

Friday February 5th, Friday in the Fourth Week in Ordinary Time, Year 1

Good Morning from St. Bernadette's.

I hope everyone is keeping safe and well, and following all the guidance we receive to overcome these strange times, and continuing to pray for all our needs at this time.

Here we are at the end of another week in lockdown, and I hope you have all stayed safe and healthy. Here it's been a busy, but fruitful week, with masses, funeral services, and lots to do regarding school, and learn how to flow test, which we officially start on Monday. There seem to be some glimmers of hope about opening up, and word is coming about how to celebrate Ash Wednesday, so onwards and upwards!

Coming to the end of the sermon the author of the Letter to the Hebrews 13:1-8 lists five essential practical qualities of the Christian life: brotherly love, hospitality to the stranger, sympathy for those in trouble, purity in and respect for marriage, and contentment with your lot, free from the love of money. And you can't really argue with any of that!

We switch to the story of the beheading of John the Baptist. As a weak Pontius Pilate condemned Jesus to death, so it is that a weak and foolish Herod, through the machinations of his wife Herodias and her daughter Salome, condemns John the Baptist to his beheading. *'When John's disciples heard about this, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.'* Of the seven corporal works of mercy, only one is not found in Matthew 25:31-46: bury the dead. It is included as proper burial of the dead was an important practice in Israel from its earliest days. A common practice was to prepare the body for burial with ointments and spices, and then to wrap the body in a linen cloth before laying it in a tomb, as was done with Jesus (John 19:40). There the body would decay until only bones remained, and then they would be moved to a permanent burial place where they would be placed with the bones of one's ancestors. According to Luke 23:53, Jesus was wrapped in linen and laid in a 'rock-hewn tomb in which no one had yet been buried,' but because of the Sabbath, his body had not yet been anointed with the appropriate spices and perfumed oil. As with all of the works of mercy, what is emphasized here is the importance of compassion for others and the need to treat everyone with the dignity and respect they deserve as people created by a loving God, and whose bodies have been temples of the Holy Spirit. From the Rite of Funerals:

Lord our God,

The death of our brothers and sisters

Recalls our human condition

And the brevity of our lives on earth.

*But for those who believe in your love
Death is not the end,
Nor does it destroy the bonds
That you forge in our lives.
Fill us with the faith of your Son's disciples
And the hope of the children of God,
For by dying you unlocked the gates of life
For all those who believe in you.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Today let us sing the beautiful hymn 'Abide With Me' in a beautiful version, and with beautiful visuals: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=84YASWe3_2Q

And today is the Feast of St. Agatha, also known as Agatha of Sicily. She was born around 231 in either Catania or Palermo, Sicily to a rich and noble family. From her very early years, the notably beautiful Agatha dedicated her life to God. That did not stop men from desiring her and making unwanted advances toward her. One of the men who desired Agatha, whose name was Quintianus, and because he was of a high diplomatic ranking, thought he could force her to turn away from her vow and force her to marry. Knowing she was a Christian during the persecution of Decius, he had her arrested and brought before the judge. He was the Judge! When faced with torture she prayed *'Jesus Christ, Lord of all, you see my heart, you know my desires. Possess all that I am. I am your sheep: make me worthy to overcome the devil.'* With tears falling from her eyes, she prayed for courage. To force her to change her mind, Quintianus had her imprisoned - in a brothel, like St. Agnes whom we celebrated last month. Agatha never lost her confidence in God, even though she suffered a month of assaults and efforts to get her to abandon her vow to God and go against her virtue. Quintianus heard of her calm strength and sent her to prison, where she was tortured, and eventually told to be given no food or medical attention. But Agatha had a vision of the apostle, St. Peter, who comforted her and healed her wounds through his prayers. Agatha prayed, *'Lord, my Creator, you have ever protected me from the cradle; you have taken me from the love of the world, and given me patience to suffer: receive now my soul,'* and Agatha was finally martyred with a last round of torture around the year 251. St. Agatha is the patron saint of Sicily, bellfounders, breast cancer patients, Palermo, rape victims, and nurses. She is also considered to be a powerful intercessor when people suffer from fires as it is believed that through her intercession Catania was miraculously saved from an eruption of Mount Etna. Let's say a prayer for all our amazing nurses, working tirelessly for us all in these dreadful days:

*Lord,
Through the intercession of St. Agatha
keep our nurses strong and healthy in every area of their lives.*

*Give them the physical, emotional, and spiritual comfort they need
during this challenging time.*

Protect them, their families, children, and everyone under their care.

Lord, help them to not grow weary in doing good.

Do not let them doubt themselves and their purpose in life.

And when they feel life is breaking down, lift them up oh Lord.

*Bless their hearts and fill them with your gifts of the Spirit,
whenever they start coming close to being empty.*

Allow them to refresh themselves and rely on You.

We ask that you give them good health as they care for the health of others.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

And a huge thank you to anyone who is reading this who works for the NHS. God bless you.

Over in Hong Kong they are really gearing up for Chinese New Year which is officially on Friday February 12th, the Spring Festival, but is really a whole series of events, and no doubt my brother and his Family in HK will be reporting on what they are all up to. Meanwhile Martin has sent a montage of the streets of Hong Kong getting ready for the public holiday and the Year of the Ox. It's looking very colourful!

Have a great Friday, and as the weather is so good, perhaps I will see you on the prom this afternoon when heaving my exercise walk!

Once again many thanks for all your return mails. Apologies if I don't reply immediately, sometimes they seem to get lost (or kind of bunched up). Any suggestions for ways to keep our faith and spirits up at this time are most welcome!

And remember, St. Bernadette's is not closed. We're just doing things differently for a while, until we are allowed to gather together once more, more stronger, more faithful, more loving, more creative, and more grateful for the amazing community that is St. Bernadette's.

With love and faith in Jesus.

Fr. P.