

IS THERE NO BALM IN GILEAD? PREACHING IN A TIME OF PLAGUE¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on 18 October 2020, being the Feast of St Luke, Evangelist and Martyr

Is there no balm in Gilead?

Unless I make a special request, I don't choose the Sundays on which I will preach. This is, in general, a good thing. I am forced to confront the lectionary readings for the day, whether I like them or not. I was pleased to have been set down for today, the Feast of St Luke. He is reputed to have been an artist and the first writer of icons. Legend has it that he painted the Black Madonna of Czestochowa² and Our Lady of Vladimir.³ These legends are most certainly wrong but they have led to Luke being the patron saint of artists. Because he is thought never to have married, Luke is one of a group of four who are the patron saints of bachelors. Our lectionary describes him as a martyr, but the early authorities are divided about that.

St Luke is, however, most memorable as the patron saint of physicians; he is believed to have been one himself. It was at this point in my preparation that I was brought up short. I was being invited to preach about the patron saint of physicians in a time of a pandemic, in a time when Covid-19 has infected nearly 39 million people, causing more than 1 million deaths, figures not likely to ameliorate for some time.⁴ The economic and social consequences of the coronavirus are of an order not experienced in a century.

This is not an occasion for trite words, for pious generalisations from the pulpit.

Is there no balm in Gilead?
Is there no physician there?
Why then has the health of my poor people
not been restored?

O that my head were a spring of water,
and my eyes a fountain of tears,
so that I might weep day and night
for the slain of my poor people!

The balm referred to is an aromatic resin, most probably from the shrub *Commiphora gileadensis* or Arabian balsam.⁵ Gilead is a location to the east of the Jordan River and, although the plant most probably did not grow there, it was a significant place for trade and through which the balm would pass. Balm was reputed to be of medicinal value, which is why Jeremiah used it in our reading today. His reference has led to the term "Balm of Gilead" being used for curing medications generally. Jeremiah's words contain a personal reference that has

¹ Readings: Jeremiah 8:22-9:3; Psalm 45:10-18; 2 Timothy 4:9-17a; Luke 10:1-9

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Madonna_of_Cz%C4%99stochowa

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virgin_of_Vladimir#:~:text=The%20Virgin%20of%20Vladimir%2C%20also,and%20Child%20and%20an%20early

⁴ https://covid19.who.int/?gclid=CjwKCAjwIID8BRAFEiwAnUoK1SIhSpxfQ15BUtbvXWnwCboeGE1MSAP0ND7jy1NiQ8yfqITDgvbTqxoCFyMQAvD_BwE

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balm_of_Gilead https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commiphora_gileadensis

a double meaning. Not only is Jeremiah in mourning for the illness of his people, but he is conveying that God also mourns.

Earlier in chapter 8, Jeremiah refers to failed crops, poisoned water and terror. As we experience the pandemic, we also look back to drought, failed crops and the terror of fire. We know what Jeremiah is talking about. Jeremiah argues that the people's behaviour may be related to their experience. When we think of drought, failed crops and fire, we may reflect on our contribution to the climate change that undoubtedly lies behind them. We also know that human action or inaction has been part of the progress of the pandemic.

Jeremiah says, later in chapter 9, that our experiences can be a test in which we will be refined. He also warns us against hubris, saying:

Thus says the Lord: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord.⁶

One of the things that we have learned during the pandemic, is that it has exposed the fault lines in our society; and not only in ours, but worldwide. In the *Sydney Morning Herald* on Monday, 12 October 2020, Ronald Sackville, chair of the Disability Royal Commission, said:

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the systemic deficiencies that have contributed to so many tragic deaths in aged care homes. But the pandemic has also exposed some uncomfortable truths about the attitudes in this country towards people with disability.⁷

It is interesting to note the different reaction of our indigenous communities, where the protection of elders has been the highest priority. Other commentators have noted the greater effect of the pandemic on women, including more exposure to domestic violence.

Many Australians who had never previously experienced anything more than transient unemployment, have found themselves facing a possibly indefinite period without work. Government assistance raised the rate of unemployment-based income support payments but those rates are set to return to their previous poverty level. Thus, many of our fellow citizens will experience what has been the daily plight of the long-term unemployed. The pandemic has exposed a moral judgement that we customarily pass on the unemployed who, we imagine, prefer idleness to activity. This ideological stance, derived from the punitive English Poor Law, is deeply entrenched in our society.⁸

More fundamentally, the pandemic has brought into question the value that we place on human life. In the Jesuit online journal, *Eureka Street*, Andrew Hamilton recently discussed the relative value of one human life as compared with another.⁹ We know that, in countries like

⁶ Jeremiah 9:23–24

⁷ [Pandemic lays bare a sector's struggle](#)

⁸ The British Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 had two principles: “less eligibility”, which meant that the position of the poor must be less than that of the lowest paid labourer, and “the workhouse test”, which offered persons residence in the workhouse or no relief. Translated into today, the equivalents are a social security payment below the poverty line and “mutual obligation” that requires job search even in the absence of available work.

