

Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles



Created By

The Partnered Parishes of

Sacred Heart Diamond Creek, St Mary's Greensborough, and
St Thomas Apostle North Greensborough © 2021



Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles

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Chapter 1. Faith stories

1.1 Fr. Steve - Home alone

This time of Pandemic has been the strangest of all in my life, and particularly as a priest over an extended time. Eight months ago, I would never have imagined that the parish house and office would be empty – no staff working in the offices; no meetings in the house; no gatherings with people for the celebration of Masses; no gatherings for prayer; being restricted from visiting people in their homes; no encounters with students in their classes or in church; no celebrations of any of the sacraments. My life and my days are normally filled with scheduled activities. The usual planning and preparations for Baptisms, Marriages, first Reconciliations and Eucharists, Confirmations are all on shifting sands. Perhaps the most heart-breaking and daily reminder of these unusual times for me is the lack of being able to celebrate what is for me the most important and fulfilling prayer of each day – the Eucharist -with parishioners. This period of my life has been the most strange and perplexing that I have ever experienced.

To be sure, there are many things I am learning, and need to develop into the future that are positive. For all of us this is an opportunity to clarify priorities and to make sure we embed them into the future. In the meantime, my life is still filled with meetings, but now ‘virtually’ through ‘Zoom’ and a number of other social media platforms that I can better exploit in the future as an alternative way of connecting with people. I also am learning to be more patient and to develop a greater ease with uncertainty and to make more room in my life for reading, prayer and reflection. I am also trying to discern what I and we are called to be and do as we emerge out of this huge global disruption. I am trying patiently to listen to what is God saying to us in all of this enormous mess, but that will take time. In the meantime, I will now describe how I live in this time of COVID-19

Let me begin with Saturday mornings when I celebrate the weekend Mass at one of our 4 churches on a rotational basis with either Trevor DeSouza or Troy Flores filming, and a local parishioner from the particular church community reading the readings and prayers. I have generally done some gardening or maintenance around the house in the afternoon and on Sundays. I have also embarked upon a process of cleaning out, culling and sorting out files in my filing cabinets and computer and books on my multiple bookshelves.

On Sunday afternoons I go to my mother’s, have lunch with her and stay overnight through to Monday evenings. I justify this by my claim that I am her sole carer. I like her company and I assist her with some gardening and maintenance around her home. The advantage is for me that she has never really learned how to cook for one, so I gratefully bring back meals to last me the week. She is quite inspirational for an 84-year-old. At the commencement of the first ‘Lockdown’ she was quite anxious as to how she would cope because she is normally quite active and socially connected to many people and drives to meet up with friends and family. So, she decided that she has to change her routine – Mondays, I’m with her; Tuesdays, she cooks; Wednesdays, she washes and cleans; Thursdays, she shops; Fridays, she bakes, and she fills the rest of the time gardening, reading, doing crosswords, knitting and communicating with friends, family and parishioners using the phone, emails, social media and even Zoom.

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Zooming in my dressing gown to keep me warm.



Throughout the rest of the week, Parish and Diocesan meetings still take place through 'Zoom' – sometimes I can be involved in 4 or 5 'Zoom' meetings daily, often with Jacinta, Tao and Lenin. I have been involved with other parishioners establishing a "Safeguarding of Children and Young People" committee which is developing policies and procedures to ensure our parishes are compliant with Government and Diocesan requirements.

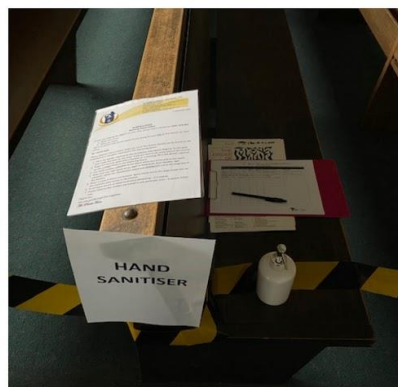
I have also been involved with parishioners to develop COVID-19 Safe plan, policies, and procedures, as well as processes involved with requirements for parishioners who may be working alone on the parish properties. I have tried to maintain contact with parishioners by phone, or sometimes when required, I will visit and anoint parishioners. I have made a few videos to communicate with various levels of our school children.

Each week I also meet up with the principals and school staff of our 3 schools and I try to meet up with Tao, Lenin and Owen, and our secretaries. Much of my day also involves communicating through emails. I spend quite a bit of my days on email with people who want to "talk" through issues in their lives. Often this requires of me much reflecting and sensitivity in my responses to them so that I might be able to affirm them and assist them to deal with their struggles and issues. I do have more time for reading and prayer and I try to ensure that I take a walk each day. In prayer I am trying to make sense of what this period of time means for us all and what positive aspects can we take into the future. The usual line I use when people say that I must be very busy continues even during this time – "I am not busy, but I don't get bored."

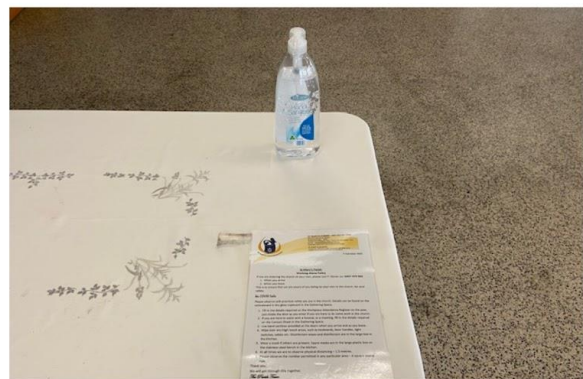
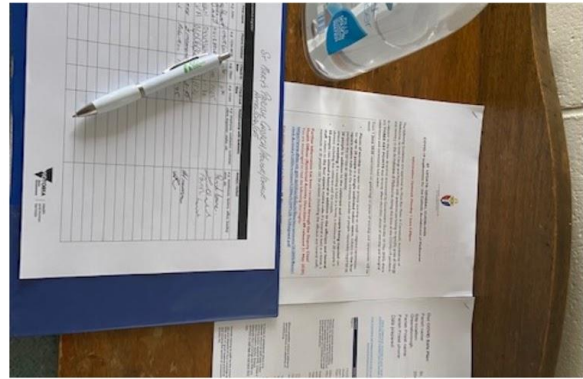
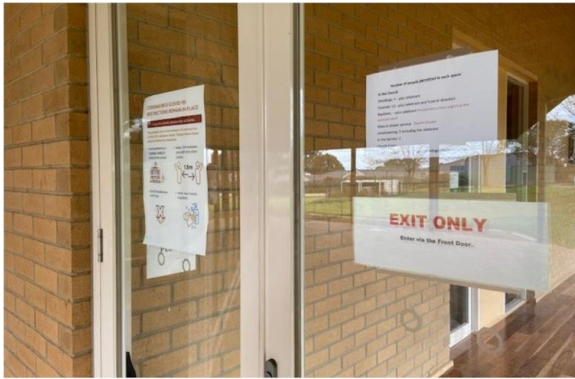
Fr. Steven Rigo

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COVID-19 ready Sacred Heart, St Thomas's, and St Mary's



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Outdoor Masses at Sacred Heart and St Mary's



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1.2 A devoted Parishioner of Saint Mary's - Appreciating little things.

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I must say I am fortunate as I have not been affected very much with the lockdown, we have been experiencing because of COVID-19. I have greatly missed going to Mass at St. Mary's and receiving Communion and seeing our wonderful Priests and our beautiful parishioners. It has been a big loss to me. I also miss my involvement at St. Marys.

I have found that I have spoken on the phone more to people from St. Mary's than ever before where they have enquired as to my welfare and I would be asking about them.

Not being able to have someone come to your home and have a cup of tea is something I have found hard. A dear friend dropped the Bulletin at the front door for me and I dearly wished I could have invited him in for a cup of tea with me, but I couldn't do that. I remember on that occasion just feeling a little bit frustrated.

My Faith has helped me a lot through this time and I am able to walk my little dog each day and I am pleased about that. I believe some good will come out of this as difficult as it has been for people and I feel God has a reason for it all. People may have come to appreciate their country more than they did and many things that we have taken for granted. When I would see people in the early days of the pandemic, and they would be filling their trollies with so much from the shelves with panic buying my mind would go back to some wise words my husband used to say.

We have nothing to worry about if we have our Faith, a roof over our heads, a comfortable bed and food on the table.

How very true are his words.

1.3 Sue McMahon - Roadside ANZAC service at dawn

Who would ever have imagined that in this modern world, life could change so dramatically and so quickly? Yes, it has been tough, but for me personally, it has also been a time of revelation and reflection. Naturally, I have missed family and friends, but it has also been a time to slow down and take stock – almost an enforced sabbatical.

Exploring, rediscovering, and appreciating the natural beauty of our surrounding neighbourhood has both energised and helped keep me fit. Seeing so many families out doing the same has been heartening while 'bumping into' fellow parishioners, also out and about, has provided life-giving 'social distanced' catch up chats. Having time to sit and enjoy the gorgeous autumn sunsets from our lounge room has been a blessing. Our online Masses have continued to spiritually nourish us and link us together. We thank our priests for that. Being involved in and observing others caring for elderly neighbours has personified Jesus' great commandment of 'love thy neighbour' and in turn, has been very rewarding. Knowing that so many dedicated health workers have been on the frontline has been reassuring and I have discovered a newfound appreciation for all the other essential workers making sure we are safe and well fed.

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ANZAC dawn service Saturday 26th April 2020

A highlight for me was the ANZAC dawn service we held out the front of our home. It was hard to know in the dark exactly how many attended, but judging by the number of torches, approximately 25 neighbours shared a beautiful and very moving morning. Our ever-evolving teddy in the window even joined in the theme! My IT skills have greatly improved, enabling me to embrace the many ways we can now keep in touch and I look forward to seeing six happy little faces as we Zoom in for Catechist classes each Thursday.



As life begins to show signs of some normality, I hope we can hold on to the positives that have emerged from our time of isolation and that we can take slow steps forward with a new appreciation of life, family, and friendship and all that it is really important. I came across a quote many years ago that really resonates with me now.

May we all continue dancing.

Sue



1.4 Robert Holbery - Feel good letters.

*This is what i do during covid lock down
Picking up the phone book Melbourne white
pages selecting names at random then writing
letters to the one's i have selected. The message
i write is you are a Beautiful Person
Stay Safe God Bless hoping the beautiful
free flowing style of copperplate lettering
will make the reciever feel good & wonder*

*who did this beautiful writing with dip pen
and ink with no signature attached i then
post these letters at Diamond Creek P.O.
where the ladies here inquire where are all
these letters going I say they are feel good
letters. They then say could we have one
with your beautiful writing So i did some
letters for all the post office ladies, plus the parish
Secretaries*

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*and our stunning pastoral associate Mrs
Jacinta Bright "Gee" i miss your smile
I have posted many letters and loved doing
every one. My name is Robert Holbery
I am 78 years of age and you have my
permission to use this letter
Robert Holbery*



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1.5 Tom Bisticic - Graces to enlighten the soul.

In this time of isolation, I have rekindled my relationship with God Almighty again which I probably would have struggled with in my busy and hectic life.

I have found through deep and reflective prayer that the holy rosary and divine mercy chaplet prayers have been instrumental in my fast spiritual growth in a short amount of time and how vital it is to have a devotion to Mary the Mother of Jesus.

All these I believe have given me the graces to be that true disciple that is mentioned in the holy bible.

These graces have enlightened my soul; that we all need to live and spread the mercy and love of Jesus Christ, especially in these isolation times where others might turn away from God or prayer or become lukewarm now that the Eucharist and Mass are temporarily suspended. If we can be a flame of light and sparkle for our fellow brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, then we are contributing to Divine Mercy, the final act of hope our world needs and longs for which we must take advantage of before Jesus Christ returns at an hour, we least expect so we need to be ready at all times the holy bible says.

God bless.

1.6 Pat Frisby - Solving every puzzle in the newspaper

As I write this, we are up to our eighth month from March, and the second wave, which reached over 700 new cases a day in late July, has now dropped to 5 new cases late this September. I “celebrated” my 89th birthday this month and it was mostly getting greetings on the phone, What’s App and Zoom, with birthday presents arriving by post. How different from past years when families could get together in the home to mark the special day.

The view remains the same even in a pandemic.



I consider myself to be very fortunate, despite being in the most susceptible age group. I have been in isolation since the beginning of March. My home is in Hurstbridge on 10 acres and the view I get to enjoy each day is of the Kinglake Ranges. We have lots of large windows and sliding glass doors, so even when I sit at my dining room table, I get to enjoy the vista, which I have photographed. Unless you can take panoramic shots, you cannot do its beauty justice. It takes in Kinglake and Mt Sugarloaf

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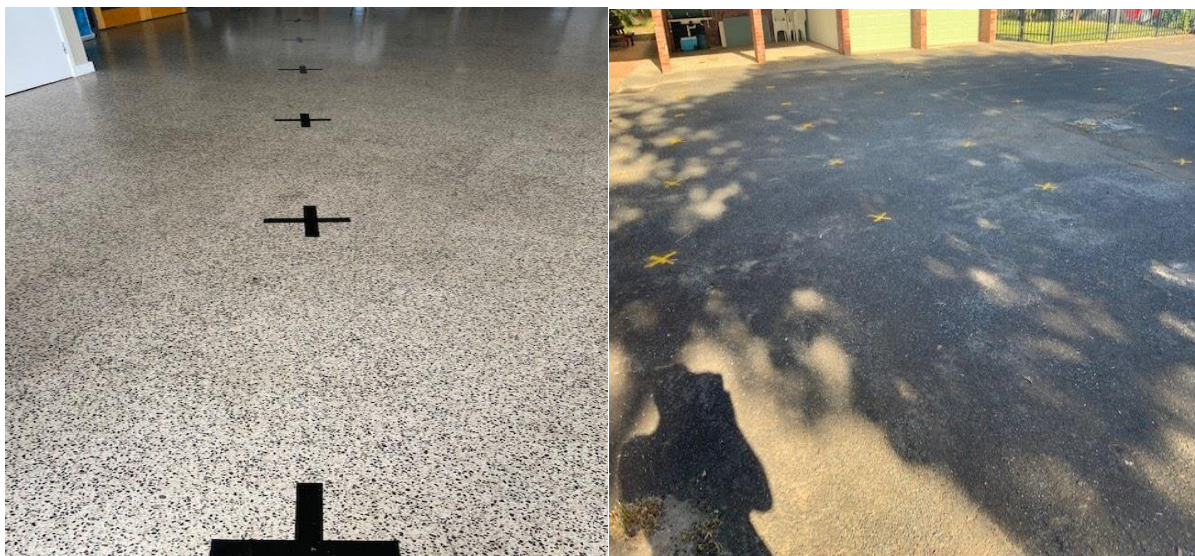
and across to Whittlesea. Therefore, I have never felt claustrophobic or bored, which must occur for many who have been cooped up over this period.

