

IN REVERSE

Prayer in a time of isolation

New Zealand is in “Lock Down”. Life as we have known it is completely changed as the nation, along with the rest of the world, wages war against an invisible but deadly enemy, Coronavirus, or COVID-19. You may have already been “self-isolating”; the “Lock Down” extends that directive to nearly everyone. Only essential services remain open.

You are a person of faith. Prayer is an important part of your life. Worship normally engages you with others and with large gatherings banned, church services, along with concerts, meetings, sporting events and large social celebrations, cannot be held.

We are in a very strange and unfamiliar environment, backpedalling to escape infection and limit the spread of a disease for which there is still no cure. This means minimal or no contact with others, no touching, no sharing, keeping our distance from one another and keeping everything clean.

It’s like we’re living “in reverse”, backing away from what we’ve regarded as normal. Indeed, as social beings, we need contact with others. Reversing what is natural and necessary is unnerving and extremely disruptive.

So here is a package of reflections to take you through this time of being locked down! Whether on your own or at home with family, I hope you will find here something to ease the isolation and to let you know you are still connected. Let the spirit be our touchstone and our bridge to one another.

They explore the “In Reverse” title, accepting that while it is unnatural to be apart from others, this time on your own can help you to place more value on community, to become more mindful of those without friends or contacts, and to nurture seeds of kindness and compassion.

Prayer in a time of isolation offers a spiritual bond that will remove loneliness from your time alone and strengthen your appreciation of “togetherness” when you return.

DAY ONE – the water of life

Setting: Make a prayer space in your room. Whatever else you place there, put a crucifix, a bowl of water and a lit candle. Begin your prayer with the Sign of the Cross, then -

Give thanks for this new day:

*God of life and light, I thank you for another new beginning.
For the light shining through my window
For the trees and their colours
The birds and their songs
Though I am, for some days, alone
The beauty I see speaks your presence
And gives me confidence to live this new day.*

Frequent hand washing plays a significant role in preventing the spread of Coronavirus (COVID-19). The virus can survive on hands for up to ten minutes and in that short time can be transferred to anything touched. Cleanliness is vital in the fight against this new virus.

It is appropriate, therefore, to open our special 14 prayer days with a focus on water, the first element in creation. Water: so essential for life, but with the potential to be extremely destructive.

Water sustains all forms of life, including the life of our planet. Droughts – the absence of water, prevent life and growth. Floods – the excess of water, destroy life.

Baptism is the gateway to faith for Christians. By “water and the Spirit” we are gifted new life, becoming “a new creation”, washed free of the virus of selfishness and made one with the People of God, the Church. In Baptism there is both a washing away and a washing into life.

Reflect today on your own baptism. How has your faith developed since that momentous occasion? It’s what happens *after* baptism that shapes the way you will experience its effects. How are you living your new life?

Consider: Baptism is the sign instituted by Jesus to unite us with his own baptism. He asked his disciples when they were seeking his favour, “Are you

willing to be baptised with the baptism with which I must be baptised?" St Paul made this perfectly clear:

When we were baptised in Christ Jesus we were baptised in his death; in other words, when we were baptised we went into the tomb with him and joined him in death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father's glory, we too might live a new life. [Romans 6:3-4]

- Give yourself 5-10 minutes meditating on the above. If you no longer have your baptism candle, or have no other candle, light a table lamp or torch. Let its glow accompany you in this quiet time.
- After your mediation write about what you have experienced, what you heard in the scripture, what dying and rising with Jesus might mean for you today and in the future.
- If you have access to the song, *Christ Be Our Light* [Bernadette Farrell], play it, listening carefully to the words. What do they say to you about the consequences of your baptism? This song will also help you know that, though you are now alone, you remain linked to all the baptised.

Here is the chorus:

Christ be our light

Shine in our hearts, shine through the darkness

Christ be our light

Shine in your Church gathered today.

