

The gospel reading for today is John 9:1-41:

22 March 2020

We are living in a very strange time. The fires, the smoke, the water shortage, the floods have passed: the football season is starting up and the grounds are closed to spectators. The churches have shut their doors. There are no services of worship except those which are online. The streets are quiet. The schools are still open, but for how long .. in Fiji the school holidays are starting early ... there are travel bans and we are using different words during the course of the day: coronavirus, COVID 19, pandemic, 'social distancing', 'self-isolation'. In the news media we hear about panic buying; there is a fear abounding and we see people on TV fighting over toilet rolls.

This is not the first time in history the church has had to respond with viral threats - and, in today's language, with biosecurity. Way back in time - in the 14th century - Europe was ravaged by bubonic plague, the Black Death. And, again, just after the first world war ended, the Spanish flu circled the globe and many again lost their lives.

COVID 19 is not the Black Death; it is not the Spanish flu. There have been huge advances in medical knowledge as well as skill in handling threats like these. Our political systems and the health experts are able to advise us in ways that reach us all through the news media and through social media too. COVID 19 is not the Black Death; it is not the Spanish flu.

But that does not mean that there are not lessons to be learnt from the past. Think about how you respond now when you hear someone cough; think about how you respond when you hear someone has tested positive to the virus. One of the temptations is to blame the person; sometimes that is because they belong to a particular race (in the current situation, it may be they are Chinese, Iranian or Italian, perhaps). In times gone by the Jews and lepers were made into scapegoats.

We may not ask the question found in the John reading - 'who sinned?' - 'was it this man or his parents?'; but it can be rather easy for a variation on those kind of questions to arise. For that reason it is a good idea to take a closer look at John 9:1-41

Of course this reading has nothing to do with Coronavirus. The man is born blind and he is healed. He has not tested negative for anything. Jesus simply says that he was born blind and that neither he, nor his parents have sinned for him to be born in this way. The man and his parents then find themselves on the receiving end of many questions. He is put under much pressure both by the people who have seen him daily begging - is he the same person to which he responds "I am the man". He is also put under intense pressure by the religious leaders the Pharisees, who want to know who carried out the healing. They are worried about Jesus and his possible effect on the people. They insist that the man has been born into sin and it is not right that he should be teaching them.

There are a lot of questions and answers in this story. It comes to a conclusion with the man born blind now saying that he believes in Jesus; the one who was born blind is now physically able and spiritually able to see who Jesus is. The Pharisees are left to wonder if Jesus is talking about them when he speaks about those who see and cannot see because they are spiritually blind.

One aspect of what we see in this story is the willingness for the crowd to link a physical defect or illness (blindness) with sin. We see people and the Pharisees turn on the man and his parents. In response to this pressure Jesus heals, says he is the light of the world, and that he has come into this world for a judgement.

In the gospel there are no reporters, no news media to cover the event, but we can gauge the mood. You think that a man being healed of his blindness would be an occasion for great rejoicing but here it is the opposite. Is it because the crowd don't understand? Is it because they are afraid of what they do not understand? In their jumping to conclusions, in their desire to think the worst and assign blame (sin), they show themselves to be spiritually blind.

In the days ahead people are likely to be afraid; there will be instances of panic; some people may be targeted as the cause of the problem:

of course we need to exercise care and be responsible about how we care for our own health and hygiene in a time like this. And, of course, we need to do this because we don't wish to be bearers of the virus ourselves and put others at risk.

But, if and when, we find some people are made objects of fear, or become stereotypes because they have acquired the virus, then let us heed the words of Jesus: neither this man or his parents sinned. Jesus is the light of the word: he did not come to spread fear and panic. Rather, in John's gospel, he called people to 'believe in me', which for Christians must mean acting in a way that is full of care, compassion and mercy. In times like this, yes, we need to be careful and responsible but we also need to be looking out for our neighbours and helping them in ways which do not put them at risk.