

# St. Vincent de Paul

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**Fr. Mark Leenane: Parish Priest**

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## HOMILY FROM FR. ROBIN BURGESS For Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2020

Dear Friends,

A week ago I was watching the Cheltenham Gold Cup and seeing the horse I wanted to win not doing so. Life was normal!

Now, just a few days later, we are entering a strange unprecedented period in which nothing seems normal and all is uncertain because we do not know how long it may last. Many of the things we take for granted, things we like to do or want to do or enjoy doing, will not be possible. Our Lent will now truly be a sharing of Christ's 40 days in the wilderness, but we know that for him it was a time of purifying intentions and preparing himself for his mission, so the desert can be not just empty, but a place of growth and new life. The word Lent, after all, means 'the springtime.'

One of the biggest losses for us will be not being able to come together to celebrate Mass, the heart and centre of our Catholic life. I will especially miss coming over to Osterley to join you on Sundays. There are ways, however, in which we can take part in the Mass at a distance, by watching it online or by praying and pondering over the readings at home, so I would like to offer some reflections on the Gospel reading for this 4th Sunday of Lent, one of those three lengthy and rich passages in John's Gospel that we read at this time. This is the story of the man born blind in chapter 9, which includes the extraordinary words of Jesus, "He was born blind so that the works of God might be displayed in him."

An American historian of religion called Sam Keen says that the world's great religions usually begin with a single person - we can think of Moses, Jesus, the Buddha - going off to be on his own, perhaps in a desert place, where he has an overwhelming experience of God - unmistakable but not easily communicated to others, as is often the way with our experiences of God. The experience he has enables him to see very deeply into the reality of things - and what he sees is that the world is one. There is no separate realm of the physical or material, but everything is filled with and radiant with the presence of God. The spiritual and the material form a single unity. Moses's burning bush is a brilliant symbol of this, the bush that burns but is not consumed because it burns with the fire of God.

The Seer (let us call him that) attracts followers who want to learn from him and share his knowledge of God. They tell stories about him and the great things he is able to do; they set up institutions, structures, churches to carry on his message. But the further these get from the original experience of the Seer the more they tend to misrepresent it. Think of how many times the disciples fail to see the point of what Jesus is getting at, and

remember how Jesus' most severe criticism is directed at religious leaders who cannot see what he sees. It is surely this feature of the way religions develop that accounts for the number of stories of Jesus restoring sight to the blind - physical sight as an image of spiritual insight. So the man in the story was born blind in order that God, by giving him back sight, can enable him to be a witness to the truth that in Jesus we see the very life and power of God.

A spiritual director I used to visit at Campion House said to me once that every crisis is also an opportunity. It may be that our current crisis is an opportunity for us to see afresh, in a deeper and perhaps more realistic way that all is one in God and that through Jesus we can be one in God and with God. This is a huge challenge, because we naturally question how a world full of disease and suffering can express God's will and creative love. There is no easy answer to that, but a suggestion of an answer was given once by an ancient Greek writer, about six centuries before Christ, "Human beings find some things just and others unjust, but to God all things are beautiful and good and just." Coronavirus? Another enormous challenge to believe that! But it could be the special vocation of the Church and its people at this time to keep faith with God, not to lose heart in the face of this crisis, even when we are as bewildered as everyone else, but to stand firm and continue to witness that in Jesus we see the love and compassion of God the creator of all things freely available to all his people. In this way our renewed sight can show the glory of God.

It will be especially important for us to keep in touch with each other at this time, so I would be very glad if anyone would like to send me a message by email with any thoughts, comments or questions they have, and I will do my best to respond.

Wishing you every blessing, Fr. Robin ([robinburgess@rcdow.org.uk](mailto:robinburgess@rcdow.org.uk)).