

Sunday Mass Homily: Fourth Sunday of Lent, 22nd March 2020

It's a very strange feeling to celebrate Mass here today, without a congregation before me. I find myself looking round, imagining the faces I normally see, picturing you all in your usual seats. Nobody moves around very much! However long this situation lasts, I look forward to the time when I don't need to use my imagination to see you all again.

But today, in these strange circumstances, I am reminded of a beautiful story from the life of St Clare. She suffered a lot with illness through her adult life, and on one occasion, one Christmas, she was unable to go to church for Mass or for the other services. The sisters in her community left the convent to go to the celebrations, leaving Clare all alone, isolated. Thomas of Celano, who knew St Clare and wrote her biography, describes it like this:

"Starting to think about the baby Jesus and greatly regretting the fact that she could not be there in person to sing His praise, she sighed, 'Lord God, here I am all alone in this place.'"

This is a feeling that many will experience today. Like St Clare, we regret the fact that we cannot gather together to celebrate Mass. I know there are many people who regret the fact that they cannot be here in person to sing the Lord's praise. And there will be many, too, who will echo St Clare's sigh, 'Lord God, here I am all alone in this place.'

But the person who believes is never truly alone, because the Lord is always with us. And this story of St Clare is not about isolation – it is a story of God's consolation. In the midst of that suffering, the Lord worked a miracle for Clare. She began to hear the singing of the friars celebrating Mass, and saw on the wall of her cell an image of the crib scene at the heart of the celebration. She saw and heard the Mass, as though she were watching on television. And she took great comfort in it, seeing it as a clear sign that God had not abandoned her to isolation, but instead had visited her in a new way. Today, as many of you see this Mass not through a miracle but through technology, let's be equally sure that this opportunity is a sign of the Lord's closeness to us in a time of deep suffering for so many people.

Because of this miracle, St Clare was declared – over seven centuries later – the patron saint of television. And perhaps for the same reason, she is also a patron for all those who suffer with diseases of the eye. We find one such man in the Gospel today – a man born blind, but granted sight by Jesus, the Light of the World.

Like the woman at the well in last week's Gospel, this is a story of someone who meets Jesus and comes, gradually, to discover who the Lord is. The man's blindness is not just physical, but spiritual – at first, he does not see the truth about the Lord. But his eyes are opened, and he comes to see that Jesus is God. It's the same journey we all make, very gradually, in our spiritual lives. We come to know, more and more deeply, that Jesus is God; and knowing this, we learn, more and more, to put our trust in Him.

Towards the end of the Gospel, Jesus meets the man again. In fact, He comes to find him. The man has been isolated, driven away by those who oppose Jesus. So the Lord comes to him in his isolation, in his loneliness. The person who believes is never truly alone. The Lord seeks him out in this moment. And He has a simple question to ask: “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” The man does not understand the question, so Jesus makes clear who the “Son of Man” is. “You are looking at Him; He is speaking to you.”

“You are looking at Him”. This would not have been possible at the start of the Gospel. The man was blind – now he looks upon the Lord. “He is speaking to you.” Jesus is the God who speaks. In this simple phrase, our Lord sums up the process of prayer. We look at Him, and He speaks to us.

We can look upon the Lord in many ways. Most obviously, we can look upon Him in the Host when He is raised over the altar at Mass, or when the Blessed Sacrament is exposed for adoration. Even when we see these things via television or the internet, we still look upon the Lord. We can look upon Him in sacred images, or on a crucifix in our homes. We can look upon Him in the face of those in need – a neighbour, family member, friend or stranger who needs our help. We can look upon Him in our mind’s eye, simply by stilling ourselves in prayer and calling Him to mind, perhaps imagining a scene from the Gospel and placing ourselves before Him. And whenever we look at Him, He speaks to us: in the Host, He says “I am with you always, to the end of time”; in the crucifix, He says, “I love you so much that I lay down my life for you; a man can have no greater love than this”; in the person who needs us, He says, “Whatever you do to the least of these brothers or sisters of mine, you do it to me”; in our personal prayer, our quiet prayer, He says whatever He knows we need to hear at that moment. Let us not lose sight of Jesus during this time – *especially* during this time – but let us look at Him, so that He may speak to us.

Today is mothers’ day, and I’m very conscious of my own mum and many others who will be physically apart from their loved ones. I’m also conscious of the mothers of our parish and beyond who will be spending more time with their children in the coming weeks because of school closures – I hope and pray that many families will be able to use this time to simply enjoy being together without some of the busyness that usually accompanies our day to day lives. And I’m thinking today of the mother we all share – Our Lady, who brought into the world the light that dispels all darkness. In St Columba’s church in Barrow, where I used to live and work, there is a beautiful statue of Mary with a group of people at her feet, her cloak spread over them, a sign of her protection. Today let’s ask her protection for ourselves, our loved ones, our communities, our Church, as we live through these unsettling times. May she intercede for us with her Son; and may He, the light that the darkness can never overpower, shine brightly on us all.

Fr Andrew

