

St. Vincent de Paul

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Homily for the Fifth Sunday on Lent 2020 By Fr Robin Burgess

On the second of February this year, in the other world of two months ago, I was remembering a previous Candlemas Day when it snowed hard in London for the first time that winter and immediately everything came to a complete standstill. There was no traffic on the roads, no trains running, no aeroplanes flying, very few people venturing out. The muffling effect of the snow produced a deep intense silence and stillness.

A book I once read about Nelson describes his home in the remote Norfolk village of Burnham Thorpe during the second half of the 18th century. "There was a tavern, *The Plough*, and a cluster of flint cottages sandwiched between two long streets, but apart from the River Burn skirting the eastern flank of the village little stirred. Admiral Nelson remembered it as "lonesome," and his father unquestionably agreed. "All is hush at high noon as at midnight," he remarked.'

That rural hush is long gone, but now because of the Coronavirus outbreak we are rediscovering something of what it must have been like. Around the flats where I live "all is hush": little movement, little noise - an unnatural silence prevails, and I guess it is the same for you. It can seem ominous or sinister, like the quiet of the dead city reduced to rubble after

the firestorm, or it can be a welcome relief from the usual hectic bustle and noise of modern life.

Silence is of various kinds, and it makes a big difference to its quality whether it is enforced or freely chosen (but perhaps even if it is enforced we can decide to choose it). We speak, for instance, of the silence of the grave where life is ended and our bodies can do nothing but await the general resurrection of the dead. There is nothing we can do, no way we can move ourselves on to a different situation. This must have been the way with Lazarus as he lay in his tomb.

At Bethany, where he lived with his sisters Martha and Mary, you can visit what is said to be Lazarus' tomb. An opening in the rocks leads down treacherous steps to a lower chamber, into which you have to crawl stooped down. This is where the body of Lazarus was placed. In the wall of the chamber there is an opening and outside it, what looks like a platform where Jesus may have stood.

Here he cried into the chamber with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out" - and the word in St. John Gospel's is a very strong one (*ekraugasen*), meaning he put all the force of his being into the cry, which would have been magnified even further by the stonework. Imagine Jesus crying out to you as you lie in the current stillness, Come out, come back to life! We do not know when it will be, but surely that cry will come.

God's desire for us to share the resurrection of his son is so strong that he puts every atom of his being into bringing us back to life, but we cannot presume on that or make it happen. Maybe our present enforced silence and inactivity, if we can enter it gladly, will be an opportunity for us to

relearn how to wait patiently and allow God's plan for us to unfold in his good time, not ours. A book called *The Stature of Waiting* suggested that to wait, being powerless to determine the outcome, is a rather Christ-like thing to do, seeing that Christ himself was reduced to powerless waiting as he prepared to give himself, to bring about through his dying, the way by which we can share his resurrection.

The very first time I ever went to Kew Gardens happened to be the season for the great display of crocuses on the lawns near the Victoria Gate, and we caught it at its peak - a brilliant vast carpet of blues and whites and pinks. I have never seen it like that again, but recall the moment very well. What intrigued me is that the crocuses only appear above ground for two to three weeks in the year.

What, I wondered, are they doing the rest of the year? A silly question really, as obviously they are not doing anything - but in some way they are preparing or being prepared for that brief outburst of splendour. If we can give ourselves to this time of being "under ground" and use it wisely to slow down the pace of our lives and embrace the silence and waiting, we will be that much better prepared for our reappearance in the glory of God's new life - which is not just a brief moment, but the eternal life of his everlasting kingdom. Lent leads inescapably to Easter.

Wishing you every blessing, Fr. Robin (robinburgess@rcdow.org.uk - do send me an email if you would like to)