



**20 March 2020**

***Pastoral letter to parishioners from the Catholic Bishops of Aotearoa New Zealand regarding the Covid-19 coronavirus-related suspension of Mass***

The psalm we pray together at this weekend's Masses for the Fourth Sunday in Lent is perhaps the best known and most loved of all the psalms. For almost three thousand years those who know God have prayed this prayer in times of comfortable peace and from the heart of the battlefields of life when anxiety, persecution and sickness threaten to overwhelm us.

We often pray this prayer especially as a hymn, when we gather to bury those we love. And today, in union with our brothers and sisters of every nation on earth, together facing the threat of the new coronavirus, we call to God with deepened awareness of our need and with confident hope:

*Even though we walk in the dark valley, we fear no evil for you O God are with us giving us courage.*

In recent weeks we *your bishops* have communicated to you the people of our Catholic community in Aotearoa New Zealand the professional advice from the Ministry of Health on how to keep ourselves and all people, especially the most vulnerable, safe, and protected from this virus. We are grateful to all who have immediately implemented the necessary restrictions, especially those who find the required changes most difficult.

Now that it is no longer possible for us to gather for Mass and the sacraments it is important to remember that the church and the ministries of the priest remain open twenty-four hours a day seven days a week. It is our hope that church buildings remain open for personal prayer, even when the liturgy which gathers people together is not able to be celebrated. If you know of people who need the ministry of a priest for any reason do not hesitate to make contact with a priest or diocesan office. In these days, even when the liturgy is not able to be celebrated together, side-by-side, the life of Jesus Christ communicated to us through the church remains open to us.

Diocesan websites are being constantly updated as new information, restrictions and resources become

available. Please make sure that all parishioners have access to this important information.

While the visible present fear is a biological virus, the fact is that we humans face fear every day. While in these days we are wisely focused on keeping people safe from the present threat of infection, in our families and friendships and local communities we continue to accompany those who are facing fears that are not related to the coronavirus; those who are struggling with a relationship break-down, and financial anxiety, and those who are terminally ill, and those who care for them.

We live in an age when it seems possible to believe that modern opportunities, education, medical care and technology can deliver us the happiness we seek. When we are faced with a fear that threatens to overwhelm us, we become aware of the fact that we remain vulnerable creatures, dependent on a God who is greater than us for everything, including every breath that we take. Without God this vulnerability is a problem to be suffered and solved. In personal and shared faith in Jesus Christ we understand that the reality of human vulnerability is a gift that opens us to receive and to give love.

May these difficult days be for all the people of our land an opportunity to realise anew that when we dwell in the "House of the Lord" here on earth, goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our life.

Perhaps our mantra for these difficult days can be our psalm for today prayed as a simple repeated line when you are not sure what to pray:

*The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.*

Then as a communal prayer:

*The Lord is our shepherd; there is nothing we shall want.*

Yours in Christ,

- ✠ Patrick Dunn, Bishop of Auckland and NZCBC President
- ✠ Steve Lowe, Bishop of Hamilton and NZCBC Secretary
- ✠ John Dew, Cardinal Archbishop of Wellington
- ✠ Paul Martin, Bishop of Christchurch
- ✠ Michael Dooley, Bishop of Dunedin
- ✠ Michael Gielen, Auxiliary Bishop of Auckland