We have had to rely on technology to help us get some variety into our activities, and I have really enjoyed being able to choose music and favourite singers on my Spotify gadget. Also being able to access Netflix gives a variety of viewing on top of the usual channels on TV. I've tried to keep my mind active by solving puzzles and keeping my exercise up by a daily walk. In all it has been a time of being able to relax and get pleasure out of simple things. I haven't had to set the alarm to get up early and I haven't worn a watch throughout the time "locked up". My daughter-in-law has shopped for me each week and family have made sure they keep in touch. So many people over this period have proved how caring they can be in reaching out to those in need, and our gratitude is certainly with those in the medical profession, many of whom have become sick with the virus themselves.

As I sent condolence cards to two of my Parish friends yesterday (both had lost their fathers) it seemed even sadder that we couldn't be with them at Mass to farewell their loved ones at their funerals. So many funerals have been held with just the few family members permitted. In Australia, as of today, there have been 787 deaths, a great majority from elderly in nursing homes.

How fortunate we are that Fr Steven records Mass for us each weekend, Fr Lenin records his homily on YouTube and Fr Tao sends his homily via the Parish newsletter. Our secretaries have continued to keep us informed with the Bulletin and we look forward to when we can all meet again in happier times. What I really miss the most is receiving Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament at Mass in the company of our faithful parishioners. May the good Lord protect us all and bring an end to this time of sadness for so many who have lost loved ones, businesses or jobs or contracted the virus. Also, to those who have had to delay treatment for all the other ailments that were put on hold throughout the period because hospitals had to be kept available for virus patients. Better days await us.

X marks the spot for Gathering Space signing-in queues, and for outdoor Masses



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1.7 Scripture Study Group - Spiritual nourishment

By members of the scripture study group in 2020 ❤️

Our scripture study group commenced the 10-week study on The Acts of the Apostles in March 2020. After meeting twice at St Mary's, we were asked to resume our group study online as we went into the first lockdown in Australia. A few of us were hesitant initially because of technical challenges but the buzzword 'Zoom' became our new reality. With much encouragement and support from each other we persevered each week.



Having enjoyed our earlier study on Zoom and with us all feeling that the stage 4 lockdown was going to be tough both psychologically and spiritually we decided to embark on our next two studies on St Paul's letters to the Galatians and Romans in September.

Besides the study we soon realised that we needed to support each other as we faced challenges due to the imposed isolation. Missing attending Mass and our church communities was something we all expressed hence our weekly online meeting became our way of feeling connected to church.

On the 6th December we will have our last study and we hope to be able to get together to celebrate our friendship and achievements in this unusual year. We would like to thank Fr Steven and Fr Lenin who both supported us and assisted us with our learning this year.

Below are comments from three of our participants:

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"2020 has been a year like no other for so many of us.

I often wake up in the morning thinking it's all been a dream. However, keeping in touch with my beautiful Bible Study friends via Zoom has been a total blessing although I'd much prefer to meet in person. We have managed to maintain a spiritual connection and could feel Jesus's presence amongst us as we discussed Scripture Studies on a weekly basis and kept us spiritually nourished especially during the lockdown days."- Sue.

"I have enjoyed the experience of this study. It is good to be in a small group discussion. The study was very well managed and run. All participants' views were welcomed. The study was in-depth, and so it was challenging and illuminating. It was also great to have Fr. Steve join us twice to clarify issues."- Ann.

"My experience during the pandemic has been one of change. My routine has slowed down, and my mind has had time to think and reflect how busy I had been before Covid-19. It forced me to quiet my mind. This has been good and healing. The restriction imposed on visiting family was very difficult and made me value the freedom I've taken for granted for so long.

I have found the zoom scripture study rewarding, to come and share our insights of the study.

I found the study itself quite challenging and at times a little out of my depth but that made me rely on the spirit to assist me to do my best and that has paid off with learning more about His word. I have also met new people who have shared their stories."- Kathy

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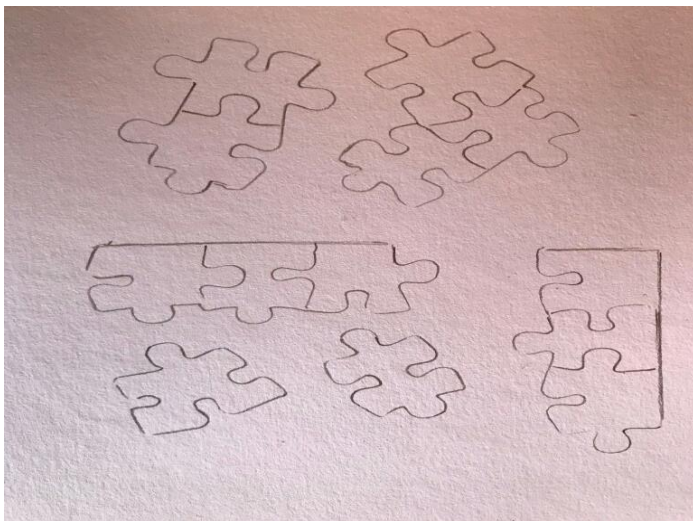
1.8 Pat Frisby (Hurstbridge) - Throw away your watch.

As I write this towards the end of June, we have just had quite a few new cases of coronavirus, so restrictions, which were to be lifted, have remained. This is very disappointing for Victoria which has had the strictest lockdowns in the country. My personal isolation began before most, at the beginning of March. At eighty-eight I am in the very vulnerable age group, so felt very precious about my situation. In the early days one of the first indications of the seriousness of the pandemic was when we were not receiving from the chalice at Mass.

Then, much to our great disappointment, Mass and the reception of Holy Communion also ceased. We have been looking forward to the opening again of our churches and Mass for 50, but that has now been reduced to 20, and is not viable for our parish. Fr Steven has been recording Mass from one or other of our four churches, Fr. Lenin has been sharing his thoughts on video, and Fr Tao has had his weekly homily in the bulletin, which the parish secretaries have put online each week. So, we are being spiritually nourished if we have access to Email and YouTube.

Zoom has become a good substitute for those wanting to keep in touch, and the 'The Way' Prayer Group and Passionate Family Groups have conducted these meetings. I even have a Zoom meeting each week with a young university student who is conducting interviews with older people in our area. This is an initiative of our council to record over 6 meetings and gives the young people interviewing us an insight into our interests and lifestyles. Information and reactions recorded will later be compiled with all the others who have been interviewed and will be shared in the wider community.

Isolation has been hardest in the family situation, when loved ones have been unable to visit. Up until recently they were not allowed inside, and any visiting from them had walls and windows dividing us. They have become my saviours in bringing



groceries and medication to me, so that I don't have to shop. Also, I've had some very nice meals donated. When it all began, I had ideas that this would be a period when I could do a few chores I'd been neglecting, such as organising my dreadful filing system, discarding clothes no longer required, clearing out cupboards etc. Instead, I've become obsessed with solving every puzzle the paper prints. There are at least nine I tackle each day including Code

Cracker, Wordfit, Double Cross, Wordsearch, Quick Crossword and Cryptic Crossword, Sudoku, etc. Some are quite tricky, so I justify the time 'wasted' by knowing it is good for my brain.

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Reading the paper has become very depressing with murders, assaults and coronavirus statistics making up most of the news items. Even our winter sport of AFL has been sanitised to where we can no longer believe this season really counts, (especially if our team loses). I'll retract that statement if Geelong should win the premiership, of course.

As I reflect on the period of isolation, I feel a sense of safety even during the solitude. Because I live in a big house on ten acres there was never any feeling of claustrophobia. Rather I have rejoiced in watching all the moods of mother nature as the countryside changed from autumn to winter scenery. There was always the ability to keep in touch with others through telephone, internet for "WhatsApp" and "Words with Friends," email, and television shows to relax to. However, I did find time for prayer and this was very devotional and focussed, with so much sadness throughout the world needing our prayers. Modern technology also gave us the privilege of participating in Fr. Steven's Masses from our Parish churches and receiving the weekly bulletins from our secretary Pat. One of the regrets of being housebound was that when petrol dropped to under a dollar a litre I wasn't driving anywhere, so couldn't take advantage of the bargain fuel.

This period has highlighted the many courageous members of our society who have faced dangerous situations and subjected themselves to being vulnerable while they carried on in their respective professions, whether on the health front or in other essential services. And let us not forget among the paramedics, firefighters, and police, we have the teachers, shop assistants and cleaners who have kept the wheels turning in our daily lives. I am reluctant to get back into the real world until a cure or vaccine has been discovered. In the meanwhile, I'll gratefully acknowledge that my isolation has been made so much more bearable because of family and friends who have kept in touch, and even more especially, knowing that Jesus is the one who is the closest of all to us. Keep safe and God's blessings on you.
Pat Frisby

1.9 Maureen & Frank Walsh - Pride before a fall

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It is said that pride goes before a fall! I can vouch for that!

As we went into the first lockdown, I was determined that I would become more computer savvy. I went on to the 'be connected' website, attended a number of webinars, and learnt how to bank and shop online. How smart was I?

Then on July 16th, I fell for a scam – Big Time!!!

I had a call from someone purporting to be from the Commonwealth Bank and asking if I had authorised a withdrawal from my Visa account. I had not!

He told me someone was, at that very moment, accessing my account. I gave him the information he requested (what a fool), while he (supposedly) was following up with the authorities. At that time, says he, someone was at an Internet Café in Perth, withdrawing my money. Never mind, says he, "I am taking care of it". He certainly was!!!

By the end of the call, he had convinced me that the police were on their way to the Café to arrest the perpetrator.

After hanging up, I checked my account, only to find that quite a lot of my savings had been taken out, and that I had (supposedly) made a large donation for COVID relief to a person in India via Western Union, and the remainder was who knows where. PANIC!!!!

I immediately rang my bank. Yes, I had been scammed, but the Western Union transfer could be stopped. The investigators would try to get the remainder back. My Visa card was cancelled, and I would be sent a new one, which should arrive within a week.

The next week, on July 22nd, I heard the Postie, so I thought I would check to see if the card had arrived. As I stepped off the front step, my left leg cramped, and I fell in a crumpled heap. My right leg was twisted at a funny angle, and I did think I heard a crack. Sure enough, after a visit to the doctor, and an Xray, it was confirmed – a broken ankle. Fortunately, no need for an operation – a Moonboot should do the trick. So, a Moonboot for a week, then another Xray, but the break was not healing – in fact, the fracture had widened. So, off to the Austin for a plaster cast. I carried the lump of concrete around for 7 weeks, with the aid of a wheelchair, and a Zimmer Frame. Our eldest daughter moved in as a career, with assistance from the youngest who lives in Hurstbridge, and had been keeping an eye on us during the first lockdown. They had both been working from home. The rest of the family were able to give respite to them at various times.

That's the bad news!

Now for the good news!

I have known for over 50 years that we, as young marrieds, had made the right decision when we moved to Diamond Creek to raise our family (even though my

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mother – a lifelong Coburg girls – thought we may as well have moved to another country). The Parish of Sacred Heart has always been welcoming, and the people caring. The saying that it takes a village to raise a child has certainly been the case here. Whenever anyone was in trouble, the word went out, and the help arrived. Very often that involved children being cared for by other families.

As soon as it was discovered that we were in trouble, the word went out, and we were inundated with cards, flowers, phone calls, offers of help with shopping with anything else we needed. Masked people were arriving with special treats and meals (we did know who they were even behind the masks). Even, friends of our children came over to clean the spouting.

One VERY special lady turned up every Wednesday with a meal from Platters or Bridges (supporting the local traders as well as looking after us). She did this every week until the end of October. She also helped to increase the size of our waistlines, as the meal was always accompanied by desserts and other goodies.

Eventually, the plaster came off my leg, and I was given the OK to drive. Of course, when I tried to start the car, I realized that the battery was flat. Never mind – I'll call the RACV tomorrow, but for now I'll just walk a little way down the street to get some exercise.

One of her neighbours came out of her drive, so we had a chat, and I told her my story. "Don't worry about calling the RACV, we have a battery charger, and I'll send Tony (her husband) down to charge it for you". Well, Tony did arrive and put the battery on charge". I went inside, and a little while later discovered that before he went home, he had pulled out all the long grass that had been growing wild and weeded the garden! He returned that night and made sure the car was charged. A couple of days later, he arrived to cut the grass, which hadn't been mowed for months. He left his phone number and made me promise that I would call him if I needed to have anything else done. Whilst I know Julie, I had never met Tony! I was blown away by this incredible act of kindness.

Also, during this time, one of the girls at the local pharmacy was kind enough to deliver Frank's medication each week – on her way home from work. (Not part of her job description).

We are very fortunate in Diamond Creek to have Pat Guatta as our Parish secretary. Pat has been on the job all during the Pandemic and has been the liaison person between Fr Steve and the parish and kept parishioners in the loop about who may need help or needed to be contacted. We would be lost without her!

