

## BLESSED ARE THE PERSECUTED

How times have changed! Not long ago it was commonly accepted by the majority of Catholics that to miss Sunday Mass was a (mortal) sin, but now, under strict lockdown restrictions it seems that attending Mass would be considered a sin as it would be breaking distancing rules. While there is no longer, in the present circumstances, any obligation to be at Mass on Sunday, we still do have a commitment and a responsibility to be a true disciple of Christ. This may be expressed in a myriad ways – our prayer, our fasting, our almsgiving, our reading of scripture, and our practical love and concern for our neighbour. While our Christian communities are “resting” our personal lives as Christians should not be anything other than active. Difficult as it may be to sustain and nourish our faith without the support of the community, we find strength in the lives of those who have been “martyrs” to the cause, both in the past as well as in the present. They give us a shining example of perseverance in times of “persecution.”

Coronavirus has brought its form persecution that has damaged us deeply, but we are surviving and doing all we can to “keep the faith” alive by zoom Masses, the WhatsApp connection, streamed Masses and personalised prayer. Even the English Reformation did not stop Catholics from holding private Masses wherever they could, where hundreds of people were hiding priests in their homes and risking their lives in carrying out these courageous acts. When the Protestants broke away from the Catholic Church, its Reformers wanted to get rid of the Catholic Church in England and with cunning audacity they went straight for the jugular – they were conscious of the fact that for Catholics the Mass lies at the heart of their faith and so if you can get rid of the Mass you will get rid of Catholics! For without the Mass the Catholic faith would surely wane and eventually fade away. And, of course, the most effective way to get rid of the Mass was to get rid of priests, because you cannot have Mass without a priest! Hundreds of people were killed for their Faith, including our own Blessed William Richardson, who was ordained a priest for nine years before he was eventually arrested, hung, drawn and quartered for treason. Despite no public Masses and the number of Catholics in England diminishing, the Faith of the loyal Catholics continued to thrive. But today we now have this most subtle persecution brought about through the coronavirus, which is threatening our communities in a way we would have never thought possible.

During the English Reformation it was calculated that some 600 Catholics died in the persecutions that took place. This global virus has killed over 200,000 lives and almost 45,000 in Britain. The virus does not discriminate between religious affiliation – it has attacked ALL Churches, ALL Mosques, ALL Temples, ALL Synagogues and ALL places of worship. Though we are slowly recovering we still have a long way to go. From this mire into which we have been plunged by the coronavirus, we have seen new breed of “martyrs” emerging.

The Black Lives Matter movement has created a new wave of passionate perseverance instigated by the brutal killing of George Floyd by a white police officer. On Sunday of last week something amazing happened – a statue was thrown into a river! The statue was in the image of a man called Edward Colston. He was a board member and ultimately the deputy governor of the Royal African Company. In his role he oversaw the transportation into slavery of an estimated 84,000 Africans. Of them, around 19,000 died in the stagnant bellies of the company’s slave ships during the infamous Middle Passage from the coast of Africa to the plantations of the new world. The bodies of the dead were cast into the water where they were devoured by sharks. This man has been honoured for 125 years in Bristol and put literally on a pedestal in the heart of the city. That is until Sunday, when the bronze effigy of the infamous and prolific slave trader was dragged through the streets of the city that was built on his wealth, and dumped, like his victims (martyrs) of the Middle Passage, into the water. The statue of Colston now lies in a history museum – not as an attack on history, but in the making of history. The virus of racism is being tackled by a fervent resolution of black people to bring

about justice, peace and equality – these who have suffered and died through racial discrimination and injustice are also martyrs in our present age.

But it does not stop there. One thing that I am certain of is the long term effects that this pandemic will have on the mental health of our nation. Already there has been an increase in the number of people who have been admitted to the wards in the hospital where I am chaplain. The range of people that are prone to having mental health problems during this crisis is phenomenal – doctors, nurses, medics and care assistants on the front line as key workers, those who have lost loved ones to the virus, those who are isolated and lonely due to the lockdown restrictions. I read a poem recently by a Dorothy Duffy, whose sister Rose died of the disease; it's called *My Sister Is Not a Statistic*:

"...Rose died without the soft touch of a loved one's hand. Without a feathered kiss upon her forehead. Without the muted murmur of familiar family voices gathered around her bed."

At least Dorothy found a way to express her tumult of emotions in the face of the virus's assault on our collective sensibilities. But there are thousands who cannot find a way to articulate their sorrow, their isolation and their disorientation. Losing someone in such circumstances is tragic, and then forced to grieve alone is totally heartbreaking. Without the rituals that so often help people through bereavement, people are left to suffer alone, leaving a deep and lasting pain in their hearts.

This Sunday we celebrate the feast of Corpus Christi – the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. It is usually a time when we focus on the Eucharist. There would be Corpus Christi processions and many parishes would have been celebrating first Holy Communion and Confirmation. It is somewhat ironically cruel that we celebrate a feast that highlights the sharing of the Body and Blood of Christ when our parishioners are unable to participate in its celebration. To be deprived of such a great gift is heart rendering, especially when the Gospel for the feast has Jesus tell us, "...if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you cannot have life in you. Anyone who does eat my flesh and drink my blood has eternal life and I will raise them up on the last day." (John 6:54). For the last three months parishioners have been unable to receive Holy Communion. However, our first reading from the book of Deuteronomy reminds us "...we do not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."

There's a lovely story about Cardinal Basil Hume who went to visit Ethiopia in the middle of the 1984-86 famine. When he arrived there by helicopter a small boy of about 10 years came up to him and took him by the hand. As the boy led the Cardinal around he made two gestures: with one hand he pointed to his mouth, and with the other he took the Cardinal's hand and rubbed it against his cheek. Later the Cardinal said, "Here was an orphan boy who was alone and starving. He showed me two fundamental hungers in people's lives. With one gesture he showed me his hunger for food, and with the other his hunger for love."

When I was ill last year it was not the Eucharist that fed me – I was so bad I couldn't say Mass, not even privately! But I was certainly fed by the love, the prayers and support of all the parishioners of St Joseph's, Kiveton and St Mary Magdalene's. It was that love that brought me back to health and gave me peace in my heart. So never underestimate the love people have for the Lord and for one another – that love will feed us for as long as is necessary. Our faith and our perseverance will not be lost.