

Reflection from Fr. Raglan for the 5th Sunday of Easter

In about 250AD, and again at the end of the century, a plague broke out. This was not new, but what was new was it struck the whole Roman empire. Like Coronavirus today, it showed that for some things there are no borders in this world. A historian of the 2nd Century recorded one group that distinguished itself in this crisis – Christians:

“heedless of the danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ”.

These Christians had been challenged that to care for the least of their brothers and sisters was to care for him. An even greater challenge was the one Jesus gave his disciples after he went through a very public death on the Cross. In these weeks after Easter Jesus appears and calls them to a completely different way of life, based on the resurrection and the promise of eternal life: “Trust me. Be prepared like me to risk your life. I will prepare a place for you”.

The modern historian Tom Holland writes:

“the compassion they showed to the sick – and not just to the Christian sick – was widely noted, and would have enduring consequences. The Church found itself steeled in its sense of mission. For the first time in history, an institution existed that believed itself called to provide compassion and medical care to every level of society. This was revolutionary in a world where doctors were a perk of the rich. The sick, rather than disgusting and repelling Christians, provided them with something they saw as infinitely precious: an opportunity to demonstrate their love of Christ. We have just celebrated VE Day (although it was very quiet). 75 years ago the war in Europe ended (though not in the East, which went on for another 3 months). Britain rejoiced, but mourned all those who had died; and that included people from ANZAC countries, India, Africa and the Caribbean who had joined up as part of the British (or French) empires.

Those sacrifices made people want to build a society that says the life of every person is more important than wealth or power. Of course, economic issues are important because they are the way people rebuild their lives. This was true after the War, and it is true now after Coronavirus. There is a grave concern that a financial collapse could kill more people, especially in vulnerable nations, than the virus. But one thing we learn in times of crisis is that economics is for people, not the other way around.

An example of that principle has emerged in this Corona Pandemic. There was talk in some places of grading patients who were infected with the virus, according to “life years”. A younger person, who had presumably more years to live, would be given priority over an older person. But a Christian would reject this, because at the level of life every person has equal worth.

In the Second Reading at Mass this Sunday, St. Paul describes Christ as, “the living stone, rejected by men but chosen by God”. They say a prophet is sometimes attacked, because they stand up for truly universal values against narrow self-interest. I believe one prophet in the War was the Bishop of Chichester, George Bell, who in the House of Lords completely supported the war effort but denounced the fire-bombing of German cities as overkill. We too are challenged by St. Paul to “set yourselves close to Christ”, to put God above anyone or anything.

Bishop Bell observed that the generation that came out of the War largely lost personal belief in Jesus Christ, but they kept the Christian values of this country. That was good, but he said the generation after that in many cases lost the values as well. After Easter, the risen Jesus comes to the disciples in today’s Gospel, saying “believe in me”, because it is that trust, that faith in Him which strengthens us to follow the way of Christ when our own strength is not enough.

Fr. Raglan