Pray one (or more) of these three Rosary decades, while giving thanks for those who have shared faith with you and helped it to develop.

- The Baptism of Jesus – 2nd Mystery of Light
- The Crucifixion of Jesus – 5th Sorrowful Mystery
- The Resurrection of Jesus – 1st Glorious Mystery

Closing Prayer:

Awaken Me

Risen One,
come to meet me
in the garden of my life.

Lure me into elation.
Revive my silent hope.

Coax my dormant dreams.
Raise up my neglected gratitude.
Entice my tired enthusiasm.
Give life to my faltering relationships.
Roll back the stone of my indifference.
Unwrap the deadness of my spiritual life
Impart heartiness in my work.

Risen One,
send me forth as a disciple of your unwavering love,
a messenger of your unlimited joy.

Resurrected One,
may I become ever more convinced
that your presence lives on,
and on, and on,
and on.

Awaken me!
Awaken me!

*-Joyce Rupp, Out of the Ordinary, 2002.
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DAY TWO – no touching

SETTING: With the crucifix, place photos of family, friends, places you've visited. Some flowers perhaps, or images of nature/creation.

Give thanks for this new day:

Creator, Life-giver.
You love the world so much that,
in Jesus, you promise to be with us
till the end of time.
I am grateful that your presence continues
for we are in a time of trouble, as an
out-of-control virus threatens your world and its people.
Thank you for being with us during another day
of social distancing and uncertainty.
Guide our minds and hearts as a remedy is sought.
May the successful outcome bring us
Closer to one another and to you.

One of the warnings given in efforts to stop the spreading of coronavirus is to avoid unnecessary touching. The virus survives in the afterglow of our touch, making the washing hands and the wiping of doorknob, bannister, laptop, lift button, important weapons in the fight. How terrible to be told not to touch, to hug, to kiss, and to “socially distance” yourself by standing at least a metre from another person.

As water is essential for life, touching is essential for life to thrive. Touching connects not only bodies but also hearts. *I was very touched by your words*, we say. And, *please keep in touch*. So many of Jesus' miracles came through his touch, and the woman who merely *touched the hem of his garment* found herself cured.

Today's prayer time invites reflection on the gift of touch. At a time when we are cautioned against touching, giving ourselves space to take a deeper look at how and why we need contact with one another, can bring fresh insights and new purpose to the way we communicate.

The Gospel according to John records six significant gifts coming from the public ministry of Jesus: the gift of **Wine** at Cana (ch.2), the gift of **Living Water**

to the woman he met at the well (ch.4), the gift of **Healing** to the disabled man who had no one else to help him (ch.5), the gift of **Food** to the crowd (ch.6), the gift of **Sight** to the man born blind (ch.8), the gift of **Life** to his friend, Lazarus (ch.11). Each gift involves an encounter with others. While they each relate to one or more of our five senses (smell, taste, touch, sight and hearing), they all relate to touch of one kind or another.

- Read and re-read one of the above chapters. Observe the connections between Jesus and the person/people involved, especially his non-physical touching.
- Look at the photos in your prayer space. In this time of prayer, “touch” the people and places, using your heart and mind. “Embrace” them in your prayer.

Without touch there is no real physical connection. The other five senses can be stimulated from a distance, but touch requires closeness, intimacy, and is never a one-way communication. This is what is missing from our personal lives during the coronavirus crisis. The tragedy is that not being able to touch another person, I can find my life – as the writer Joy Cowley puts it – restricted *to a small world of one*.

Pray this Aotearoa Psalm: The Human Race

Who was it who said that competition was a good idea?

Who reckoned it was important to be first, best, biggest, richest, fastest, brightest, top of the class?

Not Jesus, that’s for sure.

Oh, he had his chance in the desert.

All the temptations given him were a push for self-promotion.

He turned them down flat.

He knew that the secret of happiness

lay in making others happy,

in cooperation rather than competition,

in helping another unwrap her gift,

in listening to a brother’s song.

