

Again Fr Andy has been busy.  
2020 THE YEAR OF THE CORONAVIRUS

No doubt that the year 2020 will be remembered as the year of the coronavirus, as well as the year of social distancing, lockdowns and staying at home, the pubs and the churches closed - even when the sun was shining, flowers were blooming and birds were singing the songs of spring.

I celebrated my 66th birthday in a bubble in my back garden and next week I had planned to visit Oberammergau for the Passion Play as part of my 40th anniversary in the Priesthood. Now I will have to wait until June 2022. Still, I realise that I am one of the lucky ones, when I become mindful of the effect of the virus across the world and think about how many people have suffered. Most of humanity was engulfed in an unprecedented crisis. I don't think I have ever faced such a drastic and deadly situation in my entire life. The coronavirus is a show of Nature's power, and is beyond human control. Even though we have come a long way in science and technology it is highly conceited to believe we can conquer nature. It seems that through the coronavirus Nature is reminding us of our human vulnerability.

It is only since our amazing advances in science and technology that humans have come to believe that they are separate to Nature, and in many ways above it, rendering Nature subservient to human dominance. Rather than looking at the root causes of the coronavirus, governments, industrialists and scientists are seeking vaccines to protect humans against it. Of course, vaccines may be a temporary solution, but we need to think and act more intelligently and more wisely, so rather than vaccinating against the disease, we need to address the cause.

In order to do this, we need to learn to live in harmony with Nature and within its laws. We are as much as part of Nature as any other form of life. The very first lesson we should learn from this virus is to live in harmony with Nature. When I look at a beautiful tree or flower in deep appreciation I begin to understand that I can give something back to Nature in this simple act of looking. It is as if the tree is (perhaps for the first time) appreciating itself through the eyes of the human. Before humans came along the tree, and all of Nature, simply existed with no one to recognise its beauty. The tree, and all of Nature, becomes aware of its own beauty through the human – because we are not separate from Nature.

This awareness of Nature is a beautiful gift to life and humans have contributed much over the last two and a half million years. However, in the last hundred years human activity has been the cause of diminishing biodiversity, increasing carbon emissions and greenhouse gases that are causing climate breakdown. Due to human activity the oceans are polluted by plastic, the soil is poisoned with artificial chemicals, and the rainforests are disappearing at an incredible speed. It's no wonder when humans stop appreciating Nature, and act negatively towards it, that disastrous consequences happen. It is as if Nature fights back in the form of floods, forest fires, heat waves, the coronavirus in the short term, and global warming and climate breakdown in the long term. On the whole Nature is kind and generous, benign and caring and in Nature everything passes. So we humans need to respond to this crisis positively and use it as an opportunity to redesign our agriculture, our economy, our political systems and our way of life. We need to learn to respect Nature and relearn to celebrate the abundant beauty and diversity of life. Remember, what we do to Nature we ultimately do to ourselves because we are totally interconnected. The coronavirus has shown us just how interconnected we are! I think that the biggest tragedy of the coronavirus pandemic would be going back to business as usual when it is "over." Before this crisis societies all over the world were gripped by the pandemic of greed, a subtle deadly virus. This greed virus has caused the death of forests, the death of lakes and rivers, of millions of species; it is caused the death of children, of people living in poverty, victims of war, the deaths of refugees. The greed virus leaves behind a legacy of death and destruction.

In a recent Guardian article poet and novelist Ben Okri wrote:

“The real tragedy would be if we come through this pandemic without changing for the better, it would be as if all the deaths and suffering it caused....would mean nothing.”

Nature has gone through some major crises itself, but has always come through and in the process has given birth to Life in abundance. Maybe this painful pandemic can give birth to a new humanity, creating a consciousness of caring, sharing, love and compassion. We have already seen some wonderful signs of this beautiful growth – the doctors, nurses, carers who have put themselves in harm’s way, serving the victims of the virus; the hundreds and thousands of ordinary people who have volunteered to support the NHS; countless numbers of helpers in local communities caring for the elderly, the sick and vulnerable; the amazing growing awareness that has brought about the Black Lives Matter movement towards racial justice and equality; seeing that over 4,500 homeless people in Britain have been given a place to live and no longer have to beg on the streets! I have seen at first hand in the hospital where I work and in the parishes I serve, the marvellous care, kindness and practical love, and it is wonderful to see. Such an outpouring of generosity, solidarity and compassion has given so many people a deep sense of belonging, profound gratitude and unconditional love.

On a wider scale, the Russians have sent planeloads of medical equipment to Italy. The Chinese did the same for Serbia. Animosities have been forgotten, nations have been cooperating, helping and supporting one another in the spirit of mutual aid rather than the usual competing and fighting. If these spiritual qualities can be displayed and practised in these abnormal times, then why not in normal times? We have seen a reduction in pollution, clear blue skies over the cities of Bombay and Beijing, carbon emissions have gone down, and people are able to breathe pure air again. If we can collaborate and cooperate, love and respect one another in abnormal times and in abnormal conditions, why not in normal times?

As the Indian writer Arundhati Roy has said: “Historically pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.” The lockdown in so many countries, large and small, has shown that governments, businesses and ordinary people can come together and take a big economic risk in the interest of the greater good – in this case the health of the whole of society. At the moment we are as human beings sitting on a branch of Nature. If we cut the branch upon which we are sitting, we are bound to fall. As Pope Francis tells us - we must care for the earth as we care for ourselves. To love God and to love our neighbour and our neighbour is not just other humans, but every species, and indeed the earth itself.

This Sunday marks the wonderful feast of the Saints Peter and Paul, two great pillars of the Church. The Gospel recalls Peter’s profession of Faith and it’s no stretch of the imagination to understand that Jesus in giving Peter the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, he is entrusting Peter not just to look after the Church, otherwise he would have just been given the keys of the Church. No, to be given the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven is a commission for the Church to reach out to the world and through the Gospel bring new life for all. In this sense we are, as Disciples of Christ, all Keyworkers!

PS “Apparently, one in five people in the world are Chinese. Now, there are five people in my family, so one of them must be Chinese. It’s either my mum or my dad. Or my older brother, Colin. Or my younger brother, Ho-Chan-Chu. But I think it’s Colin.

This bloke came up to me and said, “You look like a medieval string instrument.” I said, “You calling me a lyre?”

This guy was playing the piano in a bar when an elephant walked in. As he was playing the elephant started crying his eyes out. He said to the elephant, “Do you recognise the tune?” “No”, said the elephant, “I recognise the ivory!”