

Third Sunday of Easter, A – April 26, 2020 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 8:30am Livestreamed Mass (COVID-19) – 950 words

The original meaning of the word “quarantine” is “a period of 40 days” – and, well, here we are: it has been 40 days since, in our diocese at least, public worship was suspended. Sadly, we will likely have to invent a new word, for our time away will be longer; at the very least, we can now glimpse a light at the end of the tunnel: we know this will end soon enough, and that things will start returning to normal.

Well, what have we gained thus far during our quarantine? It is so easy to focus on what we have lost. Oh, but there have been positives also – if we would but see them. That is for each of us to contemplate. Many have, of course, noted gains in the area of family closeness; we have appreciated the general slow-down of life in many respects. There are surely many other things, some of which are “right in front of our nose”.

What about our Lord? He was “right in front of the nose” of the disciples he walked with to Emmaus. They were so immersed in the latest happenings, the talk of the town: “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know of the things that have taken place there in these days?”, they asked him with disbelief, totally unaware of their blindness. Their vision had become distorted; they had lost perspective.

Yes, the drama of Holy Week and Easter was still fresh in their minds: how a man commonly recognized as a mighty prophet was tortured and crucified, while the sun grew dark and the earth quaked; how there was an eerie stillness the day after; and how on the third day, they had all been “astounded” by his absence from the place of burial. The women were reporting that he was no longer dead, but alive.

Every day, we are submerged in the affairs of the world. With the constant bombardment of information, of news – or of what passes as news nowadays; with concern for our family and friends; with worry about what is going on in our community, nation, and world – especially with the pandemic: all these things from without threaten to occupy and overwhelm our minds and cause us to lose sight of God.

And so, at times, we might begin to wonder, “Where is God in all of this?”, even as he is right there with us – right in front of us. Yes, our occasional sense of distance from God can arise from being too close to the things happening around us – from not stepping back and gaining some needed perspective. For as Jesus said, as he ascended into heaven, “I am with you all days, until the end of the world”.

Christ could have changed things for those men who were walking down the road: he could have made it very clear in any number of ways who he was, right there and then. But he chose a different way – one that would ultimately surprise, that they would always remember. He waited until they had settled down, washed up, reclined at table, and enjoyed a meal together. Then he made himself known – “in the breaking of the bread”.

In fact, the entire Road to Emmaus narrative follows the outline of our liturgical worship. First, our Lord opened the scriptures to them. Then, he took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them; and his presence became known to them then. So also, in Holy Mass, we hear the scriptures and they are explained to us. Very often, our hearts “burn within us” as we encounter answers to our souls’ questions.

Then, the priest takes the bread in the offertory, blesses it – consecrates it, to be precise – during the Eucharistic Prayer, then breaks it at the Lamb of God, and gives it during the distribution of Holy Communion. Those with Catholic, Eucharistic faith know him in that moment, they recognize his Presence; and so they say “Amen” before they receive him. And all of this brings renewed perspective on life as we go back out to the world.

Well, we know all this – and we long for the time when we can again share in Holy Mass together. But are we seeing Christ, even as he walks with us also now, during the quarantine? We should not miss him. In other words, Holy Mass should not be the only place where he is known to us. We should take advantage of the time to step back and gain perspective on the other areas of our lives, lest we miss what is “right in front of our nose”.

So the question I leave with you this week is: How have you gained greater perspective on your life – especially on God’s presence in it – during this time so far? He is inviting us to recognize his presence always. And as the psalm response said, “Lord, you will show us the path of life”. For when we are not walking with him – not striving to recognize him each day in our midst – we can so easily mistake the wrong path for the right one.

Yes, may greater union with our Lord Jesus Christ be one of the many positives that we gain from this time. It is available to us all. Going to Mass is essential and we cannot wait for its return. But may we each be able to say, with the psalmist: “I bless the Lord who counsels me; even in the night my heart exhorts me. I set the Lord ever before me; with him at my right hand I shall not be disturbed.” He is always with us!