

On March 22, 2020, Father Tom Ovalle, OMI gave a homily at Mass in the Annunciation Chapel. In his homily, Father Tom spoke about how our weaknesses and suffering makes us stronger. The homily gave a spiritual perspective on the experience of the Corona Virus (COVID-19). Everyone was touched and inspired by the message. The homily is available to you for further reflection.

Father Tom Ovalle's homily:

I don't know why innocent people suffer. I have no idea why we must endure so many struggles in life. I don't understand why life sometimes beats us up and leaves us barely alive.

However, there is one thing I do know.

If it weren't for people with scars, there would be a lot less compassion in the world. If it weren't for people who have suffered, there would be a lot less ministry taking place in the world.

Our ability to be compassionate and enter into someone else's pain to share the pain along with them, comes from our own suffering. We do not understand pain, until we have felt pain. It is those scars that enable us to minister to others.

In the same way, being an outsider, dispossessed and disenfranchised, gives us wisdom and insight that the comfortable and privileged do not possess.

The man born blind in our gospel text today is an example. He was unable to work because of his blindness. He was forced to sit in the town square and beg for food or money. At that time, most people thought that his blindness was caused by his own fault, brought on by his sin. Even the disciples that saw him asked Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

This poor man lived his whole life being rejected and ostracized; blamed for his own affliction.

Yet, this man, it seems, had greater wisdom and insight than the well-healed and well-educated Pharisees. When Jesus healed this man of his blindness, the Pharisees were angry that Jesus had performed this healing. And, because it would not look good for them that someone had been healed of blindness, they chose to use the fact that he was healed on the Sabbath to discredit Jesus.

When we do not want to admit that we are wrong, we look for anything to justify our actions. The Pharisees kept making the point that Jesus could not be

from God because the healing was performed on the day of the Sabbath. They kept questioning the blind man with hopes that he would tell them something differently so they could use it against Jesus.

Finally, the blind man grew so exasperated that he said to the Pharisees, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where Jesus comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. Never, since the world began, has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

Well, this didn't sit well with the Pharisees and so they chastised him by saying, "You were born entirely in sin, and you are trying to teach us?"

Notice how the blind man's weakness made him strong. He had lived most of his life on the outside of society, rejected. Yet, he was filled with gratitude toward Jesus who showed him compassion.

The blind man's disadvantages enabled him to be strong and wise. The Pharisees' privileges served only to make them weak and foolish. With skillful irony, John is asking the reader, or in our case the listener, to consider who the blind person really is.

The Pharisees were blind to their own jealousy, self-righteousness and arrogance. Their blindness was much more tragic than that of the blind man, for they had lived their whole lives in privilege. They were respected and revered by everyone. The circumstances of their life had served to make them complacent and self-satisfied. It blinded them from seeing their own sins.

So, you see, suffering can give us a wonderful gift. At times it makes us stop and look at ourselves more closely. If everything is going well in our lives, it never occurs to us to stop and to take a look at ourselves. It is often only when our lives fall apart that we think to honestly self-assess. Then, our eyes are opened. We are no longer blind to the things we have done wrong. Our suffering often makes us better people.

Therefore, a good question to ask ourselves is this: *In what way could the Corona Virus pandemic serve to make us better people?*

I believe that it will, and already has, brought out the best in some people. In times of crisis, we learn to have compassion for others. Even the suspension of worship services can bring out something better in us. If worship is suspended for a time, the faithful will appreciate it more when it resumes. When worship resumes, people might truly worship in spirit and in truth.

At this time when businesses, restaurants, and community facilities are closing, it can create a time of quietness, a time for society to slow down and have the opportunity to reflect and pray, and a time to take stock of our lives and see how we are living. Hopefully, many of us might come out of this renewed, strengthened and a little wiser. We might even come to the realization that many of the things we fussed and complained about were not worth complaining about in the first place.

Bill Mann had one of the greatest singing voices in the Christian church. He often spoke of a concert that he once performed which turned out to be the most special concerts of his life. After this concert ended, he went backstage to find a woman waiting for him. The woman appeared to be blind, deaf and mute. With the help of her caregiver, she asked Bill Mann if he could sing the last song he had performed during the concert. To that, Mr. Mann replied, "Of course."

Standing just a few inches from his face, the blind, deaf and mute woman placed her fingers on his lips and on his vocal cords while he sang "*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*" When he finished singing, a tear trickled down her face and in response to the lyrics, using her hands to speak, said to Bill Mann, "I was."

That woman was Helen Keller.

Helen Keller was a woman who suffered unlike most. She was born blind, deaf, and mute. So, to her it must have felt as if she was there when Jesus was crucified. There is probably no other contemporary person who gave the world such insight into the meaning of suffering or the love of God than did Helen Keller. God was glorified in her weakness. Her suffering enabled her to minister to others.

My dear sisters, it's our losses, not our wins, that make us compassionate persons. It's our scars, not our successes, that enable us to minister to others. It's our suffering, not our privileges, that make us a blessing to others.

It's our weakness that makes us truly strong.

Homily: by Father Tom Ovalle, OMI; Annunciation Chapel, Our Lady of the Lake Convent, San Antonio, Texas

March 22, 2020 -- Fourth Sunday of Lent

Readings: 1 Samuel 16: 1B, 6-7, 10-13A; Ephesians 5: 8-14; John 9: 1-41