Like everyone else, we had become used to being in lockdown. Life was pretty much the same from day to day. I had checked the bank several times about the return of the money from the scam but had no success. I had learnt a good lesson the hard way, so we moved on.

On November 5th, I went to pay some bills online. Imagine my surprise – there was a deposit from the bank. All but \$50 of my scammed money had been recovered. All my prayers, and those of my friends had been answered.

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I would like to thank everyone who contributed to our survival during these last months. They all made life so much easier for us.

We are humbled and so grateful for your thoughtfulness, concern and all the random acts of kindness.

God bless you all!

Maureen and Frank Walsh

2. Health workers stories

2.1 Jasna Bruce - Focusing on what is important.

My first shock about Coronavirus was when in late February a family presented to



the hospital where I work and they had just returned from China and I was alarmed, realising if they had the virus, I was at risk and why was there nothing in place at the hospital to protect me.

It did not take long and in a matter of weeks Australia had Stage 3 restrictions. My family's life turned upside down. My son lost his first qualified job, my duties at the hospital changed priorities, my husband was working from home full time and daughter's studies were all online. There was no visiting of friends and family, even for Easter, and no attending mass. Almost overnight when I went shopping everything changed, only one way in, another way out, trolleys being cleaned after use, sanitiser at entrances, crosses on floor and people keeping their distance, waiting for you to

leave before they come to the same shelf. I was beginning to understand how the lepers felt in the gospels.

On the other hand, being a health worker, I was still attending work and the roads were so much clearer and easier to manoeuvre, the hospital was quieter as people only attended if it was essential, and our immediate family was spending more time together.

Instead of attending mass we watch Fr Steven's recorded services online, read Fr Tao's homily in the Parish Newsletter and listen to Fr Lenin's passionate reflections on the website. Some days it turned into an all-out bible study because I went on and sought out the Archbishop Peter Comensoli's homily on Channel 31 from St Patrick's Cathedral where he "virtually" blessed the palms I had sitting in front of my TV for Palm Sunday, and the Archbishop of Arlington USA online homily for the Ascension, and I thought how privileged I was to have all this available to me. The internet was acting for the Holy Spirit, like the tongues of fire did on Pentecost, so the message of the Gospel can be spread around the world.

Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles

I welcomed the drop in the price of petrol to 1990 prices and news of less smog in the atmosphere, and that polluted waters of Venice and Lake Como were clearing. I witnessed community spirit with donations and help given to the elderly and the disadvantaged. Everyone was being called on to contribute even landlords and banks. I felt proud of Australia's leaders because I witnessed how swift and systematic decisions and actions prevented a disaster in our country that ravaged others but could just as easily have done so here too.

We are still in the pandemic, but I feel things will stay different at the other end. I may feel differently as time goes on, but I have adapted to online spirituality so am happy to give up my seat in the church for those that prefer to attend physically as restrictions ease. I am compensating socially by catching up with the Women's Connect Group via zoom and using my phone camera I zoomed around the garden to show them what I have been up to. Hopefully we all continue to remember our priorities and not push the planet too far going forward and focus on what is important for the earth and each other.

Jasna 31/5/2020

2.2 Nicole & Lauren Bester - Uoo Uoo sculpture painting

As an essential worker, I have continued to work part time throughout this pandemic so there hasn't been much time to do other things or try anything new. It didn't feel like much of a change in routine, the only difference seems to be that we are a lot more dependent on technology and the online world and there seems to be a lot on offer in the virtual world via ZOOM.

During the first stage 3 lockdown I was lucky enough to be 1 of 100 artists chosen to be part of the Me & Uoo Uoo 150 years art trail which will raise funds for the Royal Children's Hospital. This was the highlight of my week during stage 3 lockdown as each week, while the streets of Melbourne City seemed to be dead, I got to go into the old warehouse to paint my Uoo Uoo sculpture which provided a lot of excitement and a sense of achievement as I slowly saw my design come alive each week, from week one where most of the time was spent cleaning and preparing my Uoo Uoo for painting to the final week, standing back and looking at the finished Uoo Uoo. Even though the warehouse was very cold and dark, this was a once in a lifetime experience and I had lots of fun painting. I am looking forward to seeing it on display somewhere in Melbourne early next year.

Nicole Bester

I love being at home, so I don't mind lockdown and there is not much change for me to my usual routine. Like many, I had to switch to remote learning. Remote learning is convenient but with the internet connection dropping out and microphone and cameras not working, there have been challenges especially when there isn't much understanding and teachers assumed the internet can just be fixed. There have been some funny experiences online and there have been some new things to try that would not have been otherwise accessible.

Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles



My sister and I were lucky enough to be chosen as one of the 100 artists to paint an Uoo Uoo sculpture for the RCH 150 years art trail. During the first lockdown, this was a special time it was a great break from studying and the screen. My weekly trip to the old leaky warehouse was an experience I will not forget. Due to restrictions and physical spacing most times my sister and I were the only artists present in the warehouse and that was quite creepy.

Everything was so quiet and deserted around that every sound seemed extra loud.... the rain on the old tin roof, noises of passing people, the wind blowing through the gaps and broken windowpanes. I enjoyed spending those weeks painting and this will always be a special memory.

Lauren Bester

Chapter 3. Getting creative

3.1 Maureen Lonsdale - COVID-19

Looking forward to the year 2020 who would of thought what a distressing beginning it would be:

COVID: C....no more CUDDLES from our grandchildren / children.

O... no OUTINGS and spending time with friends.

Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles

V.... A big VOID for our knitting/ crochet group.

I.....ISOLATION for people over seventy.

D...disease that has affected millions of people worldwide.

I DREAM for the day for this to cease.

I feel we are the lucky people and country.

3.2 Mandy Robinson - Video of singing Take Number 8

Living in isolation was never more real than in attempting to be part of a virtual choir. Our community choir, called Open Door Singers, moved online Monday nights, led with much skill, enthusiasm and charm by Shaun and his wife Margot. I missed gathering with my fellow choristers very deeply, but each week, with much determination I entered my bathroom, resplendent in my comfiest clothes. There, unseen and unheard, I sang along with complete unrestraint. This simple pleasure was eventually interrupted, when Shaun, needing to keep us all challenged, sent instructions on how to record a piece for sharing. My hairdresser had now re-opened, so on Wednesday May 20th, 2020 with hair tamed, I set myself to the task. For even at 63 years of age I am no dolt with technology or so I told myself.

“Find a small space in your house with a blank wall behind” Shaun directed. The bathroom was small but the only way to make a blank screen was to pull across a blue shower curtain. That looked just like a blue shower curtain, so I tried pinning up a white bedsheet. That looked just like bed sheet. I roamed the house and the only place that seemed promising was the hallway. I placed the laptop on the small folding table, but I had not enough height. I placed a stool on top of the table.

“You will need your phone for the recording while you play the song on your other device” were the next instructions. So, I clipped my phone to the corner of the lap top screen and tried filming a video. Then I tried again using the phone’s selfie camera. Still not enough height, so I found a plastic tub, to put on the stool sitting on the table, to raise up the laptop again.

In the first take the lighting was poor so I placed a desk lamp on a bedside cupboard, behind my tower of devices. Another take and there was a shadow, so I put another occasional table, with desk lamp aloft, on top of the cupboard, and rolled the camera once more. It would look better if I jettisoned the comfy clothes, so I rummaged in my wardrobe for my best choir black top and jacket. All that black made me look pallid and the jacket really needed ironing. So, I put on a red lacy top, applied some lipstick and sang with precision, very conscious that singing “This is Me” is not the easiest for my voice in the lower notes. This take was like I was singing in an elocution lesson, clipped and wooden and totally boring.

One more take but I forgot to take off my glasses. Another take where I forgot to play the camera and the next time my voice was getting crackly, as the cold of the hallway crept into my lungs. A couple of puffs on the inhaler and fresh lipstick was not fixing it, so I dashed to find a sip of the wine left from dinner. I shook the bottle, but that last half seemed to have vanished. My husband look relaxed and grinning from the couch offered to open another bottle. I demurred and put a teaspoon of brandy in the wine glass, sloshed it down and returned to my recording studio.

Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles

Take number eight rolled. "Don't worry about how you sound" Shaun had commanded "I just want to see your smiling and happy faces."

There was no-one happier in Australia that night as I sent the clip to Shaun.

3.3 Barry Meehan - Every day we turn to Dan

This wicked disease has turned everything on its head.
The shops lie dark and empty, and the streets are all but dead.
It's been almost six months since the lockdowns began.
Each day seems the same, with an update from premier Dan.
We eagerly await the latest news.
How many new cases and lives did we lose?
Where are the infections, are any near here?
How old were the victims, is there cause for us to fear?
Are we flattening the curve, is the end of this in sight?
Will we soon be free to venture out, and not locked up at night?
How long before we can drive to the coast, and walk along a beach?
How long before the schools can open, for our little ones to teach?
How long before we can travel, more than 5 kms from here?
How long before we are free to visit, the ones that we hold dear?
Will we always wear a mask on our face, once that we are freed?
Will we ever shake the hand of a friend, or hug someone in need?
Will Santa come this Christmas, can we gather and share goodwill?
Will the skies light up on New Year's Eve, or be dark and deathly still?
We reflect these days on how things will change and can never be the same.
Of going to work and school again or watching a football game.
Of going to the movies, or sitting at a bar on a stool
Of gathering for a birthday bash, or swimming in a local pool
Of praying at our local church, or travelling far and wide
Of visiting a favourite restaurant, and free to eat inside.
As we further reflect on these covid-days, and shelter from media storms.
We know full well what lies ahead, they will be our covid-norms.
Annus horribilis describes this year, as we reflect on fires and disease.
And every day when we tune into Dan, we pray for things to ease.

COVID-19 days - Sep 2020 BM

Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles

3.4 Anne Fleming – Creating Prayer Shawls

Excitement pulsated in the Gathering Space on Monday 22nd, as our 'knitting ladies' met together after many months of physical separation! To witness the deep joy of one to the other in 'welcome,' was a privilege to be part of! Each one proudly shared their garments which continued to be created, urging each other on, during 'lock-down' days!

For being able to be welcomed anew by our St Mary's Team is a gift ... a nurturing experience .. an invitation to others:
To come and share our joy and friendship!



Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles



Chapter 4. Nature walks, plants and pets

4.1 Mary Jahne - COVID-19 according to the Dogs

My name is Teddie and I am a very handsome, 6 year old, tri-coloured Shi Tzu. My sister, Ruby, is a year younger than I, and also a Shi Tzu. She is mainly white with some caramel splotches. She is very bossy and thinks she owns us all. We don't have the heart to tell her that this is not the case!

The third member of our gang is a black and white, very energetic 2½ year old Shi Tzu named Archie Jerk Panda. He answers to any of these names. Archie and his owner, Emma, came to live at Mum and Dad's house about 15 months ago when she became very ill. We all get on well together and Dad often says that we run the household, well we think that this is as it should be!



In March this year our lives changed drastically. Something called the Coronavirus or COVID-19 had arrived. In the beginning we noticed that Mum and Dad began turning the T.V. on during the day to watch the Prime Minister and Premier, telling them "STAY AT HOME!! Now we heard this and thought 'Why are they listening to these two men, when we have been trying to tell them that for years?'

We were very excited by this new development, but it was obvious to us that Mum and Dad were not. Mum cried when she realized that she would not be able to do all the things she loved doing, meeting with friends, going to Church, shopping and the hardest thing of all was not having her son Sean and his family over for a visit. We jumped up on her lap to comfort her, even though we could not understand what she was feeling. We tried to tell her that we were with her and she need not

Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles

worry, there was plenty we could do together. She patted and hugged us but I think she was not quite on our wavelength. Couldn't she see that this was to be the best thing that could happen to us?

Overnight life changed. We went for many more walks with Mum and Dad. We love our walks. As soon as Mum and Dad went to change their shoes, we became very excited and raced to the cupboard where the leads were kept. This was the best part of the day. We would meet many other dogs out walking with their owners and we noticed that they, like us, had a very wide smile on their faces, while their owners would try not to walk too close to us and would quickly smile and say hello as they passed. We however, wanted to stop and exchange pleasantries but unfortunately this was not allowed.

For the first couple of weeks Mum went into cleaning mode. Dad told us to keep moving, as she would clean anything that stood still long enough. Now you have to understand that 'Bath' is a very bad word as far as we are concerned. We don't really see the need for this kind of treatment, especially as we do our best to roll around in the garden straight after this ordeal is over. We judiciously kept out of her way and on the move. She washed windows, floors, benches etc. and then started on the walls. We were not happy when she started removing all the 'love snots and rubbings that we had left there for her. Of course, we looked on the clean walls as a blank canvas, so it wasn't long before we started leaving our messages again!

Mum gave this up as a lost cause and then started doing jigsaws. She would listen to the radio and work for hours at the kitchen table putting tiny pieces together to make a picture. When this was finished, she broke it all up, packed it away and started another one. She said that this kept her mind active and off all of her worries. We didn't understand this, though we were quick to pounce on any piece that dropped on the floor. Mum would then pick us up and take the piece out of our mouth before we could chew it. What a killjoy she was!

After doing two very large puzzles she changed to doing Sudoku – boring!! But we did get to sit next to her on the couch and snooze.

In the garden we loved playing around her and trying to help her prune bushes and pull up weeds. Surprisingly she was not always that grateful for our help. When she did sewing, we would lie on the floor beside her and chew on anything that dropped, scissors, measuring tape, bits of material etc. Luckily, she didn't drop anything like pins or needles, because that may have been painful!

Dad worked on his computer doing aeroplane research and reading to keep busy. Emma spent a lot of time in her bed. This was ok with us – our humans were home, and we could snuggle up and get attention any time we wanted. They told us how glad they are that we are an important part of their lives. This makes us feel good.

