

Statement for Website
29 March 2020

First, a few things you should know:

- Bishop Bergie has announced that The Cathedral of St. Catherine of Alexandria (corner of Church St. and Lyman St. in St. Catharines) will be open for private prayer from Monday to Saturday between 11:30 AM and 12:30 PM and Sunday between 9:00 AM and 10:30 PM. Each person cannot stay longer than fifteen minutes and only five people will be allowed into the Church at a time.

As I have mentioned in previous posts, fear has become one of the dominant emotions within our society during this pandemic. People are afraid they will contract the Covid 19 virus personally. Will others forget about them if they get sick? They fear the number of cases of those who contract the disease and die from it will increase dramatically. Can our health care system cope with this possibility? They are afraid they may not have a job when this is over or they may lose their retirement savings. How will they pay the bills in the future? While fear is an emotion, the reasons people are experiencing it now are reasonable. Yet, I wonder if behind this fear is another one: fear of death.

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells Martha "I am the resurrection and the life" and enables her to place in perspective the death of her brother Lazarus. Like most Jews of the time, Martha believed all the deceased would rise again at the end of time. Her understanding of what this belief meant was probably limited and she might not have spent a lot of time pondering its significance; until now. Lazarus' death would have been a severe blow to both sisters. Besides, the emotional loss and grief, unless Martha and Mary had other male relatives to look out for them, their social and economic standing would decline. They would be taken advantage of by others. Faced with this situation, belief in the resurrection might be one of their few sources of hope. One day they would be reunited with their brother and in the meantime they would have to depend on God. Christ's statement was meant to reinforce this hope by pointing to future events. Not only did Jesus demonstrate his power over death by returning Lazarus to this life (remember Lazarus would still die at some point in the future) but it pointed toward his future resurrection which would lead to his disciples' encounters with the risen Christ. This would indicate eternal life was real and not just a pious hope.

Grief is the natural human response to the death of a loved one. It is not the sign of a weak person or a weak faith. Even Jesus cried at the grave of Lazarus. For Christians, belief in the resurrection does not take away grief but tempers it. It reminds them there is a life after this earthly one where they will join all their deceased family and friends. For Catholics, it also means those who have died are united with us: we pray for them as they pray for us. It gives them the strength to carry on living after the death of a loved one; to take the love which they received and pass it on to others.

Within our secular culture, there is often a reluctance to think or talk about death. Many people argue since there is nothing beyond this life they want to squeeze every drop of experience out of it they can. Others come up with their own belief about the afterlife or simply say nothing about it because they cannot be certain of anything. I wonder if this is why Covid 19 is making some people afraid. Although most people dying of the disease are older or have a compromised immune system, the percentage of cases of people under forty contracting it is creeping upward and if the numbers inflate so will the number of young people dying from it.

Catholics and other people of faith can provide assistance in dealing with the uneasiness many people feel about death at this time. First, they can support those who have lost a loved one to Covid 19. If they can't go to the funeral, Catholics can have a Mass celebrated for their intention and send a card to the family. More importantly, Christians' belief in the resurrection means they should not fear death. While they still must take the necessary precautions to safeguard their health and that of others, they can provide assistance to those in need materially, emotionally and spiritually. They should be on the front lines trying to make a difference, even when they must do it over the phone. They should be confident that whatever happens is part of God's plan and show it by the way they live out their lives.

Jesus is the resurrection and the life. This belief means because there is life in the next world, we can live the one in this world to the fullest.