Pursuit of excellence is part of growth and important in our lives, but that has got nothing to do

with standing on others to increase our stature,

or leaving others behind in order to get out front.

Isn’t it better to share the pleasures of all those around us than to be restricted

to a small world on one?

Because that's the trouble with winning:
it leaves us standing on our own.
In fact, winning can be so lonely,
that often it feels like losing.

[Joy Cowley, Aotearoa Psalms, 1989, Psalm 29]

Scripture Meditation: *As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.* [Colossians 3:12-15]

- Stay with this reading for 5-10 minutes
- The Aotearoa Psalm warns against selfishness and greed. Now that you are isolated from others, even perhaps from those you greatly love, consider the way your touch affects others. Is it in any way selfish or controlling? How does it stack up against St Paul's wardrobe of compassion, kindness, etc.
- What do you find in the scripture passage that you would like to develop / strengthen in your personal relationships when you re-enter society?

Close this prayer time with personal praise and thanks for the gift of touch.

DAY THREE – in isolation

SETTING: Alongside your crucifix and lighted candle (or lamp), place a world atlas. If you do not have an atlas, write the name of as many countries you can recall and lay the list in the centre of your sacred space.

Giving thanks for this new day:

God of the universe.
All life comes from you
and all nations are held in your loving embrace.
The pandemic that now holds us hostage
threatens the wellbeing and stability
of the whole world.
With the dawning of this new day
we place our trust in you.
Gather us under your protecting wings
that we might encourage one another
and work together to bring health, safety and peace.

Self-isolation signals a cut-off from many usual and normal contacts. Social distancing affects every community – family, school, church, town, city, the entire nation, and internationally as well. This is a terrible global phenomenon. But perhaps it will bring blessings, as we all come to realise what makes life so precious and the aspects of living we have taken for granted or never really appreciated.

To begin, use some of this prayer time, and some of this day, to reflect on the tragedy of isolation – not simply your own, but the many ways in which people experience isolation: the imprisoned, refugees, social outcasts, the elderly abandoned by family, solo parents, the sick kept in isolation, a person or persons nobody wants anything to do with...

Here are some characters Jesus encountered who knew the pain of isolation: a Leper (Lk 5:12-16), the Gerasene Demoniac (Lk 8:26-39), Lazarus – at the gate of the rich man, (Lk 16:19-31), Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1-10). There are many more, including Jesus himself; Peter and the other disciples, as a consequence of their abandoning Jesus (Matthew 26:56; Lk 22:54-62; Matthew 27:46).

- Pray these episodes – each of them at different times during the day. Note the ways in which these people were isolated. You may like to look

for other examples in the gospel narratives. Note, too, the concern of Jesus to restore people to the community or to help the community to be more accepting of the isolated one. Luke's gospel is particularly concerned with the healing ministry of Jesus and the greatest healing happens when people are at peace with one another.

- Using your atlas or list of countries, locate those most affected by Coronavirus. Consider the amount of isolation affecting the people of these lands and the enormous changes occurring in lifestyle, commerce, transport, and day-to-day living. Pray the following psalm with hope in your heart for healing, for increase in faith and for the strengthening of love between people, isolated or not.

PSALM 91

You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
who abide in the shade of the Almighty,
will say to the Lord, *My refuge and my fortress;
my God in whom I trust.*

For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
and from the deadly pestilence;
he will cover you with his pinions,
and under his wings you will find refuge...

You will not fear the terror of the night,
or the arrow that flies by day,
or the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
or the destruction that wastes at noonday...

For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.
On their hands they will bear you up
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone...

Those who love me I will deliver;
I will protect those who know my name.
When they call to me I will answer them;
I will be with them in trouble.
I will rescue them and honour them...

