

REFLECTIONS ON COVID-19

Over recent weeks, I have taken the advice of the health experts and chosen to stay within the confines of my home during the Covid-19 pandemic. During my time in self imposed isolation I have mulled over the statements of politicians, health experts and the media who claim that we are living in unprecedented times. After some reflection, I would like to challenge their assertions. In the lifetime of younger generations, this may be so, but I am sure that there are many in our Congregation who would disagree. The pages of history clearly demonstrate that we are suffering from historical amnesia. Sadly, the study of history is no longer valued and is becoming one of the lost arts in schools and universities being discarded to make way for studies in more recent fields of endeavour. If we ignore history we risk making the same mistakes all over again. Diseases such as Plague, Spanish Flu, Diphtheria, Polio, Rubella, HIV, SARS, and Bird Flu have raged in communities throughout our country and the world within the last 120 years and often draconian measures have been imposed. In the case of the Plague not only the patient but also family members were physically forced into quarantine.

When I was young (and I visualise my children and grandchildren rolling their eyes and thinking “here she goes again”), I can remember my Mother telling me that the Great War had barely finished when Spanish Flu reeked it's death and destruction in both cities and small rural communities throughout Australia. Members of her extended family contracted it and an Aunt and two cousins died. In the 1920s many in the population succumbed to the highly infectious illness, Diphtheria including one of her sisters who nearly died. The disease often caused a blockage of the airways requiring a tracheotomy, a tube inserted into the throat to allow air to access the lungs. Initially health experts believed that it was passed on by sufferers with obvious symptoms. It was later discovered that people could be carriers being well and symptom free. This happened to be the case in my Mother's family. Her oldest sister was a carrier, who was a threat to the whole family and was placed in isolation. I have memories of a Rubella (German Measles) epidemic in 1940. Identified as a mild illness mainly associated with children, it spread rapidly through my small country school and spread to the adult population. It was during this worldwide epidemic that researchers made a link between German Measles and babies being born with heart, sight and hearing impairments. Where I lived 9 babies were born seriously disabled in that year. All of their mothers had Rubella during the early stages of their pregnancy.

Polio was the other disease that impacted on my teen years. Lismore High School competed with Murwillumbah High School in a full range of sports for a “prestigious” cup. A three-day visit was arranged twice a year with each school taking its turn to host the events. In 1952 I was selected to represent my school in the tennis team and keenly anticipated the trip. My hopes were dashed when Polio badly infected Murwillumbah and quickly spread widely throughout the region. All sporting events were cancelled, swimming pools were closed as well as all entertainment venues. Fear and panic gripped large areas of Australia. Rumours surfaced that raw milk which most people used in that era was a source of the infection. Milk came off many household menus and deliveries were cancelled. Over the years there were episodes of Polio which varied in severity, but its crippling effects were very evident in the population. The younger the age of the sufferer the more severe were its effects. Muscles withered and limbs failed to develop normally. Many children needed a brace or calliper to be able to walk. In extreme cases,

patients required assistance to breathe and were placed in iron lungs for long periods of time. Australian nurse, Sister Elizabeth Kenny devised an exercise program which offered hope and the possibility of restoring mobility to those afflicted. Her treatment regime received little support in Australia, but she was lauded in America where among others she treated Polio victim Franklin D Roosevelt who carried out his Presidential duties despite being wheelchair bound.

As in recent times, various measures were implemented and adopted by Governments and communities to ameliorate the impacts of these overwhelming epidemics. They were met with varying degrees of success. It is heartening to note that the efforts of our research scientists have achieved amazing results in developing lifesaving vaccines. In my lifetime, remedial treatments for polio are no longer needed as a vaccine was introduced in 1960 and that disease has been largely eliminated throughout world. Small children are now immunised against such illnesses as Diphtheria, whooping cough, measles and mumps and as a result the whole population is largely protected. Teenage girls and boys are immunised against German Measles as a result of the research carried out by an Australian Doctor. One fear faced by pregnant women is now limited. HIV is being effectively controlled.

History can not only offer us lessons from the past, but it can also provide us with a sense of optimism for the future. When faced with a crisis, communities work together and rise to the challenges. May love and cooperation prevail over greed and competitiveness.

As the Psalmist counselled “Be still and know that I am God”

Psalm 46:10

Judith Shaw