Now as you probably realize, food is ever present on our minds, so the fact that our owners were home all the time meant that we were always present at mealtimes. We would line up in order around our Dad's chair and look beseechingly at him until he gave us a treat. This ritual became the order of the day for every meal, and we noticed that there were a lot more meals, snacks and cups of tea

Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles

during the day. I heard them mention that this would make them put on weight, but it didn't worry us at all.

Mum used her phone often, sending texts and talking to family and friends. She and Dad would go to Greensborough each Tuesday morning to do the grocery shopping. It was their one outing for the week. In the past they had said "Oh we have to do the shopping". Now they looked forward to this outing. Go figure! We would sit at the door, bark at anyone who walked by and wait for Mum and Dad to return. You see, in our minds, we are great big ferocious guard dogs, and we take our duties seriously. We did not like Tuesdays, despite the fact that we were told that this was how we had snacks to eat. Often when they returned, they mentioned that some of the shelves were bare, luckily for us there was not a shortage of dog food, I mean who needs toilet paper!

Mum missed going to Mass very much. She would watch it online each week saying how much she missed this celebration with her Parish community. Easter came and went. Mum watched the Ceremonies online; she was very sad. Sean and his family came to the front door and talked to them through the wire door, they were not allowed into the house. We couldn't understand why four of our favourite people could not come in and play with us. They gave our family some Easter eggs and finally left. I might add that we were not allowed to eat any of the chocolate!! This was unfair.

On ANZAC Day we were aroused from sleep very, very early in the morning. It was still dark!! Our owners went out to the mailbox with a radio and candles. Mum and Emma wore coats, on which they had pinned very special medals that represented Mum's Uncle Ted who died at Hellfire Pass during WW11. We watched with our noses pressed up against the glass in the front door as they stood to attention and listened to the Dawn Service. Dad took photos of them and the sunrise. There were quite a few of the neighbours doing the same thing. Our family finally came back into the house talking about how powerful this experience was but how they missed the real thing. They go every year to the Dawn Service in the city and then take part in the march. This year was different, but they were glad that they had participated in this new way of remembering the ANZAC's sacrifice.

On Sundays, Sean's wife, Nicole, who liked to do cooking and baking on her free days, sent Mum, Dad and Emma some treats. They would come to the door, talk a bit and leave the most wonderful smelling food. We always got to sample a bit. We looked forward to Sunday afternoons.

Finally in mid-May, the rules relaxed a little, Sean and his family were allowed to visit. It was a joyous occasion. Our Fish and Chip Fridays could recommence. This always included Dim Sims for us - how wonderful!

Mum and Dad were now cautiously able to go and visit our family, neighbours and some of their friends, though they kept saying that it still meant social distancing, which is a concept we know nothing about. The closer we can get to people the better. Archie is lucky, he sleeps on Emma's bed at night. We sometimes go to bed with Mum if she has a nap during the day because she cannot sleep well at nights anymore. We like to snuggle up to her and keep her safe. We sense that at times she is very sad, so we lick her and let her know we are there for her.

Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles

There is only one other occasion that we are allowed to go to bed with Mum and Dad and that is when there is a thunderstorm! This is the only time we succumb to fear. The loud rumbling sounds send us running to their bedroom door crying to be let in and kept safe. Mum gets us up on the bed. We snuggle in tight and get patted. Ruby is always more scared than I. She tries to get under the doona or on Mum's head and she takes a long time to settle down. We sleep well but I think Mum and Dad are awake for the remainder of the night.

In July something called the second wave hit, the virus spread rapidly, and the number of deaths increased almost daily. Stage 3 restrictions were reintroduced, then stage 4. Mum became busy measuring Dad and Emma's faces and then made masks for them to wear when they left the house. We were very wary for a while until it became obvious that we didn't have to adhere to this new rule. Only Mum could do the grocery shopping and she could not drive any further than a 5km. radius, whatever that is? We got the impression that she was not happy with this restriction, as there was no Aldi in that range. Dad likes all his continental food from there.

We detect that our humans are struggling to cope with the isolation this time around. However, we are very happy with the state of our world at the moment. We have our humans with us almost 24/7. Life is as it should be. Unfortunately, we get the feeling that they are not quite on the same page. They keep saying that they wish, hope and pray that it was all over, that a vaccination could be developed and that things would get back to a new normal. A world in which people treat each other lovingly, while accepting and trying to understand their differences.

So, while everyone waits anxiously for an end to this pandemic, we are happy, for as far as we are concerned, we are living in Doggy Heaven.

Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles

4.2 Edith Sutherland - On returning

When my children were small, their dad and I would take them on teddy bear picnics into Yandell Reserve. This 'bush', as we called it, was just at the end of our street.



During spring part of the picnic included searching for native flowers. There were greenhood orchids, spider orchids, chocolate lilies, salt and pepper flowers, prickly wattle and I am sure others I have forgotten. We all enjoyed these simple expeditions.

Although the reserve has given pleasure to the community for a long time, exploring it was something I had neglected as time passed.

This year, 50 odd years later, I again visited Yandell Reserve. The dreaded COVID-19 virus had spread its ugly tentacles and the state was put into lockdown. Consequently, the only outings I enjoyed were my daily walks. I was drawn to the reserve, and on each walk, I searched for the native flowers we had found all those years ago, and guess what– one day while walking with my daughter Jacinta (who was given permission to make regular visits to check that I was well and happy), we spotted some shy little greenhood orchids! They were not completely open and there was only one section of the bush that we found them in, but it was such a joy to see them! I agreed to check on these little flowers on future walks. They gradually opened up their dainty faces to the world, but unfortunately, they refused to turn to face the passer-by; we only saw their delicate little green hoods from the back. On one of my check-in visits a week or so later one brave little plant was showing its face and I could see again what a beautiful flower this Australian native plant is.

I search on each visit to the bush for chocolate lilies, but so far have not found any. I have however spotted little salt and pepper flowers, which were a favourite of my children.

The joy these walks have given me is one good thing that I can thank the horrid COVID-19 virus for, as I may never have rediscovered these beautiful creations of God in their natural habitat. Nor would I have experienced the happy memories the walks have evoked.

Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles

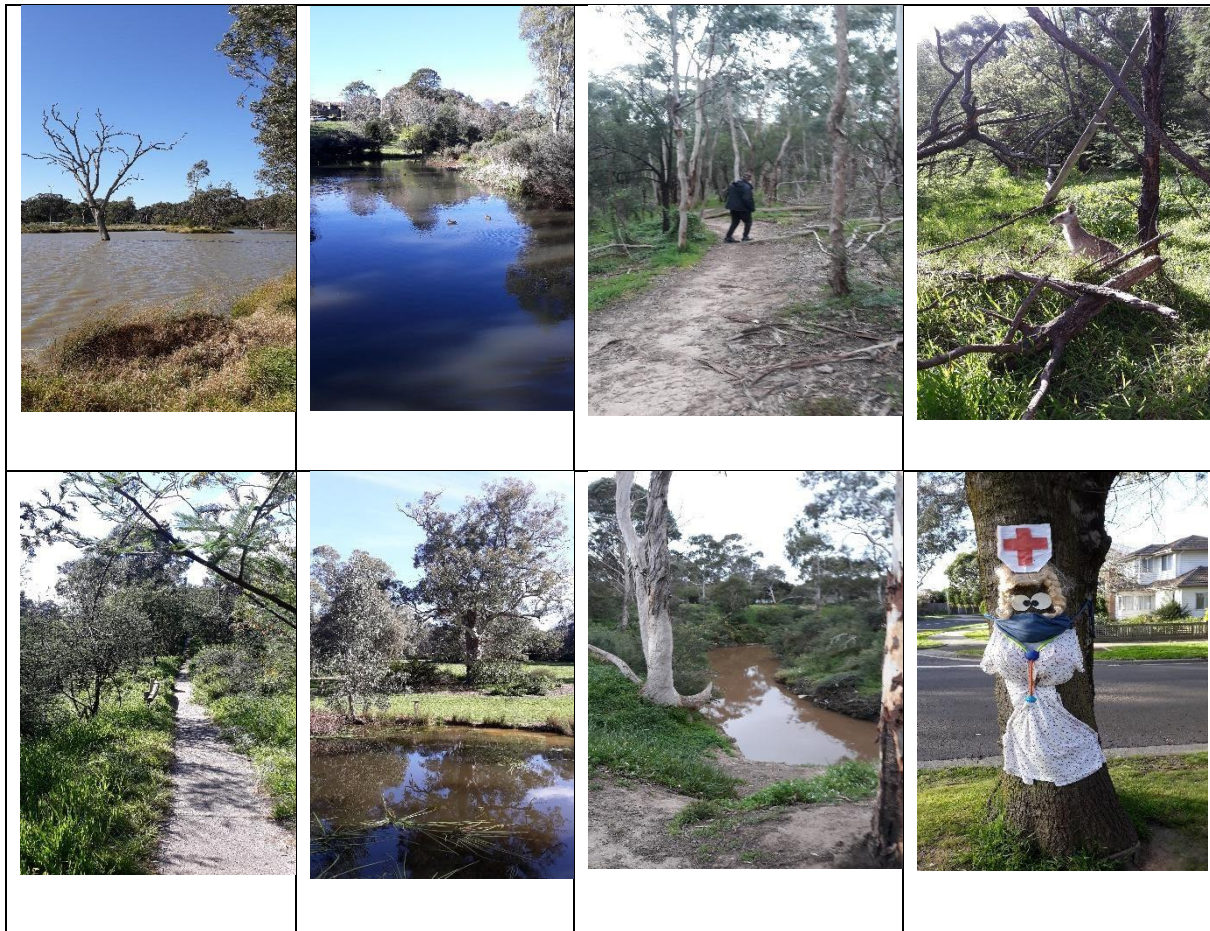
4.3 Anne Hughes (St Mary's) - Finding space in a pandemic.

Being a lady who likes nothing better than to be out in the bush, the 5-kilometre limit imposed by the Stage 4 lockdown was horrifying to me. Then we found a link to a site 2kmfromhome.com where we could pinpoint our location, specify a distance and get a map.

It was a relief to realise that there are many great places within the prescribed distance, in some of which we could easily walk for an hour without even retracing our steps and enjoy natural bush, splendid waterways, plenty of birds, kangaroos and even the occasional echidna.

Close to Watsonia where we live, we rediscovered Gresswell Conservation Area, part of Plenty Gorge Park, walks along the Plenty River, La Trobe Wetlands, Bundoora Park, Kalparrin Lake and Binnak Park. Most of these required a short drive to conserve energy for the walk. They provided a welcome alternative to the increasingly boring daily constitutional around our suburban block. We are blessed that our decision-makers have left such beautiful areas free of housing development – so far.

Perhaps you can identify some of these places. Answers below.



Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles



The answers:

- 1 La Trobe Wetlands
- 2 Kalparrin Lakes
- 3 Plenty Gorge Park
- 4 Gresswell Habitat Link
- 5 Trail along Plenty Gorge
- 6 Binnak Park
- 7 View of Plenty River Greensborough
- 8 Decorated Tree Nell Street Watsonia

4.4 Mary O'Dea - A calming experience

Being a very senior citizen, having no Mass was extremely difficult to take, but I got on with life doing my craft, a little gardening, and telephoning friends. I made time to go walking and greeted many strangers with a smile and a hello. I visited the Sacred Heart Garden of Reflection and found that a calming experience. Time passes. Hopefully one day we can get back to normal.



Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles

4.5 Sean Dunne - Enough lemons for lemonade

In many ways, I have been fortunate, as of mid-November 2019 I took retirement from work following working in various civil engineering divisions of British Rail from leaving full-time education till July 1999. On migrating to Australia, I continued working for various railway companies both international and small local. Maintaining the infrastructure while constructing bridge and station platforms.

The first months of retirement being taken up with Christmas preparations, settling into a routine and completing odd jobs around the house. This took me up to COVID-19 and restrictions.

As an individual who never enjoyed gardening, although having large gardens in England and Australia comprising mostly of lawns which only required mowing every so often.

On moving into Diamond Creek, the garden had an established lemon tree in the middle of the back lawn which fruited for a few years before dying on me.

Following the removal of the lemon tree, I made a determined effort to grow a new one in the same location. I was brought a new established tree standing about a metre tall as a present from my daughter. This duly died on me.

Sometime later while at Saint Andrews market I was offered a three-hundred-millimetre-tall lemon tree in a pot for \$20 which I bought, planting it in a nice sunny location in the front garden. The rail industry in Melbourne employs lots of ethnic groups who grow lemons very successfully. Even after following the advice on to grow a lemon tree, it too died on me.

With the restriction imposed by COVID-19 I decided to grow a lemon tree from some pips. On reading up on how to grow a lemon tree I discovered almost anything can be grown from scraps. Carrots, onions, kiwi fruit, potatoes, ginger, garlic, chillies are a few I am trying. My intension is to try a few other crops including tomatoes now the weather is improving.

Since early March I have grown indoors in pots, my pride and joy Olive the lemon tree, Jacinta and Ardern recently renamed (Bill and Rose) the Kiwi fruit could have a problem with these as you need a male and female for the propagation which cannot be identified until fully grown and numerous red pepper plants (too many to name individually). The project includes deciding on the best positions in the garden while preparing the beds to give the plants the best chance of survival, having daily welfare chats with the plants and taking a weekly photograph to monitor progress.

I look forward to sharing the fruits of my success with parishioners by leaving bags of lemons in the gathering space for people to take and enjoy.

Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles

Olive at four weeks 22/09/20



Olive at nineteen weeks



Bill and Rose at two weeks 22/09/20



Bill and Rose at thirteen weeks



Peppers at four weeks



Peppers at twelve weeks 22/09



Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles

4.6 Anne - Taken by surprise

Learning to adjust to widowhood was really daunting! It was a time of many 'firsts'! Coming home to an empty house, I was unprepared for..... It was the hardest!