Rosary Prayer: Pray the 5th Joyful Mystery – the Finding of the Child Jesus. Jesus becomes “isolated” from the Nazareth “caravan” and is feared lost in Jerusalem. Mary and Joseph search for him through a number of days. Offer

this Decade for all who are isolated or lost, and for those desperate to find them and to be reunited.

- Keep contact with people you know to be isolated at this time through phone, email or other social media. The Church has always regarded the “media” as gifts of God. Well used, they can be life-savers and health-givers. Be aware of how much you are now valuing the calls of those concerned for *your* welfare.

Wonder Counsellor.

I give thanks for the many ways
you guide the skills of people to improve and
assist the ways we communicate with one another.

In this time of isolation
when physical contact needs to be avoided
we are blessed with electronic media to
enable support to be given
news to be known and
love to be shared.

May my gratitude continue
beyond this emergency
so that I never misuse any of your gifts.

If you have access to music, conclude by listening to a quiet, reflective piece.

DAY FOUR – no fear

SETTING: Light several candles near the crucifix and scatter bright coloured cloths, paintings or drawings around your prayer space.

Prayer in praise of this new day:

Daylight takes care of the darkness of night
and the fear darkness often brings.
I thank and praise you, loving God, for your gift
of Jesus, the light of the world,
the One in whom there is no darkness,
who comes to light our way home.
Watch over us in the time of uncertainty.
Strengthen our faith, our hope and our love.
Grant us peace of mind and heart as our isolation continues.

News of the spreading Coronavirus sparked panic buying and rumours sending great alarm through the population. Such behaviour sparks fear, fear only made worse when people are isolated from one another. Fear is a natural response to danger, whether real or perceived. It takes a leap of faith to prevent the paralysing effect of uncontrolled fear. No doubt that is why the Hebrew/Christian scriptures are filled with assurances not to be afraid.

The first female Anglican bishop in the UK, Libby Lane, met considerable opposition to her appointment and found her situation potentially isolating and fearful. But, in a later interview she said her faith had given her a deep sense of belonging and reassurance, and concluded by sharing her *most valuable piece of advice*:

“It is a constant refrain in scripture: ‘Do not be afraid’ – don’t live out of fear. Of course, it is natural that we all sometimes feel afraid. We’re afraid of being alone, of failing, of not coping. But if we live our lives from a place of fear, it is damaging to us, to our relationships, to our communities. One needs to find something that gives a sense of safety, of security, of home. And that comes with accepting we are all known by God and loved by God. If you allow that truth in, it enables you to find freedom from fear. So you can live out not of fear but of hope and gratitude.” [If I could tell you just one thing..., Richard Reed, Canongate Books, 2018, p290-1]

Scripture Reflection

The first two chapters of Luke's gospel cover the conception, birth and early years of both John the Baptist, and Jesus. All associated with these events needed much reassurance to overcome their hesitation and fear. Zechariah, Mary, and the shepherds at Bethlehem are urged, *Do not be afraid*. Chapter one of Matthew's account introduces a very troubled Joseph who is told, *do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife*. [Mt 1:20]

Often during his ministry Jesus encourages the disciples not to be afraid, and guides them on a journey to *trust in God and trust also in me*. John, chapter 14, is part of Jesus' final words instruction to the disciples and it is rich with reassurance and the promise of his continued presence, especially in the gift of the Spirit (*I will not leave you orphans – vs 18*). Chapter 15 follows with the "Vine and Branch" teaching – also very reassuring.

Give yourself 5-10 minutes with one of these sections. Consider:

- Why was there such a need for Jesus to reassure those closest to him?
- When have you felt most afraid?
- How and by whom or what have you found reassurance, courage?
- What fears have you noticed, or are noticing, during this isolation?
- How is your faith helping during this experience?
- How is your faith growing, or likely to grow, because of this time?

Prayer of Intercession – For those who live in fear

For those afraid for tomorrow after what happened to them today –

[R] Gentle Saviour, grant them peace.

