can compromise our health, or even take the vulnerable to the next life, but coronavirus cannot take our soul. One simple verse from scripture, Matthew 10:28 speaks volumes. “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna.”

You will recall the Amtrak train that derailed in Port Richmond Philadelphia in May, 2015. It was the deadliest train wreck since 1987. One of the conductors on that train was my music director at St. Benedict. Tom was music director at night and on the weekends, but by day, he was a train conductor. He single handedly emptied two cars of the train of passengers. A hero! He ended up in a back brace and a neck brace, and had a traumatized spirit. He

called to see me. I told him to meet me in Church. And as we sat in the Church, in front of the tabernacle, I asked him, “Tom, what is greater? What is stronger? What is more powerful? A train wreck (for him, literally a train wreck), or the Eucharist? A train wreck or Jesus Christ? And he did not hesitate to say, “Jesus.” And Jesus walked with Tom every step through his emotional and physical scars to emotional and physical health.

We have the Eucharist. And taking the necessary precautions, which we have been doing, we will ask Our Blessed Lord, whose grace is more powerful than any coronavirus, to protect us. Matthew 10:28: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna.”

The woman at the well in today’s gospel looked for love in all the wrong places. Her life was a train wreck. One bad decision after another. It was only spending time with Our Blessed Lord, just Him and her, beside a well, that she found true peace. I will still be spending my holy hours in front of the Blessed Sacrament.

One last thought. In my reading up on coronavirus, I came across news of the Spanish flu epidemic in 1918 that killed 50 million worldwide, 675,000 in the US, and 12,000 in Philadelphia, by far, the hardest hit city. My grandparents were 18 and 16 at the time, and living in South Philadelphia. I never remember them speaking about it. Neither do my brothers and sisters. Why was that? They surely spoke about WWI and WWII. My grandmother sent her brother off to fight WWI and her son to fight WWII, and she talked plenty about those trying times, but not the flu. Perhaps, because the faith of my grandmother, who at 11 was the head of her household, her mother dead and her father a drunk, was a woman of faith, without peer. And perhaps, in her own way, as a woman of prayer, she followed the advice of CS Lewis, advice with which I began this homily.

In prayer, I'd like to close this homily by all of us reciting the prayer to end the coronavirus, found on the inside cover of the hymnal. Together:

Jesus Christ, you traveled through towns and villages "curing every disease and illness." At your command, the

sick were made well. Come to our aid now, in the midst of the global spread of the coronavirus, that we may experience your healing love. Be with the doctors, nurses, researchers and all medical professionals who seek to heal and help those affected and who put themselves at risk in the process. May they know your protection and peace. May victims regain their strength and health through quality medical care. Heal us from our fear. Stay by our side in this time of uncertainty and sorrow. Be with those who have died from the virus. May they be at rest with you in your eternal peace. Hear our prayer, O Divine Physician. Hear our prayer. Amen.