After a difficult Christmas, I thought I was slowly finding 'my-way,' when COVID-19 descended upon us, turning our world and lives, upside-down!

I had seen a documentary on Silkie Chickens and was 'smitten' by them! I was encouraged to 'launch-into-the-deep' and bring two home to Cherry Street. I named them 'Matilda---Tilly and Eleanor---Elly!' They have become an important part of my life and I can't imagine walking outside now without being greeted by their enthusiasm.



Silkies are kind, gentle and warm spirited right down to the centre of their souls. They get up close and personal with their human friends.

Having been introduced to FENCE. ART, I have painted the fenced area where the Chicken Coop is situated, with scenes and images suited to a 'chicken's world.' This therapy has been such a calming tool, enfolding me in a stillness and peacefulness of mind, heart, and spirit.

I am deeply appreciative for these months which have 'taken me by surprise' in what I have been opened-up to: not only becoming a 'pet owner,' but by the joy these little creatures have gifted me with.

After Pat's death, my prayer was to 'Endeavour to live 'love' as fully as I can with each day that is gifted to me..... To be more conscious of this 'infusion of love'not only within myself, but also in the world around me.'

Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles



Chapter 5. Young peoples' stories

5.1 Olivia Joseph - A year like no other

The year started as normal, though many people were impacted by the bushfires, but no one expected what was to come. In January we found out about the coronavirus, but people were not that worried, because there weren't any infections in Australia.

In March, the infections rose and suddenly the whole world was affected. Our last family outing was the Women's Cricket World Cup. Life changed and since people were at risk, many restrictions were enforced by the government. When they announced that we were to be in lockdown, people didn't know what to expect, and started panicking.

Families are separated, grandchildren from their grandparents. This has divided our country with borders between states/region being sealed. We are forced to stay at home and can't go to school or work. We aren't allowed to go to the park or visit any of our friends. We are adapting to this new way of life and staying motivated.

We are connecting using modern technology. Our family tunes into the masses that St. Mary's Parish posts every Sunday. We use Facetime to connect with our family members and make phone calls whenever we can. I use the computer for remote learning and my dad brought his office computer home. We watch the news and stay updated with what's going on and follow the advice given by the experts.

Many people who weren't acknowledged for their job are now getting recognition and gratitude. Doctors and nurses are risking their lives helping the sick. Supermarket workers are helping keep supermarkets open so people can buy essentials. Scientists are battling against the virus, trying to find a vaccine. But many people don't have a job. The virus has not only affected the world health wise but also has socio - economic effects. Cafe and restaurant owners have had to close their doors, leaving their staff unemployed. Many families are struggling as they don't have enough money to afford food. In this day and age when we have made so much progress in the world, the best advice to keep safe is to stay away / isolation.

Now things are starting to open up again. The government started to relieve restrictions. I go to school, and my dance school said we'd be back in the studio in Term 3. But as the government started to ease restrictions, the cases surge again. Each day, cases rose by 10 and soon, there are over 100 cases in 1 day. The government again restricted going out, and here we are again, in lockdown for six weeks.

I realised that this pandemic has brought many families together. We call relatives more often, and my family has started saying the rosary every night possible. Even though we can't visit our relatives and friends, modern technology brings us together. We care about each other more and good hygiene habits will be remembered and taught in the future. This is a once in 100 years event and hopes are it will never happen again and we come out on the other side, healthy, happy, and together.

By God's grace we are healthy and safe, and we are grateful for that, and pray that soon a vaccine is found.

- Olivia, Altar Server at St Mary's

Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles

5.2 Nancy Gheno, Joshua, Luke and Thomas - Succulents, scooter jumps and Jelly the cat

Thanks, COVID-19. We can only go out for exercise. We have to keep ourselves entertained at home. I build Lego and play board games to keep myself happy. People are complaining about not being allowed to go anywhere but I like it, loads of time to do anything I want. We would normally have school, but we can't go in case of infection. So, we do home-schooling. Every day we wake up at 7:45 am, have breakfast, get ready for school and at 8:45am sit down ready for a nine o'clock start. In the morning we would have a meeting at 9:00am and at about 10:00 am we would get off the meet and start schoolwork.

The tasks are easy and fun. We would have writing, reading, maths and religion or inquiry. At eleven o'clock we would have a maths meet. We have different groups which would do different things. For instance, we would have maths online one day and skill practice another. If it is a Monday, we would have an inquiry but on Tuesday we would have religion. Over the holidays we had a book to read. I read *The Donkey Who Carried the Wounded*. It was about a man who goes to war and in a strange turn of events befriends a donkey. We reflected and analysed this book. We wrote and drew the setting which was fun. For inquiry, our topic was government. We learnt about the House of Representatives and the Senate. I know there are lots of people in government doing different jobs to help out. In religion, we learnt about the bible and the different people in it. But right about now we would be preparing for our confirmation. Now we have to do it online. But by far my favourite subject is maths. Every week we change what we are doing. One week is subtraction and another is fractions. This week is division. In our groups we do maths online. The tasks are easy. The best thing is that we can take our time to do the work. I have two brothers who are the same age as me. We all do home schooling, and we have the same work so we can help each other finish the work. We finish all our work by about 12:30pm, have lunch, go for a walk, read for about an hour and play piano.

During COVID-19 I wasn't into anything. But now I have a fully-fledged and growing succulent collection. So here is the story of how it happened. One day, my parents and I went for a walk near my house. And lying on the road was a succulent. So, I walked safely onto the road and picked it up. When I would find a succulent that was being mistreated during COVID-19 I would bring it home and grow it. That's when my collection started. During COVID-19. That was when I realised that I had a passion for succulents. So, every day when we went for a walk, I would see succulents that were mistreated and dying, and no one was looking after them. So, I took all of them home and now as I am writing this, my collection has about 65 succulents and counting. It's not just me that is into them. It is my brothers too. The biggest succulent I have is a Jade, one that my Mum owned and just left it there, so I looked after it for her. And my smallest is a jellybean one. I have seen many succulents in the last couple of months. I stop at houses to admire succulents all of the time. Also, I look at how they grow because it helps me to find out how much to water it and how much room it might need. We go out regularly to clean up the pots, sweep the veranda and tend to the succulents, like breaking off the dead leaves and

Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles

once a week water them, usually on Wednesday. I like to call them my children and I am their father. It's weird but I like it. One day when we were walking, I saw this beautiful house with black tanbark on the ground and it had about 50 succulents of all different sizes and types. I envied the garden so much it was just so good and perfect. So, I thought to myself that is what I am aiming for. All lined up and beautifully manicured. I personally think that my succulent pot collection looks messy. Only because I have 2 big, elongated pots and lots of small pots dotted around so it looks bad. I am working on trying to make it more consistent as in all big pots or all small pots. I don't know what I found about succulents that I liked. I just fell in love with them.

A photo of Jelly!



Nearly every day we go on a walk. Me and my brothers sometimes bring our scooters. Mum and Dad have been taking us around the back streets and we have been learning all of the shortcuts and side streets. For example, today we walked all the way to the post office, that took about 1 hour. On some walks we get some cool surprises. Like today we saw a huge dig site, with a cute scoop digger and some men. We have even named some streets like Rainy Lane, once when it was raining,

Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles

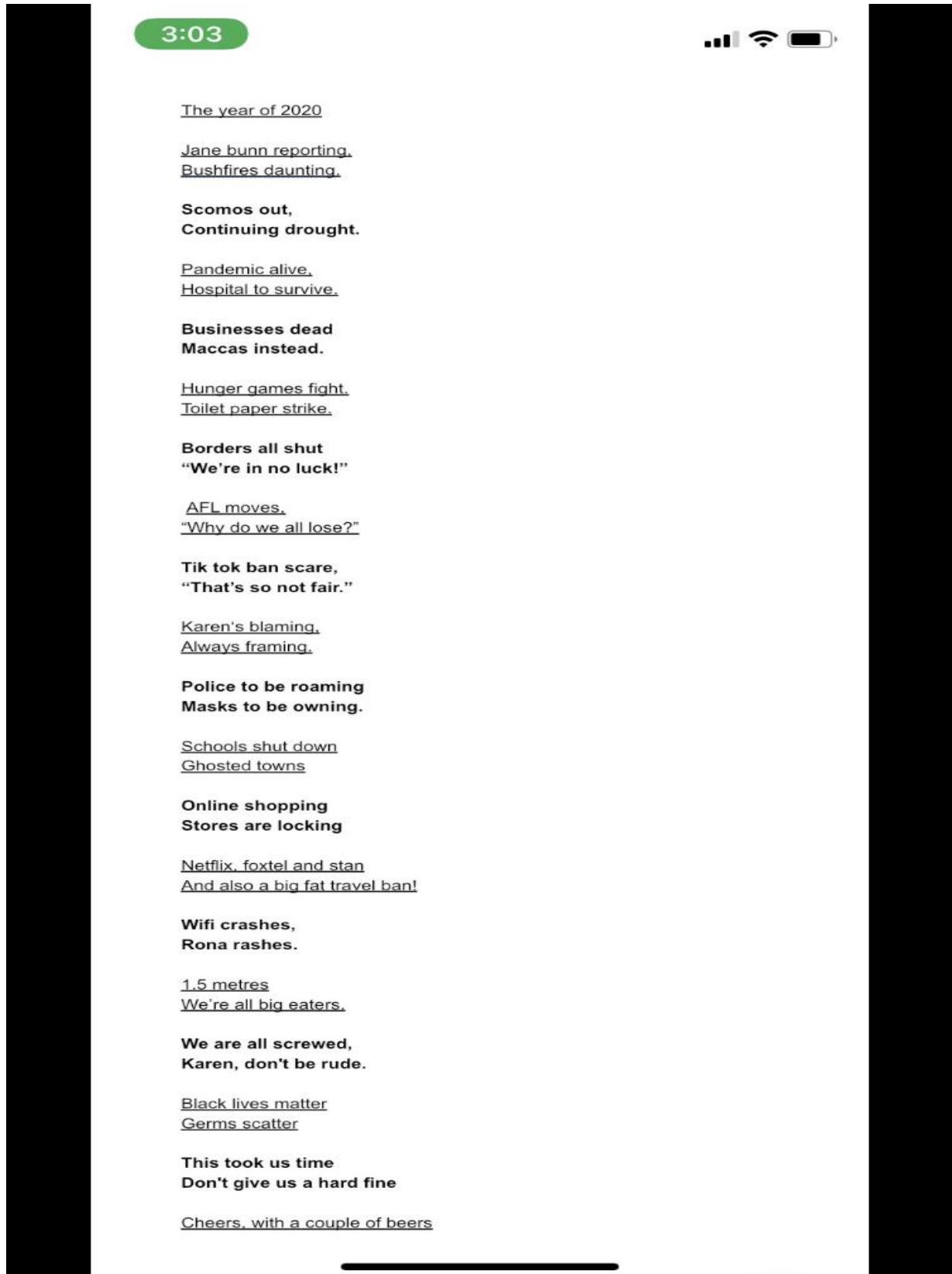
we took off our jumpers and rolled up our sleeves and got drenched. There is another street that we call Jelly street, for a very good reason. When we go down Jelly street, we see this adorable cat. At the beginning we were calling it "Gatto " which is a cat in Italian. Then one of us came up with the ingenious idea of looking at its tag, which read Jelly. She is a cute cat that we all love. Once when we were walking past without us realising, Jelly walked behind us and wrapped around Mum's and my legs. On all of our walks we always try to go to Jelly street. Next year We may be getting a cat!

At home on the verandah Josua has a large succulent garden that consists of around 65 succulents. So, every time we go on a walk Joshua is constantly going, "Oooooo, I don't think I have that one" So me and Luke are asked to pick it. Even today we picked up 3 or 4 new succulents.

We also have another favourite activity when we're scooting. As we reach the bottom of the hill, we all pretend to jump even if we don't have our scooters. When this first started we all meant it as a joke but now it's kind of a tradition if we're lucky Mum and Dad do it. Sometimes we even go to the extent of pointing out how much airtime we all get. Our clapping and our shrieks of joy can be heard for miles. These small things during lockdown are what keeps us all going.

