

Unusual times

by A. Soule

These are unusual times. There is no denying the feeling of despair at seeing the rising figures of those infected and those dying because of the virus. It is a global battle, we are up against the invisible enemy: the enemy which stalks bars, cafes, restaurants and mass gatherings.

This is not the first time the world has faced pandemics. There was the plague of 1665 and the Spanish flu of 1918, both which killed off thousands. Obviously people survived through these crises, but public memories of these are mixed.

One thing is for sure is that crises do not as always bring out the best in us. Fear can make us do things which we would ordinarily be ashamed to own up to.

A couple of days ago, rather late in the evening I went to a local superstore, looking to buy a few essentials. As you would expect with so much of this being in the news, there was hardly anything on the shelves. It took a while getting used to seeing the large store with so many empty shelves; which does make one wonder whether we are facing a famine or the virus. It was late evening that day and behind me in the store came in a young family, the parents appeared to have come straight after finishing work. It was hard not see the look of utter dismay on their faces at the empty shelves - with nothing left for them to buy that day. The mother was in tears.

The shop assistant told us that shoppers come in early to take in 'all sorts - bread, vegetables, soaps, toilet rolls 'in bulk. She mentioned 'they want to get in first'. The irony is that there is no shortage of these things as such, and there is no indication that shelves wouldn't be restocked the next day. And yet, the ransacking of shelves continue.

But this is the nature of the beast (crises). I was reading Daniel Defoe's journal of the 1665 Plague, which mentions that despite some incidents of bravery shown in the face of death all around them; people became immensely selfish. It was wife against the husband, husband against the wife, neighbour against neighbour. It was every man for himself – for the fear of catching death.

An Article I read in the New York Times mentioned that despite the Spanish flu killing over a million people in America in 1918, there were surprisingly very few books or historical accounts written on that. There is though the record that at its peak, there was a desperate call for volunteers to care for sick children, which went callously unheeded. The authorities had pleaded with the local community making it clear that there was no one to give the children food as the death rate was very high, but people, 'much respected' as they were held back. David Brooks, the author of the article I mentioned explains that the possible reason for there not being many records of the flu was 'because people didn't like who they had become. It was a shameful memory and therefore suppressed.'

Self sacrifice and caring about your neighbour are essential aspects of being a Christian. But it is so easy to forget all that in times of crisis; even Peter denied Christ three times, fearing death. But that story didn't end there, it was with him later on that the Church began, and he wasn't in the end afraid to face death when it came to him.

It is true that the common decency expected by society can never be taken for granted and human behaviour can never be completely predicted, but it is also true ordinary people can be transformed into heroes of the day, doing everything they can at the time needed. Peter after all turned out to be better than he thought who he was. We are all weak, but it is our relationship with God, with God at its focus, which can transform lives.

Understanding who we are as Christians is important especially in these times. I am often reminded of a quote from a long standing Church member (from a previous Church I used to go to) : 'being a Christian makes me better than I am'.