For those concerned for loved ones in a time of uncertainty – [R]

For those whose hearts are heavy with grief and sadness – [R]

For those fearing redundancy for they know many jobs will be cut – [R]

For those fearful for their safety in difficult relationships – [R]

For those afraid of dying; may they know the comfort of being loved – [R]

Gentle Saviour, accept these prayers, offered with the trust of knowing that you are with us. Just as fear is part of our nature, so is our desire to love and to be loved. With faith in you we can live balanced and good lives and rest in your peace. In Jesus' name. Amen.

By the tender mercy of our God
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness,
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.

[Canticle of Zechariah, Luke 1:78-9]

Horizons

Morning star
let there be light.

Between the leaves
let there be light.

Children's faces
let there be light.

On the horizon
let there be light.

Arc of rainbow
let there be light.

Candle at window
let there be light.

[*Firesong*, Anne Powell, 1999, p52]

To conclude: pray your own personal prayer, thanking God for the reassurance the gift of faith brings to your life, and for the people who bring you peace.

Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. [Matthew 28:20]

DAY FIVE – Shock, loss, confusion

SETTING: The crucifix, in the centre of your prayer space, should be the only object displayed during this session.

Prayer in praise of another day:

Glory and praise to you, O God.

You gift me with a new day to discover more about myself and to ponder the mystery of your love.

As this time of isolation continues, I am feeling the loss of my independence and am confused by my inability to live a normal life. Yet, my desire to praise you rises strongly in my heart. For I trust your goodness and believe that, as the Good Shepherd, you will guide us to fresh and green pastures.

Glory and praise to you, O God.

Shock, loss, confusion are words used by Daniel O’Leary in the introduction to his final book, *Dancing to My Death* (2019). He used them to describe “a routine that is suddenly up-ended and knocked entirely off track.” This Irish born priest, teacher and bestselling author was referring to his 2018 cancer diagnosis and his book invites the reader into an emotional and extremely “raw” conversation as the tumour progressed to take his life in January 2019.

With COVID-19, taking hold a year after his death, the “routine” of the whole world has been “suddenly up-ended and knocked entirely off track”. Individuals know this especially in their time of isolation, unable to live life normally, visit friends, shop, or even work. Today’s prayer draws from the experiences described by Daniel O’Leary. His journey through shock, loss and confusion, while echoing the feelings, frustrations and fears of those in isolation and communities in lock-down, also offers life-lines for anyone willing to listen, to reflect and be open to discover goodness and peace even in the worst of times.

1 *What I am trying to do...is to make my wound into a sacred wound; to make the stones of darkness into welcome stepping stones of light across the turbulent river.* [p.22]

Jesus, you are God’s gift of light for all the nations. In you we live and move and have our being. Help me to make this connection; to fill it with meaning;

to enter more deeply into your life; to know in my heart as well as in my mind that my life is intimately bonded with yours, that my wounds and your wounds, and yours are mine.

2 *There's a gift hidden in your new condition, I'm told.* [p.29]

I am not suffering a terminal illness, but this coronavirus, a plague in our midst, is sapping my energy and my faith – even as it threatens life throughout the world. Can such a threat carry a gift? Hold me close, loving God, that I may not lose faith in your goodness, nor hope that, within the cloud of sickness, isolation and even death, there is treasure to be found. Perhaps a kinder way of being, a better way of living.

3 *I need to feel the rhythm of the heart of Mother Universe, Mother Evolution, Mother of Humanity, Mother of all Creation. May God forever deepen in me, clarify for me, the aching glimpses of an impossibly enchanting love.* [p.65]

Help me, O God, in this distressing time, not to think only of myself and my situation. Remind me that I am part of something huge and splendid and unfinished. I know the words from Paul, *Love never ends* [1Cor.13:8]. Stir them into my life that I might make them my own and reach out to all.