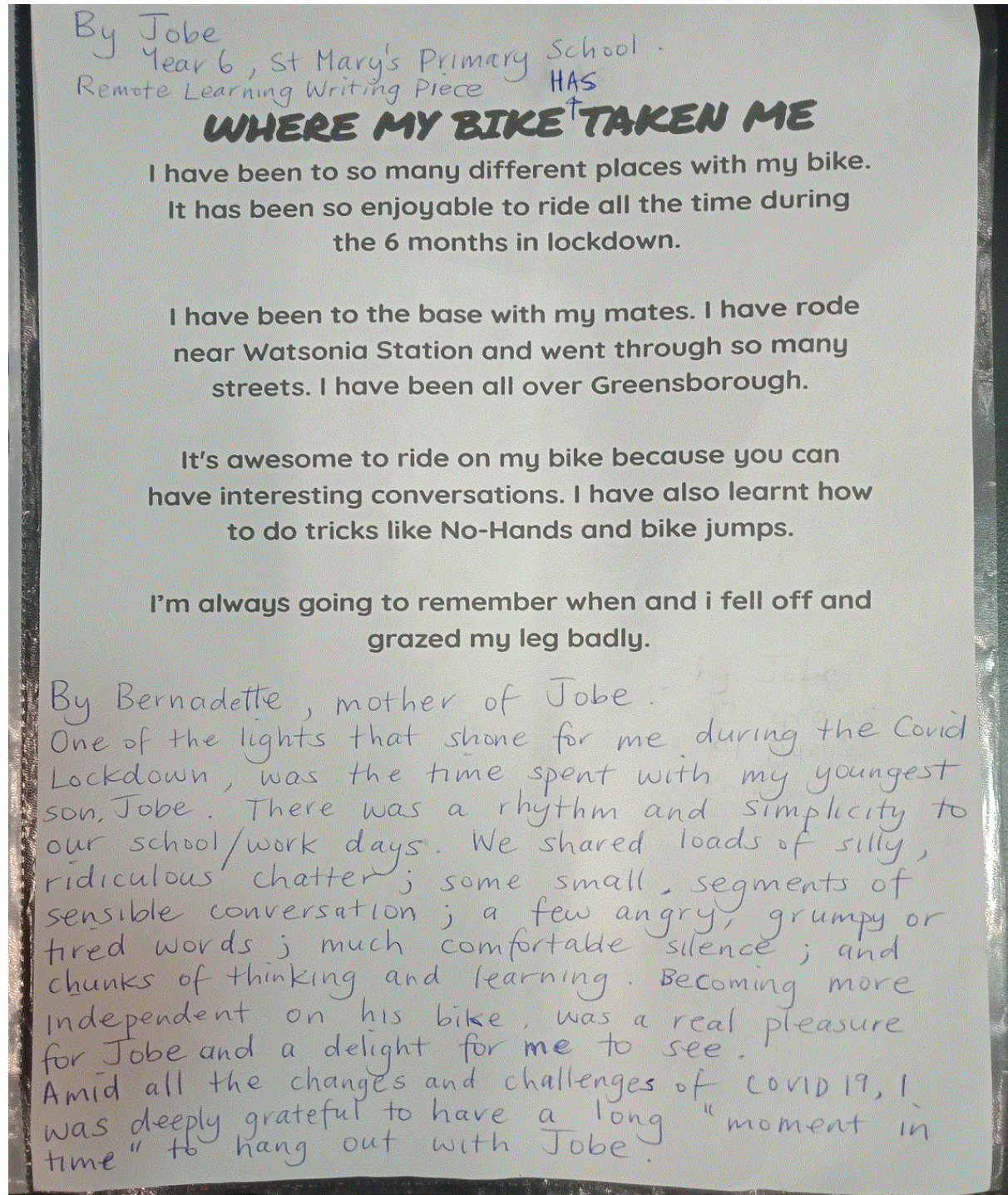
Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles

5.3 Jan Duffel - Rap by my grand-daughter Hannah Price and friend Emily Cook aged 14



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5.4 Jobe Douglas – Where my bike has taken me, and Bernadette Douglas Jobe's mum - Lights that shone.



Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles

Jobe setting off for an enjoyable bike ride.



Chapter 6. Family life

6.1 Rosa Poon - Blessings on the inside

The last few months of “lockdown “called for a total new style of living! More cleaning, more sanitising and no physical contact with our children and grandchildren. It was hard at first, but on the bright side with IT technology we kept in touch with each other via FaceTime. Also, via Facebook I have daily Mass, adoration, and rosary.

On the financial side, it is worrying as each day seeing the share market not doing well, pension investment fund losing money just overnight. However, there is nothing I can do about this except to pray. “Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you.” 1 Peter 5:7.

The positive side is my husband who never initiated to do any exercise now wants to walk 3 km daily! He being a non-Catholic always complains that I go to church frequently, but now because of the ‘lockdown’ that I have Mass and prayer time on online at home, he even turns on the computer for me beforehand. What a big change!

I remember a reflection on Psalm 63 that helps me through the current situation, “Wilderness experiences are good for you, for they teach you an important truth: You draw satisfaction from blessing on the inside, not from circumstances on the outside.”



Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles

6.2 Cathy O'Brien - A letter to my grandsons in the time of COVID-19

Dear Patrick and Finn,

I am writing this letter to you to share what life was like in 2020 when the coronavirus known as COVID-19 turned our world upside down. Paddy, you were only two years old and Finn, you were only four months old as I write, so you will both rely on stories from your parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and big cousins to understand our lives before and the new ways of living that we had to adopt to stay safe and well.



Prior to COVID-19 coming to Australia at the beginning of the year, our family had a wonderful life. We are a very close family and we saw each other regularly, to celebrate birthdays, Easter, Christmas, all kinds of special events and just because we could. We are very affectionate and so there was always a lot of hugging and kissing, celebration, and laughter. Your grandfather and I would also go out to restaurants, the theatre, movies, festivals, and exhibitions, often with friends, without thinking it were special. We loved to travel, both internationally and within Australia. Shopping and going out for coffee were simple pleasures. All these events and activities and more were just a normal part of our lives. I was in a singing group, a book club, a twice weekly yoga class and regularly walked and went out with friends. I belonged to a wonderful parish and loved to be with my faith community every week and to be involved in various groups that supported parish activities. I particularly enjoyed taking Communion to an aged care home near me and spending time with the beautiful residents who loved to see someone from 'the outside' and to share aspects of their lives.

The highlight of every second Thursday was looking after you, Paddy. It was our joy to see you grow and develop, to play, to spend time in the garden because you loved sweeping and weeding (!) and riding your little bike, as well as doing puzzles, creating with Duplo, dancing around the house, reading books and cuddling and laughing. Little Finn, you were born in San Francisco and your wonderful Daddy and Mummy sent us lots of photos and videos so that we could watch you growing and changing and so be part of your life. A Viber video call was always the best because then we could see you moving and hear you babbling away and I'm sure you listened to our voices and you certainly smiled for us.

Then as the year went on, we came to realise that this virus was very serious and was impacting more and more on our lives. It was moving into every country around the world, was making many people sick and so to keep us safe as much as possible, our governments decided that we had to drastically change the way we

Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles

lived. We couldn't move around our communities as we wanted any more. We had to stay in our homes or close by and only go out if we needed to work, buy food or go to the doctor or get some exercise. We couldn't visit our family and friends or organise a get together. Large scale events were all cancelled. No crowds at civic, cultural and sporting events. All my personal activities and interests were cancelled. We had to stay a safe distance away from other people when out and we were told not to shake hands, hug and kiss. We couldn't travel overseas and so we missed your birth, Finn, and the wedding of your uncle and aunt in Vancouver had to be cancelled. We couldn't visit your elderly great, great aunt in Queensland and help to look after her when she became ill and we missed her 90th birthday. We wore masks when we left home. We washed our hands a lot and bought many cleaning and sanitising products. There was a curfew overnight. Many businesses closed and many people lost their jobs. We were worried for ourselves and our family but also for every other person, because no-one escaped the widespread and overwhelming effects on our society. Some people were facing this alone; loneliness is a hard state to be in. We were so lucky to be able to continue babysitting you, Paddy, during the lockdown, which always lifted our spirits and brought us much joy.

All these changes were so strange and at times I felt very unhappy. The hardest part of this pandemic for me, boys, was not being able to see and hold my family because all of you bring me so much happiness. I realised that we take for granted living in social groups and in many ways, we are unaware of how we are nourished physically, emotionally and spiritually by others. Of course, we appreciate and love each other but because this is part of the fabric of life, we don't necessarily stop and think about all that we have, until something so dramatic as this virus makes us pause and puts a focus on what is really important in life. For me that is you and all my family. And it is my friends and those people in the groups of which I am a part. And I have come to clearly realise that all people in the world are important. We are so similar, even though many people try to tell us how different we are. We are experiencing this pandemic around the globe. People get sick and people die and that is heart-breaking. We need to care about everyone and to try to make this world a better place to live in the future because this virus has found us out. We haven't been looking after everyone as we should.

We were all very sad when your great grandfather died. He was so excited when you were both born and very proud to see the next generation of O'Brien's starting out in life. His funeral was so small and not the celebration of his life that we wanted. But a time will come when we can all gather to share our memories of him and there will be many stories about Granddad Jack that we will share with you in the coming years. Birthdays and anniversaries, Easter, ANZAC Day, Mothers and Fathers Days came and went without being together and having the soothing experience of human touch. And right at the beginning of this pandemic Bender, our adorable chocolate labrador, died and there is a hole there in our hearts that only a faithful dog can fill.

One thing I have come to realise is that we human beings are very strong and resilient. There have always been wars, disease, immense struggles, challenges and hardships and this one came without warning. None of us had ever experienced anything like this before. Life would never be the same again. People as individuals and societies were being asked to pull together, to bear the pain and loss, to find the hope for the future. Human beings have found this strength and courage, sense of purpose and optimism throughout our history and it was time to do so again, as one

Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles

person and as part of a larger society. I realised that it was very important to think about those things I had some control over and some creative ways to make a new life meaningful. I didn't want to isolate myself; I wanted to feel connected to others and part of something larger. And so, I made a commitment to follow all the rules and together I believed that we could all make a difference.

I found myself saying hello to anyone I passed while out on a walk or nodded or waved and still smiled behind the mask. Happily, most people responded positively, and we all enjoyed a quick word of acknowledgement, including patting any dog that came inside my 'social distanced' zone. I developed a renewed interest in cooking and in particular I learned to cook the most amazing sour dough bread. I also started to bake my own cakes, slices and biscuits again and sometimes I even had a dessert at our evening meal, something your grandfather really enjoyed. I remembered that I had a garden and gained much pleasure from pruning back the mayhem that had arisen in some parts, moving on those plants that had never flourished but had been left in neglect, and then replanting. I walked each day and discovered parts of my suburb, and places within five kilometres, that I had never been to before. Plenty Gorge, I salute you for your beauty and abundant wildlife. I knitted a baby blanket for you Finn which took three months to finish because I had not knitted for some time, but each stitch was knitted with love. Your grandfather and I finally 'noticed' some home maintenance and improvements that needed attention and we felt so good when we completed them. I discovered internet shopping! I had never been a fan in the past, preferring the experience of going into the shop, picking up and looking through the book, trying on the item of clothing, getting feedback from a sister or shop assistant or the person in the next cubicle. However, when the shops are closed and you feel like a little of normality, window shopping on the net and even ordering something certainly fits the bill. I did get very tired however of looking at tracksuits and pyjamas! On the other hand, I found some great little outfits for both of you.

We all found ways to get in touch with others because we realised that we needed and wanted to be close to each other, in any way possible. Aside from the phone we discovered Zoom and WhatsApp, apps which you boys have both starred on already. We regularly zoomed with our family and friends. I got my book club back together and we had our discussions on Zoom with no problems. Of course, we didn't have the shared supper and cold and hot beverages to enjoy but I was so happy to see their faces and hear their voices and engage in on-topic and off-topic discussions. My singing group also found a way to gather, and we had many laughs over that Zoom lag that occurred when up to 100 people tried to talk and sing at the one time. The music trivia quizzes worked really well, however. Groups in my parish met over Zoom and technology enabled me to participate in Mass and to read the parish bulletin which kept me up to date about people and events in my faith community.

I loved having time to read without guilt and to watch many programs on live TV or on those new 'platforms'. A topic of most conversations with family and friends was "What have you been watching or reading? Any recommendations?" I also loved the quiet time, when I could just sit and think or daydream, nothing to do, nothing to achieve, peace and stillness, just being. Walking in nature or in a beautiful place or being in the garden could also bring that sense of calm and tranquillity.

Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles

And so little Patrick and Finn, as I write, the virus is still not contained here in Melbourne, but we have got it on the run. I am so relieved that you are coming home Finn with your Daddy and Mummy very soon and we will be able to meet you in person and hold you and play with you. And you can meet the rest of your family and the cousins can grow up together. There is even a glimmer of hope that we will be together at Christmas time.

There are fracture lines in our society that this virus has revealed but I look forward with hope for our community, that we learn from this pandemic about what is fundamentally important in our lives – our families, our relationships and the wellbeing of all people, and a commitment to treating others with genuine care and respect. I hope we start to create a better world in which you can grow up and thrive.

Your loving Nanna

(Cathy)

6.3 Megan Mitchem - Alternative coffee catchup



My son & daughter-in-law who live two streets away have acquired a beautiful bespoke coffee machine from Italy.

So today I'm going around, and my son will leave a cup of coffee in the letterbox and he and his wife will stand on their veranda and we'll have morning tea.

Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles

6.4 Jan Duffel - Social distancing

Family visit during the Pandemic, before stage 4 lock down and compulsory wearing of masks was introduced. All parties observing the 1.5 meter social distancing rule, BYO chairs and drinks. Jan 75 years from St Mary's with daughter Carmel 50 and grand-daughter Ashley 16 years old.



Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles

6.5 Angelo & Elaine Ledda - Ordinary people doing extraordinary things.

Seven months on (October) and we are still unable to enjoy the things we love, seeing family and friends.

As my wife Elaine is wheelchair bound due to a stroke, she had three years ago, one of the pleasures that she enjoys is going out in her motorised chair to the local small shopping strip 3 streets away - with the excuse of getting a cup of coffee and to see other people out and about. Sadly, this has not been possible. Another pleasure for both of us is going to the 10.30 Mass at St Thomas the Apostle in North Greensborough. We look forward to receiving the Eucharist, seeing and chatting with our friends, and we are hoping that it will not be too much longer before we can resume going to Church.

We are fortunate in many ways but especially so to have a very supportive group of friends and family that come to visit as it is not always possible for us to visit them due to wheelchair access, distances and relying on taxis for our travel. And now due to the nine week ban on everything other than essential shopping, this too has been put on hold.

We now rely on telephone calls, face-to-face mobile calls and more and more to ZOOM calls. This has been great in that we can see most of our family and friends, but unfortunately, we have not seen my older brother and sister-in-law since February or Elaine's older sister and brother-in-law since December 2019. They are not computer literate or have 'modern' phones and as both couples are considerably older, we hope that the virus and the restrictions ease to allow us to see them again soon.

One thing that keeps our spirits up is humour. Our neighbour Chris, has since the lockdown began in March, been producing a e-newsletter which is filled with all kinds of jokes, memes and wonderful links to amazing singers, dancers and videos of ordinary people doing extraordinary things.

