

CHURCH OF ST. PATRICK

53 ST. PATRICK'S PLACE STATEN ISLAND, NY 10306

June 21, 2020

Dear Parishioner,

During these last three months I have had the opportunity to read a number of books that were sitting unread on my shelves. One of them, "The Great Influenza", interested me because we are going through the same thing one hundred years later, and because my mother was one of the survivors in 1918. In reading the book there appear to be many parallels that show us how history repeats itself, but which also caution us about what we should be doing now. The philosopher George Santayana said: "Those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it."

My mother lived in Whitinsville, Massachusetts, 40 miles south of Camp Devens, and 40 miles west of Commonwealth Pier in Boston, two extreme hot spots in the 1918 pandemic. The First World War was going on in Europe and we were setting up camps in the US to train our troops before they went "over there". Camp Devens was one of those camps, set up to hold 36,000 troops. It actually had 45,000 squeezed together in extremely crowded conditions. Flu struck in early September 1918 (It was the second wave. The first was February – June) and before long 6,000 soldiers were in the infirmary. At one point there were 100 deaths a day. The soldiers from Devens had infected the nearby civilian population while they were on leave, and those from Devens infected other soldiers and spread the pandemic when they were transferred to other bases and later to the "front". The same thing happened around the same time on crowded naval vessels in Boston Harbor and spread to the civilian population, and when 300 sailors arrived from Boston in Philadelphia the flu broke out there also.

One of the biggest problems in 1918 was that the government was not honest with the people about the flu. President Wilson was concentrating on WWI and felt that any bad news about the flu would depress morale and hurt the war effort – so he never said anything. Public health officials went along with the government policy and painted a rosy, inaccurate, misleading picture of the severity of the pandemic. They believed it should be business as usual in order to keep the people focused on the war, the nation's number one priority. All of the nations at war did the same thing including our enemies, the Germans. Spain was a neutral country and so their government was honest about the disease, about the fact that the King had it, and about all the measures that needed to be taken to mitigate it. That is why it was called "Spanish Flu:" because they were the only ones who were honest about it.

Because we were not honest about it in 1918 we did dangerous things. We transferred troops from base to base when we should have quarantined them as soon as we found out they had the flu. We packed soldiers into troop ships even though some of them had just come from camps infected with rampant flu. We had "Liberty Bond Parades" like the one in Philadelphia on September 28, 1918 attended by several hundred thousand people that became a super spreader by September 30. Later businesses closed and there was a general shut-down in some places, but the leadership wouldn't either acknowledge or deal with a coordinated response to the pandemic. They were too busy with the war.

There were at least 3 (probably 4 in some places) waves of flu transmission: from early February – June 1918, then September – December 1918 (by far the worst wave), then early 1919 with cases appearing into 1922. On January 19, 1922 Pope Benedict XV celebrated morning mass at the Vatican. Later that day he felt ill. He died January 22, 1922 of the flu.

President Wilson got the flu April 3, 1919 during the third wave. He was in Europe for the peace talks after WWI. He was holding out against the English and the French for a “peace without victory,” a treaty that would not punish the Germans for starting the war. He felt that the only way to have “peace in our time” would be to treat the vanquished in a humane, gentle, but just way so that they would not leave the peace table with resentments that might lead to another war. Then he got the flu. It affected his thinking. It did something to his brain – from his sick bed he signed the treaty that he had been lobbying against, a treaty that humiliated and oppressed Germany and led to Hitler and WWII. The flu had affected his brain, four months later giving him a massive stroke that disabled him for the rest of his presidency.

So – what does history tell us? What should we learn from 1918? We learn that it is important to be honest and realistic about the pandemic. When we know what we are dealing with we know how to deal with it. We should not be too complacent thinking that we have beat “this thing” (at least until we have an effective vaccine) because the disease can and probably will come in waves. We should not gather in crowds, like they did in Philadelphia, because that is the absolute best way to spread the disease. We should not act like it is over until it really is over.

So – we begin to re-open, but very cautiously. Jesus tells us: “Be on guard!” We are tired of being “locked up.” We are tired of living isolated and truncated lives. We want to get back to normal. Enough of all this. That is just the way the people felt and acted between the waves of the 1918 – 1920 pandemic and the consequences were grave, especially in the case of the second wave where most of the death occurred. And, although people over 65 died, the majority of the 675,000 deaths came between the ages of 20 –40. We need to stay vigilant. God gave us our lives and He will care for us throughout our lives, but as Jesus told the devil when he told Him to dive off the top of the temple and let the angels catch Him; “Don’t tempt God.” God expects us to cooperate with His work of taking care of us. We can’t let our guard down.

But, on the other hand, Jesus doesn’t want us to live in fear. In this Sunday’s Gospel (Mt 10) he tells us: “Don’t be afraid of anything!” Fear is useless. When the object of our fear fails to happen we have wasted our time worrying about fantasy. When the object of our fear happens we have still wasted our time focusing on the future rather than living in the present. We are in God’s hands now and forever. He is committed to us for all eternity and will bring us through everything into the fullness of His Presence.

So – we open up carefully, taking due diligence in protecting our lives and the lives of those around us. But we open up with trust in God who holds us in the palm of His Hands.

God bless you.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jeffrey B. Conway". The signature is written in black ink and has a fluid, connected style.

Jeff Conway, Pastor

JPC/smb