4 *...when God eases us out of God's heart onto this planet, God searches for a place that is most like paradise, and this is the mother's gaze, she transparently sacramentalises God's infinite gaze, looking into the eyes of the infant. And when the infant looks into her eyes it is looking into God's eyes...* [p.177-8]

Thank you, Creator God, for your great love, holding us forever in your gaze. Help me to always appreciate the wonderful intimacy of your love for me and all creation, and to play my part more resolutely to honour your presence in everything that is.

5 *We must evolve the energy of love, learn it and spread it... – openly within our communities and hiddenly in our hearts – advancing, enhancing and completing the work of Creation, of Evolution, of the Kingdom of God.* [p.190]

O God, I want to understand more about how I can use your gift of love to partner you in your creative work. I want to serve others more than myself. Place me where you need love to flourish that I might truly share my love for you and with you.

SCRIPTURE TIME

Choose a favourite gospel passage and spend 5-10 minutes in meditation. In what way(s) might it direct you to the theme of today's prayer session?

Scripture references you may like to consider:

Luke, chapter 15 – losing and finding

Mark 6:1-6 – the shock of rejection

Matthew 5:1-11 – the Beatitudes

John, chapter 11 – the raising of Lazarus

SHOCK, LOSS, CONFUSION

in a world turned upside down
when the ordinary is no more
and isolation is the norm
I must not forget the we
or you or us
I must not allow
shock to horrify
loss to paralyse
confusion to terrify
hold on to sanity
let love be our sanctuary

THE WAY IT IS

There is a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen: people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.

[William Stafford, *Ask Me: 100 Essential Poems*
Graywolf Press, 1977, p.42
Quoted by Daniel O'Leary]

DAY SIX – the Name of God is Mercy

SETTING: crucifix and candles with some violet or purple cloth, palms or other greenery.

Prayer in praise of this day:

A new day signals freshness
and the chance to make a new start.
I want so much to leave behind the fear, the anger,
the upsets and unloving thoughts I have allowed
to enter this time of isolation. Cleanse me, merciful God.
Flood me with your calming Spirit.
Free me from any sense of isolation
that I may feel and know your presence and
the embrace of your mercy.

In a conversation that became a book in 2016, *The Name of God is Mercy*, Pope Francis told journalist, Andrea Tornielli, that he thought of the Church *as a field hospital, where treatment is given to those most wounded*. He pointed out that Jesus declared himself as having come, *not for the healthy who do not need the doctor, but for the sick*. [Mark 2:17]

Mercy is a key ingredient for the Christian faith. It is not about letting people off the wrong they have done or the harm they have caused; it is about understanding the guilt they feel, the trap they have got themselves into, the choices they shouldn't have made, and about providing the opportunity to heal. It is also about knowing my own mistakes, deliberate or otherwise, and the overwhelming feeling that there's no way out.

A word that has sprung into life with the coronavirus crisis is KINDNESS. *Be kind* is the first piece of advice health officials give. Look out for one another. Kindness is closely related to mercy, as it is to love.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. [1Cor.13:4-8]

Using this well know quote from St Paul, make a personal examination of conscience. The following quotes, psalm and prayers may help bring you peace.

The more conscious we are of our wretchedness and our sins, the more we experience the love and infinite mercy of God among us, and the more capable we are of looking upon the many “wounded” we meet along the way with acceptance and mercy. So we must avoid the attitude of someone who judges and condemns from the lofty heights of their own certainty...

[The Name of God... p.67]

Psalm 51. Verses 1-2; 10-12; 15

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy blot out all my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.

Prayers

Create a clean heart in me, God. Dust off the unmindful activity that constantly collects there. De-clutter my heart from harsh judgements and negativity. Wash away my resistance to working through difficult relationships. Rinse off my un-loving so the beauty of my generous and kind heart can shine forth. Remove whatever keeps me from following in your compassionate footsteps. [Joyce Rupp, *Out of the Ordinary*, 2000, p.116]

Holy and merciful God: Your loving kindness breaks the hardness of my pride and heals my reluctance to see the good in others or even to accept their sorrow. I open myself to your mercy that, knowing your forgiveness, I might open my heart to share your life-giving gift of pardon and peace.