We have also been looking at different recipes in books and on YouTube with the result that we have started baking, biscuits, cakes, bread. All this is good, and it helps to pass the time, but it is with some consequences, we are eating more than we probably should. We will review this situation when restrictions are eased.

We are trying to follow our political and medical leaders' instructions to maintain a safe distance, to wear masks, to not go out unless necessary and we sometimes get annoyed that others in the community are not adhering to these instructions, but we believe that if we all try, we will get through this one day and I pray that it will be sooner rather than later.

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Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles

6.6 Tina & Len Rochford - Our side gate

Tina and I have lived in our Greensborough home for almost 50 years. One of its best features is a side gate to our next-door neighbours, Maree and Graham. We did not foresee the impact of this gate on our life.



The gate has been amazingly busy over the years, overcoming the all-too-common isolation of suburbia and enriching our lives in many and unexpected ways. Children playing together and growing together, adults chatting through the gate or “just dropping in” to borrow some milk or an egg (and receiving half a carton), sharing a cuppa to discuss problems, searching over the fence for lost pets or chooks or balls, and the family intermixing after the happy noise of a gathering was heard over the fence. Most of all, the peace of mind that right next door there are people we know and trust, who have become virtual family members. The gate has become a bit wobbly over the years (like us), is never closed, and can no longer easily *be* closed due to the jungle which has grown around it.

Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles

In 2020 along came COVID-19 with its unreality, disorientation, lockdowns, social isolation, church and work closures, and fear. For weeks and months, we could not see our grown children, grandchildren, extended family, friends or neighbours, and at times were confined to our property except for essential medical reasons etc. But through it all, there was plenty of quiet time to think about and talk about what good lessons or purposes God might wish us to derive from this disaster. And plenty of examples of humanitarian good will, support, sharing and sacrifice by so many people around the world. We saw how challenge and disaster can bring out the best in people.

No amount of Zoom meetings and WhatsApp calls (though we were thankful for them) can ever replace face-to-face social interaction with loved ones. But there was always the side gate, through which we and our neighbours could share a BYO coffee and a chat, each within our own properties and suitably socially distanced for COVID-19.

The mildly embarrassing photo of us was taken through the gate by Maree during one such not-quite-get-together, just after “attending” televised Mass on the chilly 2020 Easter Sunday morning (hence the dressing gowns). The photo is a treasured reminder of the good and simple things we shared and experienced during the pandemic, disregarding of course the minor trauma when I noticed that Father Steve’s dressing gown (featured elsewhere in this COVID-19 story book) is almost identical to mine...

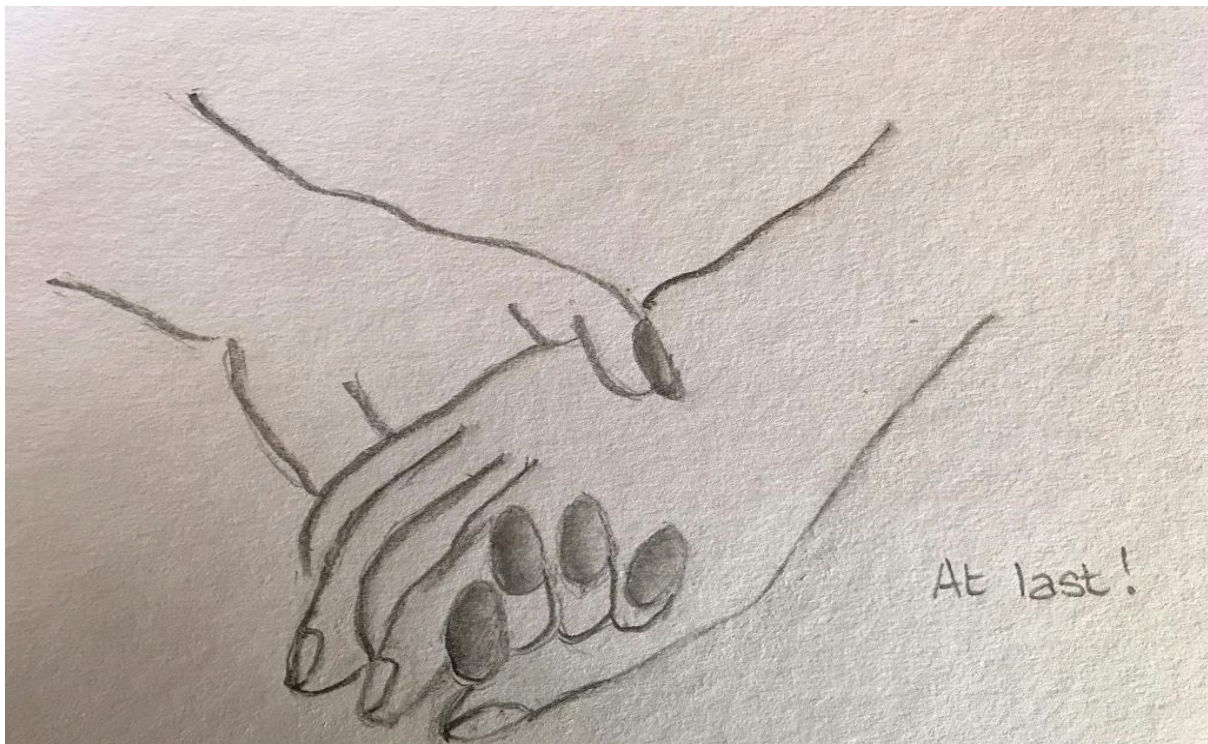
Chapter 7. Family history interests

7.1 Maureen Lonsdale - Saint Vinnies and Facebook Family Descendants

My name is Maureen, and I am 66 years old. Whilst some things in my life are not possible at the moment, others have continued in a different form. As a member of the Greensborough Conference of St. Vincent De Paul Society we have been able to keep connected by meeting once a fortnight via Zoom. We have permits to be able to visit those who need our assistance on certain days and provided we keep our masked distance at their letterbox, our level of help remains much the same. We are able to do most of the 'interviewing' by phone the day before, so this means the in-person time is minimal. This means a lot to all of us.

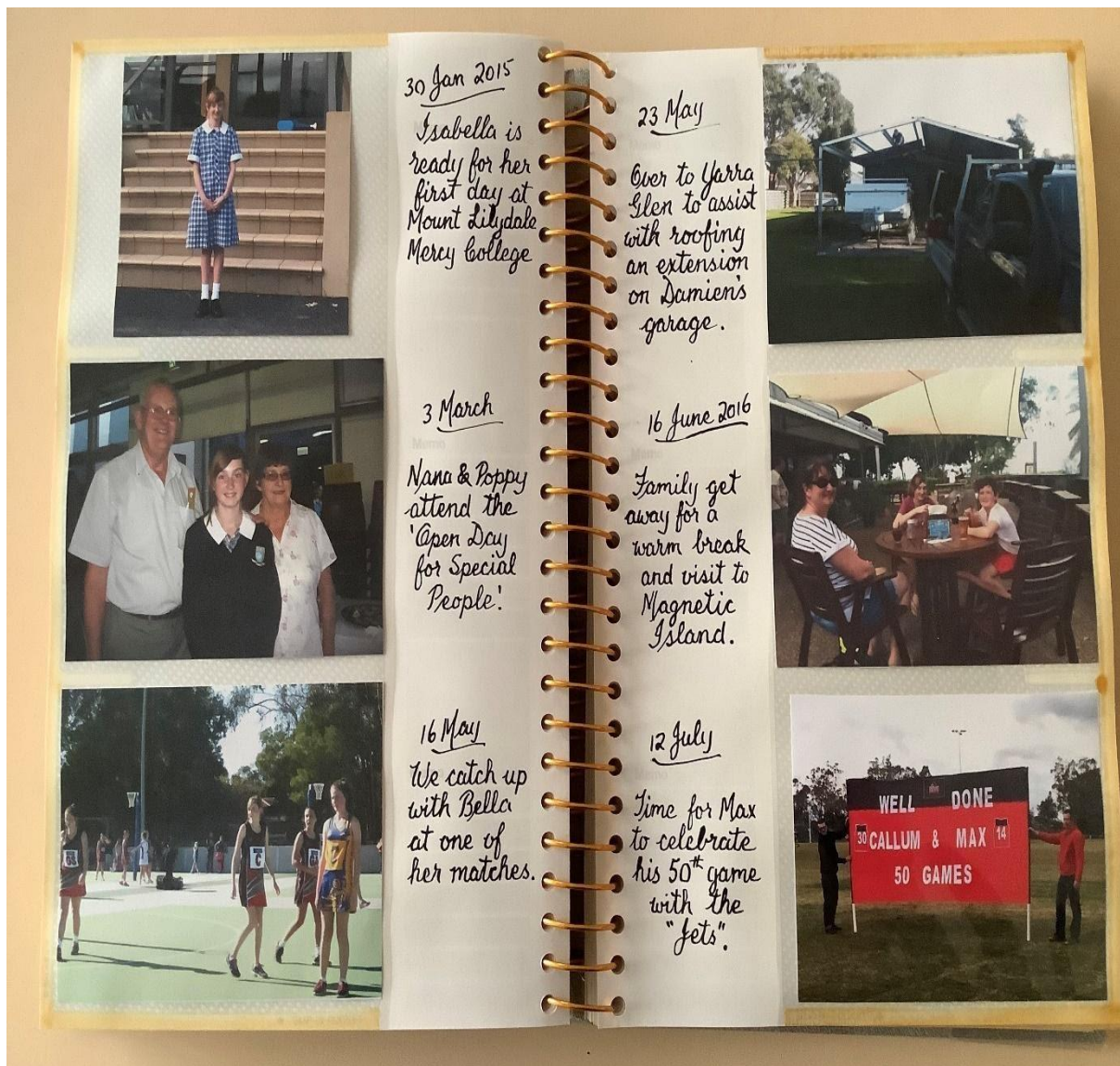
Jigsaws have become a surprising new part of my day! A great time waster they bring joy and frustration and require a lot of patience, but in the end, they are really lots of fun!

Another unexpected addition to 'normal' has been my entry into the world of Facebook via a special Family Descendants page set up by my cousins on my mother's side. This seemed to be an idea too good to refuse as it enables me to be connected to so many of my relations. With the last generation all gone now, we were growing further apart. Now we can share photos and stories of the grandparents and great grandparents that we all have in common, which has been very enjoyable!



Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles

7.2 Bernie & Barb - Family albums from the new eighth day



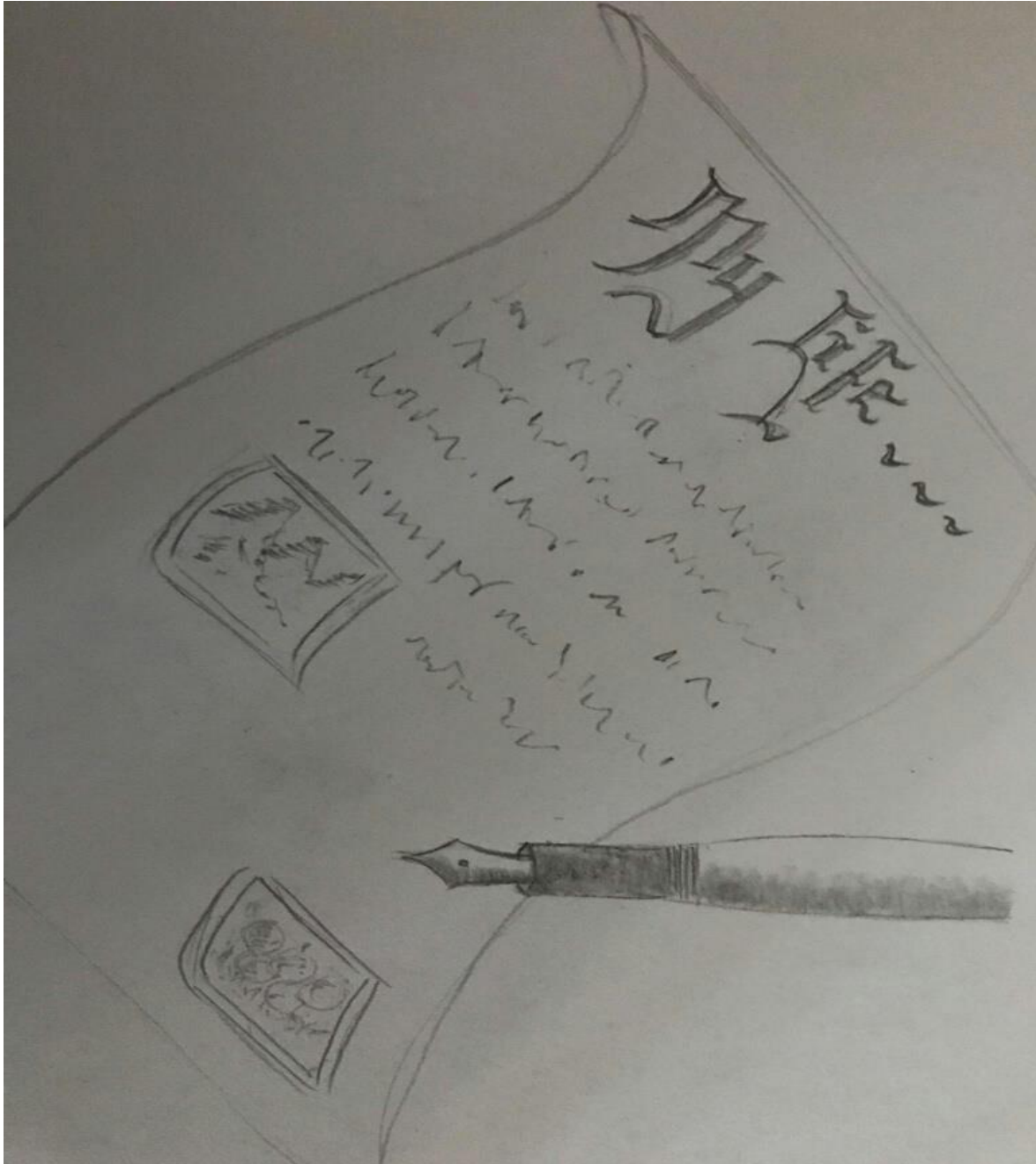
As people who have always looked for an eighth day in the week, Barbara and I have been fortunate to be able to fill in the time very easily. She has been able to complete Craft items that have been around for some years and as you know spends a deal of time gardening. In amongst a whole range of other things, I have been able to spend time extending all our Family History records and currently updating one of the albums we made for each of our 3 children on occasion of their 21st birthdays.

