

## **Fr. Joe's Homily, 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent, March 15, 2020 (Coronavirus)**

The last few days have been strange with twists, turns, shocks and disappointments. School has been cancelled and Mass is dispensed for 30 days – a shock. Our phenomenal St. Joseph Altar is cancelled – a shock. I can't travel to Houston for my great nephew's First Communion next weekend – a huge disappointment. Sports seasons are cancelled and so are theatre and concert events, and even Disney World is closed – inconceivable. All that, of course, pales in comparison to the loss of life and suffering around the world due to the coronavirus. We believe that God is in the middle of everything. Where is God in the middle of the coronavirus? We believe that God doesn't send pain and suffering, but God does allow them for a greater good. What is the greater good here?

That was the question I asked Jesus as I was praying Daytime Prayer this week from the Breviary. After several days of exhausting meetings, phone calls and messaging about the virus, I asked that question. I then read a prayer I have been praying every day since Lent began, but this time as I prayed it, it struck me: "The time of penance has come, the time to atone for our sins, the time to seek our salvation." That is the theme of Lent, but this time it seemed squarely to apply to coronavirus. I read on in Psalm 60, entitled "Psalm after a disaster," and it says, "O God, you have broken us. You have made the earth quake, torn it open. O, come and deliver us. Give us help against our foe. The help of man is vain, but God will trample down our foe." I believe those words were God's answer to my prayer about this present danger: it's a time to pray and do penance.

At this point in time, we don't know how much loss and suffering (physical, financial and emotional) this disease will inflict on us and our world, but we Christians, whose faith is grounded in the mystery of Jesus' dying and rising, believe that God will bring good from this illness if we are ready to pray, repent and do penance. For a very long time, much of our world has denied and rejected God – and has decided that man, rather than God, gets to define the truths about the human person. We have built our lives on worldly and false ideals rather than on the true values of God. We have been prideful and defiant. It is time to come home. The good news is that God still is madly in love with us, and God (not man) will defeat our foe, the foe of coronavirus and the foe of sin.

In today's gospel, Jesus conversed with a Samaritan woman who was married and divorced five times and living with a man she wasn't married to. According to Jewish customs, Jesus should not have spoken to this woman because: (1) she was a woman who wasn't a member of his family; (2) she was a Samaritan, and Jews hated Samaritans; and (3) she was broken by her marriages, divorces and concubinage. But Jesus loved her and engaged her in spite of all of that. That is what God does. He loves us in the middle of our brokenness and sin. For her part, the woman just couldn't believe it: "You, a Jew and a man, are talking to me, a Samaritan and a woman?"

Jesus replied that he wanted to give her Living Water, which was the spiritual gift of himself and the Holy Spirit. He understood the woman had tried fruitlessly to find happiness and peace in life through relationships and sex rather than through God. He knew He was the one she was really looking for – she just didn't know it yet.

Jesus didn't give up on her. God didn't give up on her. Sins and failings notwithstanding, she was a beloved daughter of God. And she responded to Jesus' unconditional love. She finally got it that she was God's beloved. She went back to her town and told the people, "Come and see a man who told me [every bad thing I ever did but still loved me]. Could he be the Messiah?" The Samaritan woman was transformed by her encounter with Jesus. She was a new creation.

God hasn't given up on us either – despite our sins, our selfishness, and the failings of ourselves and our world. Jesus died to save us out of love, and that love remains solid. The coronavirus is an opportunity to experience the embrace of God's healing mercy and love. Through our confession of sin, through prayer, through fasting and through penance, the Lord won't just save us from the virus but from the devastating impact of sin on us in this world and the next.

With all the cancellations and closings of businesses, events and activities, and with all the quarantines, we have an unprecedented opportunity to pray – at Mass (if we are healthy) and in the privacy of our home – to pray with the Bible, the rosary, to simply converse with God, or to sit with God in silence. We also have an unprecedented opportunity for penance – small acts of penance – with all this extra time on our hands.

I don't believe it's a coincidence that the coronavirus reached our part of the world, the Christian world, in Lent. Lent is a season of prayer, fasting, penance and charity. Hopefully, prayer and penance become the bedrock of this time of sitting and waiting, rather than vegging out on social media, CNN and Netflix.

We ask you, Lord, to rid us of this heinous disease and of the worse disease of sin and living apart from You. Let us not waste this opportunity to draw closer to You and become a new creation. As only you can do, O Lord, bring blessing and good from the coronavirus.