God, ever patient, ever hopeful, abounding in kindness: You stand at the door and knock, prepared to keep knocking. You watch the road for any sign of your returning child. You pray through the night that those you love might be safe in the storm. Help me feel your longing, and the warmth of your love and open myself to your welcome.

“At the foot of the Cross, Mary, together with John, the disciple of love, witnessed the words of forgiveness spoken by Jesus. This supreme expression of mercy towards those who crucified him show us the point to which the mercy of God can reach. Mary attests that the mercy of the Son of God knows no bounds and extends to everyone, without exception. Let us address her in the words of the *Salve Regina*, a prayer ever ancient and ever new, so that she may never tire of turning her merciful eyes upon us, and make us worthy to contemplate the face of mercy, her Son, Jesus.”

[*The Name of God... p147-8*]

HAIL HOLY QUEEN

*Hail, Holy Queen, Mother of Mercy,
Hail our life, our sweetness and our hope.
To you we cry, poor banished children of Eve.
To you we send up our sighs,
Mourning and weeping in this valley of tears.
Turn then, Most Gracious Advocate,
your eyes of mercy towards us
and after this, our exile,
show us the blessed fruit of your womb.
Jesus.
O Clement, O Loving, O Sweet Virgin Mary.
Pray for us, O Holy Mother of God
Make us worthy of the promises of Christ.*

Our “In Reverse” theme points to how different things have become in society even in the space of a few months. Self-isolation, shut-down and avoiding contact with others are not community habits. The quieter streets, job losses and economic hardship for all levels of society push us further back from where we were and from what we were used to and expected. Panic buying for fear of supply shortage has brought out the worst in some, illustrating just how quickly behaviour patterns can change.

Metanoia, the word that is used in the call of Jesus at the beginning of his public ministry, normally translates as *Repent*. But the challenge in being repentant is to do more than say “sorry”. It means reversing and turning around and re-orienting ourselves to the direction we’re meant to be travelling

We are quite literally out of our “comfort zone” in the face of COVID-19. We have a new appreciation of what it means to be “in need”, “vulnerable”, “helpless”. We can use this unexpected and unprecedented opportunity to focus the gift of faith in the context of daily life, and to make Mercy a priority.

The Name of God is mercy – Jesus is the Face of God

DAY SEVEN – Joy to the world

SETTING

Prayer in praise of a new day:

Praise and glory to you, Christ Jesus.
Your coming among us was
news of great joy for all the world
and your continuing presence is a
constant source of joy even in difficult times.
Though containing the Virus means
limiting personal contacts and choices,
I give praise for this new day.
Help all of us to see you present
in this challenging moment.
Keep our hearts joyful.

Two spiritual giants and Nobel Prize Laureates, His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu spent a week together, in 2015, at the Dalai Lama's home in Dharamsala, India. They had arranged the visit to coincide with the Dalai Lama's 80th birthday and to spend the time discussing and exploring the question: *how do we find joy in the face of life's inevitable suffering?*

The resulting book, *The Book of Joy* was published a year later. For this prayer day, I am offering some of the insights and comments offered by these Buddhist and Christian ambassadors. Their theme is so appropriate for this time of uncertainty as the Coronavirus threatens untold suffering across all nations. A joyful heart has no space for negativity, no room for despair.

Archbishop Tutu: "We don't really get close to others if our relationship is made up of unending hunky-dory-ness. It is the hard time, the painful times, the sadness and the grief that knit us more closely together."

READ: Acts of the Apostles, chapter 1. It was only after the death and resurrection of Jesus that his disciples came together as a united group. Contrast their behaviour and outlook in "Acts" with their attitude in Matthew 20:17-24, and elsewhere. Prestige, power held their focus, certainly not joy.

