

Good Friday 2020

Much has changed since Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent on February 26th. When ashes were imposed on our foreheads back six weeks ago, social distancing was not yet part of the vernacular. Mass quantities of paper towels were available on supermarket shelves. Hand sanitizer was there for the taking. But even more significant—gatherings with families and friends were just part of ordinary life. Work was something that you reported to and did. One's livelihood was just assumed. And perhaps, greatest of all, we took for granted our health and the health of our loved ones.

Ashes marking the start of Lent that were imposed upon our heads in the shape of a cross on that Wednesday in February and they were, by the next day, washed away and for many of us forgotten and moved on from. And while some of us might have been struggling with individual crosses in our lives, these crosses were not seen or known by the vast majority of people around us. They were private and personal. Not the stuff of headlines, not the stuff of breaking news. Much has changed since then, has it not? The crosses we and others are bearing are written about in newspapers, spoken of in conversations, visible on the faces of the people we pass on the street or in the supermarket. We see the cross that is carried by nurses and doctors, respiratory therapists and medical professionals. We see the cross of fatigue and worry on the face of the neighbor who is caring for her elderly parent. We see the cross of the 97 year old parishioner who, out of concern for her health is confined to her home, and wrote to me recently telling me that these are the worst days of her life. We see the cross of a friend of mine who was unable to visit his ill sister who, as a nursing home resident, became ill and ultimately passed away. We see the cross of the parent who is worried about his ability to provide for his family as these days unfold. And we see the cross of adult children whose father has died and who are unable to gather with their extended family and friends for the wake and funeral mass.

Yes, our Lenten journey this year is very different from what it has been in the past. The cross of Covid 19 is very much part of our lived and shared experience. The cross this year isn't something that was placed on our foreheads, washed away and moved on from. The cross this Lent has been placed on our shoulders and is being carried in a way unlike any Lent that I can remember in my many years of walking on this earth.

And today—Good Friday—we come to the time in our Church’s liturgical year when we especially focus on the cross. It is the day in which St. John tells of Jesus’ crucifixion but also wants us to know in no uncertain terms that Jesus was in full control and gave his life over in complete love. It is the day in which Isaiah, the great Old Testament prophet, tells us in our first reading of God’s suffering servant. Isaiah describes him as one who is seen by onlookers as stricken and afflicted, crushed and cut off from the land of the living, spurned and avoided and held in no esteem. But then Isaiah goes on to say that in God’s eyes, this servant of his shall prosper, shall be raised high and shall be exalted. It is the day in which a cross is unveiled and we respond three times to the invocation, “Behold the wood of the cross, on which hung the salvation of the world.”

Yes, we today, ever aware of the crosses that have been carried over these recent weeks, are invited to look to the cross of Jesus Christ. We look to that cross as that which sheds light on the crosses that we bear in our lives today. We look to the cross that reveals to us the depth of God’s love for us. We look to the cross by which we too pass from death into new life. And that brings us to ourselves.

I began this homily by observing how so much has changed around us since Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent. I end by asking very simply what has changed within me? Over four weeks ago, prior to the suspension of public Masses and many of the other measures that have been undertaken in recent weeks to flatten the curve, parishioners and friends gathered here at St. Agnes Cathedral one Saturday afternoon for a Memorial Mass of a young, seventh grade parishioner named Mary who had died from cancer two years ago this past March. She was a remarkable young girl who loved people and life and was unabashed about praying the rosary and looking with trust to God. At the time of the Mass, although gatherings were still being allowed, I was also very aware of the news reports that were indicating the potential severity of covid 19. And as I listened to the news about this virus, I began to sense ever more deeply how Mary must have felt as she faced the uncertainty and the ensuing cross of her own illness. I began to better understand how Mary must have felt in realizing that not everything was in her control, that the future was a mystery and that questions of why go seemingly unanswered. And in grasping more fully the “what” that young Mary faced in those final years of her life, I looked to her as an example of the “how” we can face the “what.” And that “how” was with simple child-like trust. Child-like trust comes from hearing Jesus proclaiming from the

cross, “I thirst” and knowing that Jesus was not just speaking here of physical thirst but the thirst and desire that St. John tells us he had for the Samaritan women’s faith and the desire he has to bring each of us into new life. Child-like trust comes from seeing the love Jesus has for each of us which impelled him to shed the very last drop of his blood for us. Child-like trust comes from knowing that the absurdly high amount of 100 pounds of myrrh and aloe that were brought to the tomb were not to prepare a corpse but rather to prepare a tomb where the body of Jesus the bridegroom could await his bride the church. Child-like trust comes from understanding that Jesus’ final cry, “It is finished” are not words of surrender and defeat, but a cry that all has been accomplished, all has been completed. They are words exclaiming that Jesus has been faithful to the mission he was sent from heaven to bring about—humanity’s reconciliation with God. The gates of heaven are now opened and, in the words of St. Paul, nothing can separate us from the love of God.

In Bishop Barres’ Lenten Pastoral Letter, *The Great Week*, Bishop Barres reminds the homilist on Good Friday that a brief homily is to be given by the priest. I apologize for not quite following that injunction. I would, however, also call our attention to his words at the end of the letter that are addressed to all of us. We are called, Bishop Barres tells each of us, to “remember that the Lord Himself has invited you to make this pilgrimage [of Lent] with Him. And there are special graces he has in store for you that He can only impart to you in this way through this journey.”

What are those special graces that God has imparted upon you on your Lenten Journey? Have you changed? And if so, how? My prayer is that whether the cross has led you to a deeper child-like trust or some other grace that it strengthens you to bear the crosses of today and tomorrow. And that it enables you to bear much fruit today and in the years to come.