

Dear Friends,

Here we go again! So began 'Thought for the Day' on the radio on Monday, as the government announced a new national lockdown to combat the Coronavirus. It is especially hard on the churches that despite having what must be among the best safety measures for gatherings of any organisation we are now expected to forgo public Masses and other services for the next four weeks. Our bishops have made their protest, but also emphasised that it is important for us to observe the regulations, which have the force of law, even if, as they say, they 'demonstrate a fundamental lack of understanding of the essential contribution made by faith communities to the wellbeing, health and resilience of our society.'

We are probably feeling a range of emotions - disappointment, anger, frustration, despair, but maybe also determination to grit our teeth and get down to it once again. At least, we may hope, this time it should not be nearly as long as before. We can take heart from the example of Israel, the first nation to impose a second national lockdown. It lasted for about four weeks from September to October, but with cases of the virus going down Israel has now returned to something more like normal life.

Negative emotions are hard to deal with and can be very draining. It is necessary to acknowledge and accept them, not deny or repress them, because if we do they will only come back to bite us again - but then somehow let them go. We often cannot change our situation, but we can change how we feel about it. The speaker on Monday mentioned two people who can be a model here, one of whom was Terry Waite, the archbishop of Canterbury's special envoy who had gone to Beirut to negotiate the release of hostages and was himself held hostage for four years from 1987 to 1991, mostly in darkness and solitary confinement. How could anyone cope with that without falling apart?

Terry Waite followed a threefold strategy. He resolved not to indulge in regret, self-pity or false sentimentality. That is, he would not spend time wishing that he had not gone to Beirut, he would not feel sorry for himself over where it had got him, and he would not dream about what he could be doing if he were not being held prisoner. What helped him of course was his strong Christian faith and belief in the God who is to be known, and can only be known, in the present moment. We can remember how God has dealt with us in the past, we can bemoan our present circumstances if they are bad or unsatisfactory in some way and blame God if we want to for where he has led us, and we can hope for better things in the future - but here and now is the only place and time where we can know God. So whatever our current position may be, if it is where we are then it is where God is and if we want to be with God we need to be, really be, where we are, and not in the past or future or daydreams.

Nobody would pretend this is easy to do, but it is possible, and the example of Terry Waite shows that ordinary people can, if they put their trust and faith in God, find extraordinary powers of endurance in themselves, or rather in God in themselves.

The other model mentioned was St. Paul, who in his lockdown likewise concentrated his attention on his relationship with God, which must always be the best thing there could be for us and is always available to us wherever we are, in whatever condition we find ourselves. Paul lists no less than ten possible deterrents to our relationship with God - no doubt we could add to them - which really need not deter, however powerful they seem:

*I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers,  
not things present, not things to come,  
nor powers, nor height, nor depth,  
nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us  
from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

We know what Paul was able to accomplish in the service of the Lord and how much he himself had to endure, so when he says he is convinced of this we can be sure he is not speaking out of wishful thinking, but out of real lived experience.

Here then are two great men of faith whom we can take as our inspiration in the difficult days ahead. I certainly wish you all a faith-filled lockdown until we can celebrate being the body of Christ in church again - but we always are the body of Christ whenever and wherever we are.

With best wishes and prayers, Fr. Robin

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