

FATHER ANDY WRITES: Part 4

I am beginning to see a subtle connection between the coronavirus pandemic and the season of Lent. On Ash Wednesday the Gospel reading at Mass told us, in the words of Jesus, “When you pray, do not imitate the hypocrites, who love to say their prayers standing up in churches and at the street corners for people to see them. I tell you, they have had their reward. But when you pray, go to your private room and, when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in that secret place, and your Father, who sees all that is done in secret will reward you.” (Matt 6:5-6). Jesus spent 40 days (willingly) in the desert and was truly tested. He fasted, prayed and struggled, but came out a stronger person, with a sense of mission to create a greater and more beautiful world. We have been plunged (most of us, unwillingly) into this desert of testing, which may go on longer than 40 days. We have to fast from our loved ones, our family, our friends and our social active lives, but we can emerge from this crisis with a greater and more beautiful understanding of who and what we are and how we can make this world a better place to live in.

I must admit that I have rarely celebrated Mass privately before this endemic was thrust upon us forcing us into semi-seclusion. However, it has created for us a Lenten experience we could never have envisaged. I now feel that the solitary Masses I celebrate are more meaningful because they are connecting me to all whom Christ died for. In the Masses I pray for everyone in the parishes of Dinnington, Kiveton and Maltby; for all those who have been affected with the coronavirus; those who have died from it and for those who have been bereaved. I also remember those who look after the sick, especially in the NHS and the many living in enforced isolation.

But it is also important to remember that the Eucharistic celebration, that is the Mass, is not limited to the church or to the priest. We are, all of us together, a Eucharistic community and even our closed churches cannot, in any way, prevent us from living our lives as a Eucharistic People.

While it's great to have live streamed Masses broadcast into our living rooms, which helps to connect to the wider Church, it is ultimately a passive experience, as all television is. We cannot truly participate in the celebration of the Mass on TV. On the other hand however, simply being physically present at a Mass does not guarantee that a person is fully participating. We need to come to appreciate that the Mass is not something that we attend or which is given to us by the priest, but an experience which we all fully participate - priest and people alike.

First of all, the Eucharist is about sharing in a meal – food and drink – bread and wine. Jesus loved to share in a meal and the Gospels are full of stories where Jesus gathers around a table to eat and drink with all kinds of people. Even living on our own we can give thanks to God for the food we eat. In the old days it was called “grace before and after meals.” We can be particularly thankful if other people are doing our shopping for us, or in some cases cooking meals for us and bringing them to our door. St Paul reminds us in his first letter to the Corinthians “.....every time you eat the bread and drink the cup, you are proclaiming his (Jesus) death....”

Secondly, prayer unites us, even when we pray alone. We are not really alone when we pray because the presence of Christ resides within us. That's why we never pray, even on our own, “My Father, who art in heaven....” But always “Our Father.....” and “forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” It's always

including other people. Praying for others and giving people a call on the telephone or through an email or even a text keeps us united in prayer. Being isolated does not mean we become passive recipients of the good will and kindness of others, but prayer makes us active members of the Body of Christ reaching out to others. Remember St Teresa of Lisieux, (commonly known as “the little flower”) who became a nun at the age of 15 years. She died of tuberculosis 9 years later at the age of 24 years. These years were uneventful and “ordinary”. Yet she stuck bravely to her “little way” of simple trust and love of God and her neighbour. Her neighbours were not only the sisters in the convent with her, but she united herself with all people everywhere, especially the poor and sick. It is no wonder therefore, that the Church has made her the patron saint of missionaries. Even though she never physically left Lisieux, her loving heart reached out to the whole world in prayer. Just like the human heart pumps blood around the body, so Teresa’s heart of prayer was the driving force of love that flowed around the world. In this way our own prayer, no matter how solitary it may be, is a wellspring of love that reaches out to the whole world. Oh yes, indeed we are an active, engaging, and empowering Eucharistic community, which gives life to the world.

Joke of the week? Two fishermen are sitting with their legs in the water when a shark swims up and bites one man’s leg off. “Hey, a shark has just bitten my leg off!” the man screams. “Which one?” asks the other. “How should I know – all these sharks look the same to me!”