

FATHER ANDY WRITES

We are now journeying through Holy Week like we have never done before. It certainly is a strange and unsettling journey. Most of us are journeying on our own, wondering how to navigate, asking ourselves what we need to the journey and how best to “celebrate” the glorious Triduum, that is “The Lord’s Supper” on Maundy Thursday, “The commemoration of the Lord’s Passion and death” on Good Friday, and the “Easter Vigil” on Holy Saturday night, with the climax of the Resurrection of the Lord.

I am preparing for a videoed Mass for the coming weekend, which I hope will be available to all those who have the technology to receive it, but for now I want to say a few words about the Triduum in the light of the coronavirus pandemic.

I was saddened to hear about Neil Bailey, a deacon at St Peter-in-Chains in Doncaster. Neil died early Saturday morning from the COVID 19 virus. Neil had underlying breathing problems. We remember Neil, his wife and family at this time. All priests over seventy years have been instructed not to take on any pastoral responsibilities and so it falls on us “younger” priests to pick up any sick calls and funerals in and around the diocese. The coronavirus seems to be getting closer to home every day.

Father Richard Rohr reminds us that “we do not handle suffering; suffering handles us” and it is the way we respond to suffering that will make a difference. I invite you to join in prayer for all those who are suffering as a result of the coronavirus, for those who have already lost their lives, and for those who are healthcare workers attending to the sick:

“God, our Father, we ask that all who are affected by this virus be held in your loving care. In this time of uncertainty, help us to know what is ours to do. We know you did not cause this suffering but that you are with us in it and through it. Help us to recognise your presence in acts of kindness, in moments of silence, and in the beauty of the created world. Grant peace and protection to all of humanity for their well-being and for the benefit of the entire world.”

It is amazing that Jesus went through so much suffering himself and even more amazing that God, his Father, allowed him to go through so much suffering. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed, “Father, If you are willing, take this cup away from me. Nevertheless, let your will be done, not mine.” (Luke 22:42-43). It seems that God, the Father was not willing to take the cup (of suffering) away from his Son, Jesus. But this did not stop Jesus praying and accepting the Father’s will. This is what we call “deep” acceptance, as opposed to “conventional” acceptance.

Conventional acceptance is when, for example a doctor tells someone that they have a terminal cancer and the patient says to himself and others, that he has accepted the situation for what it is and resigns himself to whatever the consequences are – such as chemo, losing hair, suffering nausea etc. This form of acceptance is a kind of “putting up with it” and in a way reluctantly taking things on board. But a deep acceptance consists of knowing “this is how it should be”.

Michelle, a friend and colleague of mine, who died of cancer at the age of 38 years, is an amazing example of deep acceptance. When I went to see her in hospital, the

day before she died, I asked her, “Do you still love your cancer?” to which she responded, “Of course I do!” Michelle came to love everything in the end. She was one of those women who would never “fight” her cancer. She came to realise that picking and choosing what you want to love is not really love at all, but self-interest. She knew that if she “hated” her cancer, she would begin to reject anything and anyone who would not give her what she wants or threaten what she believes. No, she would love her cancer because it was part of who she was and therefore part of life. In doing so, Michelle loved everything, because it was reality. When you fight against reality, you lose, and she would add wryly, but only always!

So deep acceptance is not about accepting the situation that brings pain and discomfort, but in accepting the present moment for what it is. The pain does not even need to be named (cancer or otherwise), but simply acknowledged as a sensation of what is happening. There is no longer any desire for things to be otherwise, and to understand that what is happening is right and fitting, not wanting things to be any different. This is how Jesus accepted his suffering in the garden of Gethsemane. It seems to me that this was the kind of spirit, the spirit of people like Michelle that enabled Jesus to accept being arrested, to be betrayed, to be denied, to be tortured and scourged and to be condemned to death, to pick up the Cross and carry it to Calvary for crucifixion.

At this time when we are surrounded by fear and anxiety about the spread of the coronavirus, we can turn to the Lord Jesus, knowing that as he willingly faces death on the Cross, we too can find strength in the deep acceptance of what is. The coronavirus pandemic is here among us – it has been thrust upon us – a cross to carry. Acceptance does not mean we resolve to do nothing as if to give up or give in. On the contrary – we carry the cross by doing what is right - following the instructions given us by the medical profession and the government. But we do not get caught up in the details of the “what ifs?” and the “how longs?” and allow things simply to be as they are. Jesus prayed dying on the Cross, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit”. We too pray that we may put ourselves whole heartedly into God’s hands in these last few days of Holy Week as we await in confidence for the new life of the Easter Resurrection.