

Merrylea Parish Church, Glasgow.

Pastoral Homily by the Locum, the Rev'd Jim Gibson.

Sunday, 12th July 2020

Fifth Sunday after Trinity.

O Lord, our Lord, your greatness is seen in all the world! Your praise reaches up to the heavens; it is sung by children and babies ... when I look at the sky which you have made, at the moon and the stars which you have set in their places – what is man that you think of him; mere man that you care for him? Yet you made him inferior only to yourself you appointed him ruler over everything you made, you placed him over all creation. O Lord, our Lord, your greatness is seen in all the world!” (Psalm 8).

It was a beautiful, sunny afternoon. My wife and I had been invited to enjoy tea and delicious home made scones in the garden of a couple who had been members of my congregation at Bothwell. Conversation was free, easy, and wide ranging. Until we began to discuss the political handling of the Covid-19 pandemic and its effect on global economies. That was when our host casually turned to me and asked, “Just how much do you think a human life is worth Jim?”

How would you reply?

In America, the numbers are staggering. Thus far, more Americans have died from Covid-19 than from the wars in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan combined. The economic effects of the pandemic have been nothing short of carnage with more than 33.5 million people registered as unemployed. Companies large and small are expected to disappear, along with millions of jobs. Consumer spending, business investment and manufacturing are all in freefall. Depending whether there may be a second wave of the virus, economic recovery within the world’s richest nation is not expected anytime soon.

In the UK the pandemic has also struck hard. Numbers of deaths are higher than anyone would have wished. With the easing of lockdown, this week the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced further eye-watering amounts of money being made available to kick-start the British economy, get people back to work, create jobs particularly for the under-25s with wage subsidies, loans and deferred taxes and encourage support of the travel, hospitality and leisure industries. Government borrowing is now at record levels.

However, the Chancellor remains adamant that this is a price that simply has to be paid.

The potential ruin brought to so many individuals and businesses through Covid-19 is as a result of no-one’s fault. The Government must try to give support when it can and try to ensure no-one is left behind. An early end to lockdown is now timely in order to breathe fresh life into the stagnating economy.

Conversely, in Scotland, whether because of ‘the science’ or simply playing political games, the approach to easing lockdown has appeared more cautious. Because of the time delay in the virus having effect in Scotland, holiday makers in their thousands are being denied longed for trips to favoured destinations now readily available elsewhere. Though it is hoped such restrictions may soon be removed, for the present there is little good news for Scottish airport authorities and aviation businesses. It would seem that for the Scottish Government, continued safeguarding of people’s health outways the clamouring of business and industrial voices urging preference being given to restoring the welfare of the country’s economy.

At the beginning of May, the Economics Editor of the *Telegraph*, Russell Lynch, wrote that *'the cost of saving lives in this lockdown is too high'* and then proceeded to offer a cost-benefit analysis on the saving of human life. Responses to his column were as angry as they were predictable. What do you think?

Apparently, the UK Treasury works on the premise that a human life is worth £2million. This is the VPF – the value of a prevented fatality. Mr Lynch argued this was too high. He was supported in this by no less than the former Governor of the Bank of England, Mervyn King who said, *"Younger generations have suffered in the last 20 years. Why on earth is our future being put at stake in order to prolong life expectancy of older people, whose life expectancy cannot be very high in any event?"*

It's interesting to hear politicians say *'no-one should be left behind'*. Last year, the Department of International Development, now part of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, used the phrase as the title of a major report last year. They called it, *'Our Promise'*; and recently I heard an official of the World Health Organisation use it on BBC's *Today* programme in respect to our attitude to the current pandemic. That's the kind of world in which I wish to live. Where people are in agreement that *'no-one should be left behind'*. Even if, in reality, that is not how everyone now behaves. I would want that mantra to be our aim and our goal as a society.

How do you put a cost on a human life?

People often say human life is priceless. Of course, that is nonsense. Insurers and actuaries weigh it on their scales every day. But now, the pandemic has apparently created a trade-off between wealth and health as lockdown is relaxed and the wheels of industry, trade and business start grinding. I can understand why politicians become deeply uncomfortable discussing such matters in case they are branded callous. For behind every cold statistic in the increasing global Covid-19 death-toll lies an individual, personal tragedy.

Perhaps it is our Judeo-Christian inheritance that makes so many people balk at Russell Lynch's words. For, if human beings are indeed made in the image of God, then they are each of infinite value. No matter how old, infirm, useful or otherwise they may be.

Prayer:

God bless me today – my eyes and my seeing, my ears and my hearing, my lips and my speaking.

God bless me today – my hands and my holding, my feet and my moving, my body and my health.

God bless me today – my mind and my thinking, my heart and my loving, my soul and my believing.

(A prayer from the Iona Community)

Our Father in heaven. Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sin as we forgive those who sin against us. Do not bring us to the time of trial but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours. AMEN.