DALAI LAMA: “Our whole society has a materialistic culture. In the materialistic way of life, there is no concept of friendship, no concept of love, just work, twenty-four hours a day, like a machine. So in modern society we eventually also become part of that large moving machine.”

Will the experience of lockdown cause us to see the community in a new light? Can being in a situation where you are not allowed to be with people help you to be more open to contact, more ready to notice and relate to others when the lockdown is over? You can be joyful when you are alone, but not when you are lonely. Loneliness wipes out joy. There are people all around us, in every town and place; but too many of them are lonely.

ARCHBISHOP TUTU: “If you are filled with negative judgement and anger, then you will feel separate from other people. You will feel lonely. But if you have an open heart and are filled with trust and friendship, even if you are physically alone, even living a hermit’s life, you will never feel lonely.”

DALAI LAMA: “The only thing that will bring happiness is affection and warmheartedness. This really brings inner strength and self-confidence, reduces fear, develops trust and trust brings friendship. We are social animals and cooperation is necessary for our survival, but cooperation is entirely based on trust... If you feel fear and distrust, then other people will distance themselves. They will also feel cautious, suspicious and distrustful. Then comes the feeling of loneliness.”

Both have experienced great personal suffering and persecution. They agree that joy is reached through suffering and adversity.

DALAI LAMA: “You see, if there are no difficulties and you are always relaxed, then you complain more... We can experience more joy in the face of great adversity than when life is seemingly easy and uneventful.”

THE JOY OF GIVING

- Research indicates that people find greater joy in giving to others than in buying something for themselves. Reflect on your own experience of giving a present, paying for someone’s meal, giving service...
- Archbishop Tutu offers a powerful example from the Dead Sea: “It receives beautiful water from the rivers, and the water goes dank. I mean, it just goes bad. And that’s why it is the Dead Sea. It receives and does not give.” Consider: Joy comes as a gift through giving.

- When we learn not to take ourselves too seriously and can joke about ourselves, humour becomes part of our makeup. Joy is very comfortable with humour. Don't miss the light-hearted moments in this lockdown time. Make some of your own. Look for them in the scriptures.

This is an ideal time to read what you may have wanted to read but “never had the time”! For instance, Pope Francis' *Evangelii Gaudium, The Joy of the Gospel, 2013*. It can be found on GOOGLE. Just to read a section of it will be uplifting and a way of updating your understanding of faith. The Pope concludes his writing with a prayer to Mary for guidance and encouragement. Such prayer has special relevance for our present situation.

*Mary, Virgin and Mother,
you who, moved by the Holy Spirit, welcomed the Word of Life
in the depth of your humble faith:
as you gave yourself completely to the Eternal One,
help us to say our own “Yes” to the urgent call, as pressing as ever,
to proclaim the good news of Jesus.*

*Filled with Christ's presence, you brought joy to John the Baptist,
making him exult in the womb of his mother.
Brimming over with joy, you sang of the great things done by God.
Standing at the foot of the cross with unyielding faith,
you received the joyful comfort of the resurrection,
and joined the disciples in awaiting the Spirit
so that the evangelising Church might be born.*

*Obtain for us now a new ardour born of the resurrection,
that we may bring to all the Gospel of life which triumphs over death.
Give us a holy courage to seek new paths that the gift of
unfading beauty may reach every man and woman.*

*Virgin of listening and contemplation, Mother of love,
Bride of the eternal wedding feast, pray for the Church,
whose pure icon you are, that she may never be closed in
on herself or lose her passion for establishing God's kingdom.*

*Star of the new evangelisation, help us to bear radiant witness
to communion, service, ardent and generous faith, justice and
love of the poor, that the joy of the Gospel may reach to the end of the earth
illuminating even the fringes of our world. Mother of the living Gospel,
wellspring of happiness for little ones, pray for us. Amen. Alleluia.*

DAY EIGHT – A New Normal

SETTING

Prayer to praise the day: