



Speaking the truth in love

Eph 4:15

The first Holy Week was a rollercoaster of emotions: Palm Sunday jubilation, Maundy Thursday terror, Good Friday despair, Holy Saturday numbness, Easter exultation.

We've been through similar mixed feelings this year with drought and fires, then welcome rains, then the COVID19 pandemic and daily restrictions, and all the see-sawing about whether the situation is improving or not and for how long.

We can feel like those first apostles – grieving, apprehensive, isolated, insecure – and like them struggle to make sense of it all. So here are a few thoughts...

First, humanity has known plagues before. Waves of what was probably smallpox claimed 5 to 10 million lives in the Antonine Plague (165-80 AD) and a million more in the Plague of Cyprian (249-70 AD). While some blamed the Christians, the fact was that they distinguished themselves by staying and caring for the victims. This was a major reason why Christianity took off so spectacularly amongst the poor of the Roman world: Christians cared!

The Justinian or First Bubonic Plague (541-2) took as many as 50 million to their graves. Eight centuries on, it returned as the Black Death (1331-53) to claim another 100 million or so, halving the population of Europe. It recurred in succeeding centuries and each time people like Saints Catherine of Siena and Charles Borromeo demonstrated Christian heroism in caring for the plague victims.

If humanity has been through plagues before, so has Australia. The Third Bubonic Plague (1855-1960) traversed the globe, killing 15 million. When it arrived in Sydney in 1900, the Q-station at Manly received those infected and the Plague Department ordered houses in the Rocks burned, rodents rounded up and streets disinfected. It worked. Only 1371 cases were reported across Australia, with 535 deaths.

Spanish Flu followed fast on the heels of World War I, claiming perhaps 50 million more lives. When it hit Australia in 1919 it quickly infected a third of the population. 15,000 died. Institutions were closed, public gatherings restricted, then all assemblies prohibited. Eventually it passed.

ooo

After Good Friday comes Easter, after the tomb new life.

Spanish flu put so much ordinary life on hold. But the Australian community picked up, applying pent-up energies to economic and social growth.

The epidemic also closed churches and stopped public Masses. But Australian Catholics bounced back, recovering from their long Eucharistic fast by building churches and doubling their practising rate (to two-thirds by the 1950s).

So far, COVID19 has been relatively merciful, claiming only 70,000 lives worldwide, 37 in Australia. The public health response has been rapid and effective; so have people's prayers. Without being complacent, there's every reason to expect Church and society to recover, and sooner rather than later. We could even be stronger, more united, more idealistic than before - if we learn the lessons.

ooo

The Easter God doesn't just watch the human drama from the sidelines or come along for the ride. He joins humanity so as to redeem humanity, to promise more renewal to come, and to draw us into building that new world with Him.

Such beliefs, dreams and bonding - what we Christians call *faith, hope and love* - are the Easter call.

Think of the countless acts of selfless service by health workers caring for the sick right now, or by families and neighbours sustaining each other through isolation and grief, or by researchers seeking a cure and essential workers keeping the wheels of our society turning, or by those lacking work still looking out for others, or by those leading us through all this. See what human beings are capable of - with good will and divine grace.

A novel coronavirus calls for novel pastoral responses. By live-streaming Sydney Catholics are able to participate in religious services from 'the domestic Church' of their home. Churches leave lights on as a source of comfort to passers-by. Bells ring out five times a day to remind people to pray for all affected. Priests and pastoral teams call isolated parishioners to wish them a happy Easter and to ascertain their needs.

CatholicCare, St Vincent de Paul and the parishes have increased local support services. Education continues through online schools and universities, and fee relief is offered to those experiencing hardship. Pastoral care is delivered safely and imaginatively. Needed groceries and medications, or Easter cards and chocolate eggs, or a Palm Sunday palm are dropped at people's doors...

In times like these people of faith and ideals really shine. Australians really shine.

On Easter night, in any ordinary year, the Paschal candle is lit from the Easter fire and carried into the Church as a symbol of Christ - our light returned and hope restored. This year there'll be no congregation to light their own candles from His. But already people are demonstrating that Easter light in their acts of kindness, their pulling together, their intercession and their sharing.



Most Rev. Anthony Fisher OP, DD BA LIB BTheol DPhil
Archbishop of Sydney
