

Statement for Website  
19 March 2020

Most people think of Apollo 13 as a movie starring Tom Hanks and Kevin Bacon. In April 1970, I lived through the real thing.

I have always considered the safe return of the Apollo 13 astronauts as the greatest feat accomplished by American engineers and scientists in the Twentieth Century. Three astronauts who had just left earth orbit had the side of their Service Module blown out and people at NASA had to find a way to keep them alive and bring them home. Those astronauts had to fly around the moon before they could return to earth. They had to worry about such problems as how to stop the increasing concentration of carbon dioxide from killing the astronauts, how to conserve electric power to keep their instruments functioning and how to line up the spacecraft so it could re-enter the atmosphere. They had to do this with only the items available in the spacecraft and no manual to tell them what to do. They had to think critically, clearly and practically in order to solve every problem (and there were many). In other words, they had to make it up as they went along. While everyone in the world was worried about the astronauts, the tension in the NASA Control Room must have been extreme. Yet, those three astronauts came home alive.

In today's Gospel, (Matthew's version of the Christmas story) Joseph faces a serious (but somewhat less dramatic) situation. His betrothed (Mary) is pregnant. He is not the child's biological father. The Jewish Law tells him he must divorce Mary because the relationship has been violated. He is an honourable man and knows what he must do. Then the angel tells him all of this is part of God's plan. Imagine what must have been going through Joseph's mind after the angel left: Can what the angel said be true or is it an illusion? If I do remain with Mary, what are the family and friends going to think? What was so special about this child? Joseph faced a situation for which he was totally unprepared, his support system was limited and possibly unreliable and the end result was unknown. What did the future hold in store for him? From now on, he was going to have to make it up as he went along.

Our current situation is a lot like the one facing the NASA engineers and Joseph. We don't know how many people will be infected or die from Covid-19. We don't know if all the efforts to "flatten out the curve" will make any difference in stopping the spread of the virus. We don't know if the limited medical resources we have will be enough to care for all the sick people. We don't know if the glue holding our society together will hold if things get really bad. Yet, what we do know is if we get through today, there will be a tomorrow.

What our situation calls for is innovation and creativity. We need to do things differently from now on. We will have to make it up as we go along. We need to do that in how we think about Covid-19 and how we treat others. The Catholic Church is not normally associated with innovation and creativity. Yet, when cities began to grow in Europe, St. Dominic and St. Francis of Assisi founded their religious communities to respond to the situation. There was no book on how to serve people in urban setting so they wrote one. Later, when the Black Death (Bubonic Plague) killed about forty per cent of the people in Europe between 1348 and 1351 the Church somehow cared for the sick (To put that in relative terms imagine if about 10,000 people in Thorold died in the next three years). When corruption and abuses threatened to destroy the Church in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance Period, changes were implemented to set things right. In all of these cases, the problems were many, past experience provided little guidance and the resources available to change things were limited. Yet, through innovation and creativity a new way forward was found.

What does that mean for us today? There are Priests who are celebrating daily Mass and live-streaming it on the internet, as the Bishop will do on Sundays and during Holy Week. It is possible to check on the vulnerable and maintain social distancing by telephone and dropping off whatever they need at the door. People can still come to Holy Rosary Church and pray for God's help during these difficult times. They can also drop off some toilet paper at the Church so the St. Vincent DePaul Society can ensure the people they serve don't run out. Finally, they can drop their envelopes off at the Parish Offices to ensure their Churches have the funds to pay for the heat, hydro and other bills that need to be paid over the next little while.

The challenges we face in the next weeks and months are immense. Yet, we shouldn't worry if we have to make it up as we go along; we have done it before.