

Reflection for the Mass of Thanksgiving /First Responders and Essential Workers

In 1896 a big wooden sled sat dockside in Fells Point on the south end of Broadway. There a six ton piece of sculpted marble was placed on it to be carried by a team of four horses uphill on Broadway to Johns Hopkins hospital. That carved marble was a 10 1/2 foot high statue which was to be called "Christ the Consoler" or more commonly, "The Divine Healer." It was placed in the lobby of the oldest part of the famed hospital on top of a three ton pedestal which was carved by a local stonemason, Hugh Sisson.

There is an inscription on the pedestal taken from the gospel reading that you just heard: **"Come unto me all ye that are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest."** That statue of Jesus and that comforting inscription have greeted hundreds of thousands of people who have come to Johns Hopkins Hospital, and to those wonderful caregivers who work there, for 125 years. People travel to Hopkins from all over the world as they face the stress of illness, injury and disease.

Our country and our world has had to face a similar stress for the past twelve months as Covid 19 spread from Wuhan, China, all across the globe. As of this morning there have been 106 million cases reported worldwide and 2.3 million deaths from this virus. It is highly contagious and most likely spread from one person to another through respiratory droplets.

Last March restrictions on our daily lives and activities, unlike any we had seen in our lifetimes, became routine. Recommendations that we stay at home, the requirement to wear masks in public, the emphasis on washing our hands and using hand sanitizer, and maintaining a distance of at least six feet from other people, were hammered into our consciousness as a way of protecting ourselves from this disease and protecting anyone with whom we might come in contact. Restaurants, hair salons, "non-essential businesses," schools and Churches were shuttered. Phrases like "social distance" and "masking" and "quarantine" became a daily part of our lingo. Gone were hugs, handshakes and kisses. In January of 2020 we could have never imagined what life was going to become a few weeks later. Long lines were commonplace outside of the local grocery stores and Walmarts and home centers, as we were directed in only as someone else left. Lysol and bleach wipes were unavailable, toilet paper could only be purchased one pack at a time, and for a while the availability of hand sanitizer was as rare as a lunar eclipse. Non-emergency medical procedures were put on hold. People in many areas of employment began working remotely.

We were held hostage in a fear of the unknown by this new virus. Predictions of 2 million deaths in America alone over the following twelve months were being made by the experts who admitted that even they could not be sure where this plague was going to take us.

Yet there were some things that did not change. Our law enforcement departments still had to maintain safety and order in our communities. Our first responders in our fire departments still had to render emergency aid to victims of illness and accidents and fires. Medical assistants, nurses and doctors still had to ensure that they were there around the clock in our hospitals and medical facilities to protect our lives from whatever might ravage our bodies as a result of illness or injury. Those who worked in the areas of transportation continued to make sure that medicines were delivered, food was trucked to our grocery stores, and mail made it to our homes. Our grocery store workers courageously continued to serve us even though they often found themselves in close contact with us. There were numerous other areas where people continued to selflessly serve other people during the worst of this pandemic. There were so many duties that just could not be done remotely. Tonight with sincere hearts we express our gratitude.

When Jesus spoke those words we heard in the gospel this evening -- **"Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light."** -- he was directing them to a people who were burdened by the religious laws as interpreted by the scribes. They were strictly obeying the laws because it was what they were expected to do, not because they had taken those laws to heart.

For some of you who so courageously continued to serve those of us who were locked down, you did so because it was your job or because that was what you were expected to do at the time. You had the same concerns and fears as the rest of us, but you carried out your duties because it was your job. No doubt the stress of the pandemic and the lack of certainty as to where it was going to take us was a burden to you.

However the message that Jesus offers us tonight is that when those courageous duties are carried out not simply because it is what is expected of first responders and essential workers, but out of a love for others in imitation of God's love for us, then much of that stress, that burden, that yoke, is lightened. The job becomes more than a job. It evolves into a vocation, a mission. It receives a higher purpose than simply a way to get a paycheck every two weeks. I suspect that most of you got into the professions that you did for that higher purpose anyway, but sometimes it is easy to be distracted from what motivated you to serve others when you chose the profession that you did.

Those of you who believe in a higher power that based on various perspectives may be called Allah, or Jehovah, or Yahweh, or God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, might be comforted by the words of St. Teresa of Avila, a holy woman who lived in 16th century Spain. She reminds us that we have the opportunity to serve God and our neighbor as God's instruments in this world that is often beset by fear, doubt and death. These are her words of wisdom: **"Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."**

The patron of this parish, St. Charles Borromeo, ministered to the victims of the plague in Milan when so many others fled the city. If you don't already see yourself in this way, please recognize that you are God's tools in making the world a better place for all of us that you so unselfishly and courageously serve. Thank you. May God bless and protect you.