

4<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY LENT YEAR A

HOMILY

2020

PROJECT COMPASSION & FURTHER ENCOUNTER

MOVING FROM BLINDNESS TO VISION, INSIGHT & FAITH

*Jn 9.1-41 1Sam 16.1-13 Eph 5.8-14*

This is the weirdest feeling I have had on a weekend for over 41 years as a priest, as there is to be no public Mass, given the current coronavirus crisis, an unprecedented phenomenon in my lifetime, or in anyone's for that matter, given that the Spanish Flu of 1918-1919 was the last, and not too many remember that one from personal experience!! It seems surreal, but the warnings and precautions to be taken are very real, the dangers of exposure evident in countries like China and Italy, where the virus has been rampant and extremely contagious.

There are dangerously stupid people like a Polish Archbishop who was quoted as saying "*Satan is powerless in the face of holy water*"!! Such ill-advised insanity is not to be taken seriously, except to see, and be appalled by, the madness of such distorted pseudo-faith. Then there is the priest in New Jersey who has literally taken to flight over his parish in a light plane with a parishioner pilot with a Monstrance in hand and a big statue of Mary to "*pray for God's protection, for the sick to be healed and for the end of this 'modern day plague, the coronavirus.'*" He might as well have kept his feet on the ground and gone to his private room and prayed for his parishioners there, advising them to keep their distance and follow public health directives, rather than go up in the air and fly around in circles!!

Another silly Archbishop described coronavirus as "*just another type of flu*", pontificating that wars and gender ideology (*a bizarre and inappropriate combination in itself!*) are greater threats to civilization!! Then, an even crazier priest has allegedly said during Mass that "*coronavirus is punishment for the sins of abortion and homosexuality*"! It's like going back to the 1980's absolutely false and unjust superstition or claim that AIDS was God's way of punishing certain types of sinners, as the 'Pharisees' (ancient and current) so wrongly perceived such to be.

There is science to be understood and applied here, and we need to take heed of the practical advice about precautions to take, along with '*social distancing*', not out of fear of each other, but in order to acknowledge the reality of the unbelievably high risk of infection from this particularly virulent virus. If we're to talk about God's Will, it is that we, be informed and not ignorant, then use our knowledge and free will wisely and well. We can hope and pray that the spread of the virus will be limited by our practical precautions, and that a vaccine will eventually be developed, but it won't happen overnight. So it's not sufficient to just close our eyes and hope for the best.

This weekend's Gospel is apt for our current dilemma, with scripture scholar Raymond Brown describing John's account of the blind man coming to sight and faith in Jesus, as a "*masterpiece of Johannine narrative, so carefully crafted that not a single word is wasted... The man born blind is more than an individual; he has been developed as a spokesperson for a particular type of faith-encounter with Jesus... He exemplifies one who is enlightened on the first encounter, but comes to see who Jesus really is only later – after undergoing trials and being cast out of the synagogue.*" It was St Augustine said in the 4<sup>th</sup> century: "***This blind man stands for the human race.***" In other words, it all takes time to come to and grow in faith, with pitfalls, rejection and setbacks along the way, as was presumably happening in the early church communities, for whom John was writing.

Immediately, Jesus dismisses the blame game claim, that the blind man deserved his affliction, suggested by his own disciples, before the Pharisees get in on the argument, even prejudging Jesus as a 'sinner' for breaking the Sabbath by offering healing and vision.

The symbolism of moving from blindness to vision is clear, that the old adage holds: "***There are none so blind as those who will not see***", as the critics remain victims of their own prejudices and refusal to be open-minded, in order to see the reality around them. This is exactly where the Pharisees are critical of Jesus first, and then of the blind man, even to the extent of kicking him out of the Temple, whence he finally returns to an even deeper faith encounter with Jesus. The deniers of Jesus not only don't want to see the truth and goodness of Jesus' person, but also fail to open their ears to his message, and so remain in their closed-minded and wilful ignorance.

Meanwhile, the blind man's poor, fearful old parents are caught in the middle, and so, unsurprisingly, say he can speak for himself, which he does. We can hardly blame them for that, can we!

And, as for us, from this Gospel today, we should be encouraged to be more courageous in our being open-eyed and eared in seeing and hearing the call of those in need around us, with encouraging words and open hearts and minds to all, reflecting the love Jesus proclaims and lives.

The Project Compassion theme this year is "***Go Further Together***", as I recommend you view this week's story, concerning Sakun, a disabled young Indian woman, and the dignity and hope she experiences through the support of an ongoing Caritas Australia program. (*It's on the Project Compassion website.*).

Please don't forget to keep contributing during this difficult, uncertain and trying time, as I acknowledge and appreciate your ongoing generosity.

I conclude with 2 prayers, the first written for the pandemic, and the second based on our themes for Lent:

**PRAYER FOR A PANDEMIC** by Cameron Wiggins Bellm

*May we who are merely inconvenienced remember those whose lives are at stake.*

*May we who have no risk factors remember those most vulnerable.*

*May we who have the luxury of working from home remember those who must choose between preserving their health or making their rent.*

*May we who have the flexibility to care for our children when their schools close, remembering those that have no options.*

*May we who have to cancel our trips remember those who have no safe place to go.*

*May we are losing our margin money in the tumult of the economic market remember those who have no margin at all.*

*May we who settle in for a quarantine at home remember those who have no home.*

*As fear grips our country, let us choose love during this time when we cannot physically wrap our arms around each other, let us yet find ways to be the loving embrace of God to our neighbour.*

*Amen.*

**PROJECT COMPASSION PRAYER**

*God of all peoples and nations, as you accompany us on our Lenten journey, may our fasting strengthen our commitment to live in solidarity, our almsgiving be an act of justice, and our prayers anchor us in love and compassion. Awaken our hearts and minds that we might be one human family as we all go further together. We ask this in Jesus name. Amen.*

*john hannon*

*AUTUMN EQUINOX*

*21st March 2020*

**PROJECT COMPASSION MATERIAL FOR 4<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF LENT**

## WEEK 4: INDIA

Today's gospel story of Jesus healing the man born blind has a strong and powerful message for our times. Disability was considered to be result of sinfulness in the time of Jesus. Even today suffering can be considered a result of sinfulness by some. Jesus, however, rejects these notions by healing the man and even more radically healing him on the sabbath.

The healing of the man born blind is twofold; the physical cure leads to a spiritual revelation which allows him to see Jesus as the Son of Man. The miracle also causes a stir amongst the community; as here is a man who went unnoticed now challenging the leaders, revealing their own blindness. Jesus' love and compassion bring light - to the man born blind but also to those around him.

In our Project Compassion story this week, we meet Sakun from India, a young woman living with a disability. As is the case in many countries, people like Sakun and her family are often 'out of sight' when it comes to receiving the support and care needed to participate in the life of the community.

Through her participation in the Caritas Australia supported program Sakun's dignity is upheld as an equal member of the community, her voice is heard and respected. She has a means to earn an income and is now more independent with her new improved mobility.

***How can we use our freedom and courage, much like Jesus with the man born blind to act with justice and love to those who are excluded?***