

So, this is what history feels like. I say that because what we and the whole world are going through with the coronavirus pandemic will be in all the history books. None of us are sure right now of all the political, economic, cultural repercussions that will flow from the disease. But we are certainly living through a momentous time when many things will change for better and worse – forever.

A few of you remember Pearl Harbor. More of you remember JFK's assassination. Most of us know where we were on 9/11. We will also remember the coronavirus of 2020. In our parish we have already lost several members to the virus. More of us will be lost in the days to come. Many are being impacted as I speak. I don't know how or when it will end. Real history is rarely comfortable.

But I mention all this on this Sunday when we hear the story of the Raising of Lazarus because we want to know what to do and how to think in this crisis time. As I mentioned last week, we have many anxieties these days, but the possibility of death or grave illness for

ourselves or loved ones is right at the top of the list. In our Gospel story we hear an account that perhaps we can relate to more easily than in past years. Someone Jesus loves gets sick – and then quickly dies. Lazarus' family is grief stricken. Jesus Himself weeps at the loss of a dear friend. Jesus knows the weight of illness and death.

That weight is pressing on us today. How are we do carry it as Disciples of Christ? Speaking of history, we Catholics have a long historical record for such situations we should not forget. Prof. Rodney Stark wrote a book entitled The Rise of Christianity. In it he looks at the historical causes for Christianity's surprising growth from a band of fishermen, to the official religion of the Roman Empire. One of the factors Stark mentions is the plagues that struck the Empire during those centuries. For instance, in A.D. 165 a plague (perhaps smallpox) broke out in the Roman Empire. It lasted on and off for 15 years (hopefully not our future). Between a quarter and a third of the

population died. There was another, similar epidemic in A.D. 251 (perhaps measles). These plagues shook society to its foundations.

But for Catholics it was also a time of growth for the Church.

Why? First, they were better able to survive because of the networks of charity and concern among them was stronger than among the pagans.

In short, they took better care of one another. Catholics took risks to nurse and minister to the sick and dying, even those who were not related to them by blood, including the pagans. The pagans saw this, and it made an impact on them.

But there was another factor. The high mortality rate shook the pagans' world view. They had no hope of something better in the face of death. Whereas their Christian neighbors in the midst of plagues, social chaos, and death had a hope for joy the plague couldn't touch.

Where did this hope come from? Let's go back to the Gospel. In the face of Martha's sorrow at Lazarus' death and her questions to Jesus, Jesus responds, "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever

believes in me, even if he dies, will live; and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” Ultimately this promise Jesus makes of life beyond death is the reason for our hope.

Today Jesus (and history) are also asking us that question. “Do you believe this?” How will we each answer? We are being tested. All people face the historical circumstances of their time. But our current generations haven’t faced much real adversity. Think of the people from the so-called Greatest Generation who lived through the Great Depression and World War II. America in past centuries has faced other devastating diseases and epidemics. But us – not so much. Until now. During these weeks, months, (years?), of the pandemic will non-Catholics notice (as the Romans did) any difference between themselves and us Catholics as to how we respond to this crisis?

During these days we are each called to courage and charity, acting from our faith in Jesus who has promised that we need not fear death when we’re close to Him. What will we contribute to society that

others can't or won't? How will Jesus appear through our actions? I know that at this precise moment we are restricted in what we can do for others. But there are still ways we can reach out.

The parish has been calling our senior members asking if they need anything, food, other supplies, etc. I now put out this broader call. If you are vulnerable in any way, not just age, and don't feel you can leave your home, we will try to help. Call or e-mail Andrea Liggett on our staff. We're organizing volunteers to call our seniors – and shop for others – and prepare meals (in appropriate ways) for the homeless shelters. Would you be willing to volunteer for this ministry? Let Andrea know. These times call for prudence, yes, but even more for magnanimous charity. We're called to be “great-souled” by our faith.

We priests are also called to the same charity. If you saw my video about the Governor's decree to stay at home, you know that any of you can e-mail me or Fr. Tyler if you want confession. We can make an appointment to meet you at church. And we promise that, if healthy,

we will not leave you without the anointing of the sick if you are seriously ill or dying. Call the parish number and there is an emergency line number to call for such cases. We will take prudent protective precautions against Covid-19 but won't let fear of contagion stop our ministry to you in sickness.

What will history say looking back on us Catholics of 2020? Death clarifies who we are. At the tomb of Lazarus Jesus revealed to His Disciples who He was and His power over death. "Lazarus come out!" As we ourselves face the tomb – our own, or loved ones, certainly our neighbors' – the tomb will also clarify who we are as Catholics and the strength of our faith. Jesus weeps over death, but He also conquers it. Faith in that truth is our strength and our joy. Today we have a great opportunity -- to demonstrate that faith to the newly paganized world we live in -- and to Jesus. We can make history, not just suffer from it.