⁹ https://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article/putting-a-value-on-a-human-life?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Eureka%20Street%20Weekly%20-%20Friday%20%20October%202020&utm_content=Eureka%20Street%20Weekly%20-

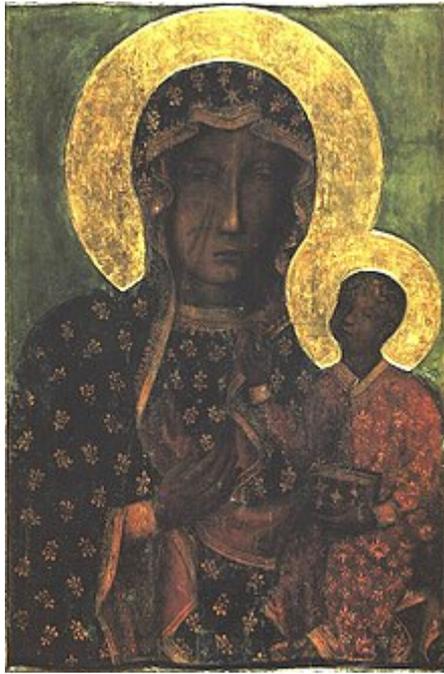
Italy, where hospitals were overwhelmed with seriously ill patients, medical staff had to make decisions about which persons would be admitted. This situation is about to re-emerge in some parts of Europe.

Is it possible to find a mathematical model that will put a comparative value on the lives of different people? Some economists argue that it is. Such attempts set the value of human life within a structure of individual economic competition. Of this, Hamilton says:

It seems that the more deeply the influence of competitive economic individualism has seeped into national culture, the greater is the resistance to restrictions on individual freedom in the name of the common good, and the higher cost in illness, death and national prosperity. Nations in which there are a relatively small infection and death rate and steadier economic performance are those that have a culture of cooperation and an understanding that the economy serves the common good.

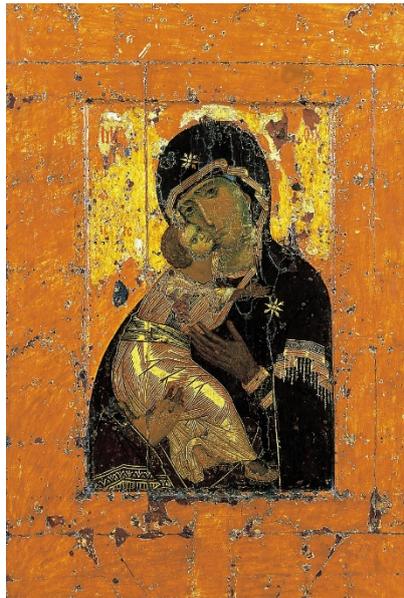
Thus, the healing of the pandemic is more than the treatment of directly affected persons. We will not be truly healed if our experience does not, as suggested by Jeremiah, refine us. We need “steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth”.

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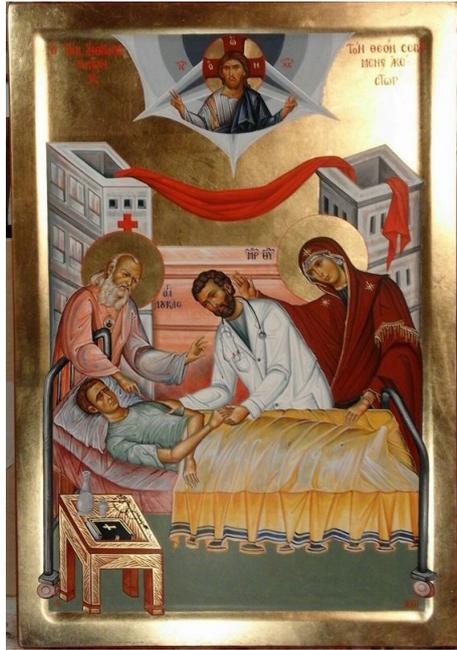


Black Madonna of Częstochowa

Date unknown, attested as early as 14th century



Our Lady of Vladimir c1131



This modern icon shows a doctor treating a patient while receiving a blessing from Christ (above), the virgin Mary (right) and St Luke (left)