Matthew 22:34-40

Holy Week has arrived. For many of us, this comes as a welcome relief from the way of life we are experiencing at this moment, our lockdown from society, our time spent isolated in our own homes as the world battles Coronavirus. Sacrifice, death, and suffering do not come easily. We’d rather carry on in our comfortable lives, living in the busyness of the world, coming together in our churches to celebrate Easter rather than how we will experience Easter this year on Facebook or a web page. As we prepare our souls to accept and surrender to the weight of Jesus love before entering into the celebration of the Easter season, maybe we should pause to share in the appreciation for Jesus who was glorified by way of surrender and death.

Some of the Saints lived during terrible times. Take Catherine of Siena, who lived in 14th Century Italy. During her times, the Black Death raged throughout Europe killing 26 million people (an estimated 30% to 60% of Europe’s total population!), mercenary armies prowled the countryside cutting a path of death and destruction wherever they went, and Pope Gregory XI was cowering in Avignon, France, leaving the Church in the hands of corrupt legates. In many ways, Catherine’s times were “the worst of times.”

But Catherine did not bemoan her times. She did not say, “If only the Black Death would go away… If only the world were at peace… If only we had perfect Church leaders, then I could really live my Christian faith.” No, Catherine became a saint by accepting her times as the context in which she was called to live her faith. She did not run away from the critical issues of her day; she engaged herself with them.

Sometimes we are quick to bemoan our own times. We assume that the world used to be a kinder and gentler place, and our ancestors had it easier than we do. But a quick perusal of history shows that every age, for one reason or another, could be called “the worst of times.” But, as Christians, we believe our age is precisely the context in which we are being called to live our faith. Maybe this is God testing us to look at our world and the way his people are living in it. Maybe we need this time to focus on Jesus who during this week was tested in many ways through isolation, through the fear of death. But Like Catherine, we are being called to respond to the critical issues of our times with attentiveness, courage, love, persistence, and great faith in Jesus.

No wonder Jesus’ teachings on love are so hard for us. “When someone strikes you on the cheek, turn the other one to him as well… from the person who takes your cloak, don’t hold back your tunic as well… Forgive your brothers and sisters not seven times, but seventy-seven times..” We protest: “But that’s not fair, Jesus!”

As Christians, we are called to love others as God loves us: compassionately, consistently, inclusively, and forgivingly. To do otherwise, would not be fair! We cannot bury our heads in the sand but we can do what we are asked to do with Jesus walking by our side and hopefully we will come out from this darkness into the light, living out our faith not just for ourselves but for our world.

May your experience this week be one of contemplation, prayer and listening to the words spoken as you come together in a different way to share once again Holy Week and Easter.

Let us pray

We turn to you, our Father, for we need your help.
Lord Jesus, as you have promised, be with us, whatever lies ahead,
Strengthen us, Holy Spirit, as we face this together.

We pray for our world and our country,
as coronavirus threatens our lives and our livelihood, leaving many in lockdown,
while key workers continue, despite the risk.

We pray for government leaders at Westminster and Holyrood,
responding to medical and scientific advice,
making tough decisions for the wellbeing of all.

We pray for all who serve on the frontline in the NHS and in social care;
facing increasing numbers, overstretched resources
and distressing human need.

Bless those who are ill, those who are alone and afraid,
those exhausted looking after their family, those worried for the vulnerable,
those fearful for their finances, those shut into their fears.

Thank you for those who have returned from retirement to help,
or joined the volunteer army.
Thank you for those working:
to manufacture needed resources,
to find a vaccine,
to keep in contact with the isolated,
to encourage others at this time.

Have mercy on us, O Lord.
Give us faith, hope and love and hear our prayers,
in Jesus' name. Amen.