Bernie & Barb

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7.3 Yvonne O'Brien - Writing family history

Being the only girl with two brothers, I inherited all the family photos from my mother, so I decided to document details on the back of each photo. Having completed this I have begun to write the story of my life growing up in suburban Melbourne during the forties, fifties, and sixties.



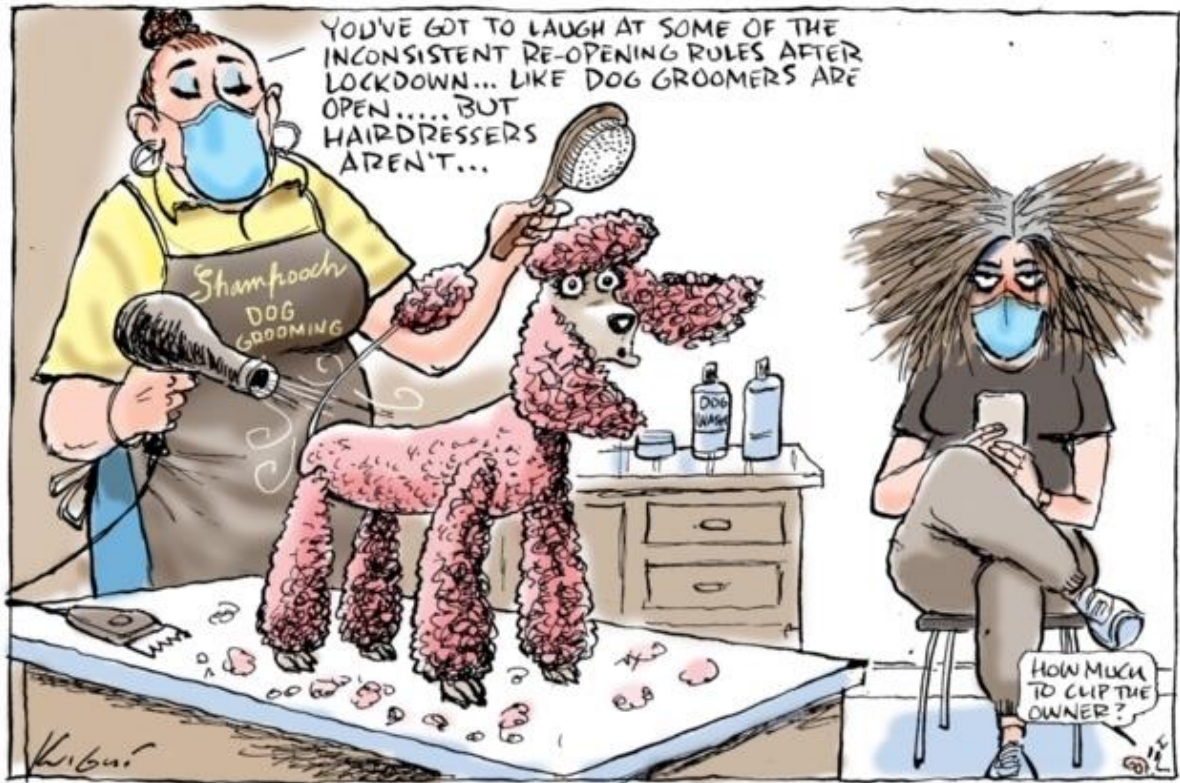
Chapter 8. Some cartoons



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Appendix

Fr Steve's Request for COVID-19 Pandemic Story Submissions

Good stories capture our imaginations, inspire us to be better, teach us, define us and help us bear witness to our own humanity and those of our neighbours. We weave our stories with other people's stories on a common loom. Let's weave together and see our tapestry.

Jesus was not only a healer, a teacher and prophet—he was a storyteller. He used his stories to illuminate the minds and souls of those who heard his voice. His voice can still be heard in the written form through the scripture, through the Mass, through the art and music that artists across the world are inspired to create and our very own voices (if we allow it to be).

Pope Francis' 2020 Message for World Day of Social Communication is an inspirational piece about the value and need for our stories to be told. The text of his Message follows and is an inspiration for us to be storytellers, especially at this crucial time in history. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed how we live in the short term and we are yet to see the changes that will occur in the future.

We would love to hear your story about staying home to stay safe. Some inspiration questions may include:

- What has changed in your outside world?
- What has changed in you?
- What new skills have you been required to learn?
- What have you grown to appreciate?
- What has died in you during this time?
- What time has been given life at this time?
- What has been your biggest challenge?
- What has been your biggest success?
- What do you want to remember from this?
- What lessons will you let live or let die?
- What made you see the humorous side of life
- What made you shed a tear or re-evaluate your heart's desire?
- With all that you have learnt, gained and lost - Where do you want to go from here?

We would LOVE to hear your stories and anecdotes to collate into a book. Over the next few weeks, think of what story you would like to pass on; perhaps something you want others to know, or perhaps your children, your grandchildren or even those who will walk the paths we walk now.

Say a prayer, muster your courage, get planning & write! Your piece does not need to be long—a paragraph or two or three, would suffice. If you do complete this task,

Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles

email it to us at diamondcreek@cam.org.au or greensborough@cam.org.au or greensboroughnorth@cam.org.au with your name, your age (if you are game enough) and a note giving us permission to publish your work.

Pope Francis' 2020 Message for World Day of Social Communication

Pope Francis releases his annual message for the Word Day of Social Communication, a reflection on the Biblical text Exodus 10:2: "That you may tell your children and grandchildren".

Life becomes history.

I would like to devote this year's Message to the theme of storytelling, because I believe that, so as not to lose our bearings, we need to make our own the truth contained in good stories. Stories that build up, not tear down; stories that help us rediscover our roots and the strength needed to move forward together. Amid the cacophony of voices and messages that surround us, we need a human story that can speak of ourselves and of the beauty all around us. A narrative that can regard our world and its happenings with a tender gaze. A narrative that can tell us that we are part of a living and interconnected tapestry. A narrative that can reveal the interweaving of the threads which connect us to one another.

1. Weaving stories

Human beings are storytellers. From childhood we hunger for stories just as we hunger for food. Stories influence our lives, whether in the form of fairy tales, novels, films, songs, news, even if we do not always realize it. Often, we decide what is right or wrong based on characters and stories we have made our own. Stories leave their mark on us; they shape our convictions and our behaviour. They can help us understand and communicate who we are.

We are not just the only beings who need clothing to cover our vulnerability (cf. *Gen* 3: 21); we are also the only ones who need to be "clothed" with stories to protect our lives. We weave not only clothing, but also stories: indeed, the human capacity to "weave" (Latin *texere*) gives us not only the word *textile* but also *text*. The stories of different ages all have a common "loom": the thread of their narrative involves "heroes", including everyday heroes, who in following a dream confront difficult situations and combat evil, driven by a force that makes them courageous, the force of love. By immersing ourselves in stories, we can find reasons to heroically face the challenges of life.

Human beings are storytellers because we are engaged in a process of constant growth, discovering ourselves and becoming enriched in the tapestry of the days of our life. Yet since the very beginning, our story has been threatened: evil snakes its way through history.

2. Not all stories are good stories

"When you eat of it ... you will be like God" (cf. *Gen* 3:4): the temptation of the serpent introduces into the fabric of history a knot difficult to undo. "If you possess, you will become, you will achieve..." This is the message whispered by those who even today use storytelling for purposes of exploitation. How many stories serve to lull us, convincing us that to be happy we continually need to gain, possess and consume.

Stories from our COVID-19 Bubbles

We may not even realize how greedy we have become for chatter and gossip, or how much violence and falsehood we are consuming. Often on communication platforms, instead of constructive stories which serve to strengthen social ties and the cultural fabric, we find destructive and provocative stories that wear down and break the fragile threads binding us together as a society. By patching together bits of unverified information, repeating banal and deceptively persuasive arguments, sending strident and hateful messages, we do not help to weave human history, but instead strip others of their dignity.

But whereas the stories employed for exploitation and power have a short lifespan, a good story can transcend the confines of space and time. Centuries later, it remains timely, for it nourishes life.

In an age when falsification is increasingly sophisticated, reaching exponential levels (as in *deepfake*), we need wisdom to be able to welcome and create beautiful, true and good stories. We need courage to reject false and evil stories. We need patience and discernment to rediscover stories that help us not to lose the thread amid today's many troubles. We need stories that reveal who we truly are, also in the untold heroism of everyday life.

3. The Story of stories

Sacred Scripture is a Story of stories. How many events, peoples and individuals it sets before us! It shows us from the very beginning a God who is both creator and narrator. Indeed, God speaks

As word and things come into existence (cf. *Gen 1*). As narrator, God calls things into life, culminating in the creation of man and woman as his free dialogue partners, who make history alongside him. In one of the Psalms, the creature tells the creator: "For you formed my inward parts; you *knitted me together* in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and *wonderfully* made ... My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth" (139:13-15). We are not born complete, but need to be constantly "woven", "knitted together". Life is given to us as an invitation to continue to weave the "wonderful" mystery that we are.

The Bible is thus the great love story between God and humanity. At its centre stands Jesus, whose own story brings to fulfilment both God's love for us and our love for God. Henceforth, in every generation, men and women are called to *recount and commit to memory* the most significant episodes of this *Story of stories*, those that best communicate its meaning.

The title of this year's Message is drawn from the Book of Exodus, a primordial biblical story in which God intervenes in the history of his people. When the enslaved children of Israel cry out to Him, God listens and remembers: "God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel – and God knew" (*Ex 2: 24-25*). God's memory brings liberation from oppression through a series of signs and wonders. The Lord then reveals to Moses the meaning of all these signs: "that you may tell in the hearing of your children and grandchildren... what signs I have done among them, that you may know that I am the Lord" (*Ex 10:2*). The Exodus experience teaches us that knowledge of the Lord is handed down from generation to generation mainly by telling the story of how he

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continues to make himself present. The God of life communicates with us through the story of life.

Jesus spoke of God not with abstract concepts, but with parables, brief stories taken from everyday life. At this point life becomes story and then, for the listener, story becomes life: the story becomes part of the life of those who listen to it, and it changes them.

The Gospels are also stories, and not by chance. While they tell us about Jesus, they are “performative” [1]; they conform us to Jesus. The Gospel asks the reader to share in the same faith in order to share in the same life. The Gospel of John tells us that the quintessential storyteller – the Word – himself becomes the story: “God’s only Son, who is at the Father’s side, has *made him known*” (Jn 1: 18). The original verb, *exegésato*, can be translated both as “revealed” and “recounted”. God has become personally woven into our humanity, and so has given us a new way of weaving our stories.

4. An ever-renewed story

The history of Christ is not a legacy from the past; it is our story, and always timely. It shows us that God was so deeply concerned for mankind, for our flesh and our history, to the point that he became man, flesh and history. It also tells us that no human stories are insignificant or paltry. Since God became story, every human story is, in a certain sense, a divine story. In the history of every person, the Father sees again the story of his Son who came down to earth. Every human story has an irrepressible dignity. Consequently, humanity deserves stories that are worthy of it, worthy of that dizzying and fascinating height to which Jesus elevated it.

“You” – Saint Paul wrote – “are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (2 Cor 3:3). The Holy Spirit, the love of God, writes within us. And as he writes within us, he establishes goodness in us and constantly reminds us of it. Indeed, to “re-mind” means to bring to mind, to “write” on the heart. By the power of the Holy Spirit, every story, even the most forgotten one, even the one that seems to be written with the most crooked lines, can become inspired, can be reborn as a masterpiece, and become an appendix to the Gospel. Like the *Confessions* of Augustine. Like *A Pilgrim’s Journey* of Ignatius. Like *The Story of a Soul* of Saint Therese of the Child Jesus. Like *The Betrothed*, like *The Brothers Karamazov*. Like countless other stories, which have admirably scripted the encounter between God’s freedom and that of man. Each of us knows different stories that have the fragrance of the Gospel, that have borne witness to the Love that transforms life. These stories cry out to be shared, recounted and brought to life in every age, in every language, in every medium.

5. A story that renews us

Our own story becomes part of every great story. As we read the Scriptures, the stories of the saints, and also those texts that have shed light on the human heart and its beauty, the Holy Spirit is free to write in our hearts, reviving our memory of

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what we are in God's eyes. When we remember the love that created and saved us, when we make love a part of our daily stories, when we weave the tapestry of our days with mercy, we are turning another page. We no longer remain tied to regrets and sadness, bound to an unhealthy memory that burdens our hearts; rather, by opening ourselves to others, we open ourselves to the same vision of the great storyteller. Telling God our story is never useless: even if the record of events remains the same, the meaning and perspective are always changing. To tell our story to the Lord is to enter into his gaze of compassionate love for us and for others. We can recount to him the stories we live, bringing to him the people and the situations that fill our lives. With him we can re-weave the fabric of life, darning its rips and tears. How much we, all of us, need to do exactly this!

With the gaze of the great storyteller – the only one who has the ultimate point of view – we can then approach the other characters, our brothers, and sisters, who are with us as actors in today's story. For no one is an extra on the world stage, and everyone's story is open to possible change. Even when we tell of evil, we can learn to leave room for redemption; in the midst of evil, we can also recognize the working of goodness and give it space.

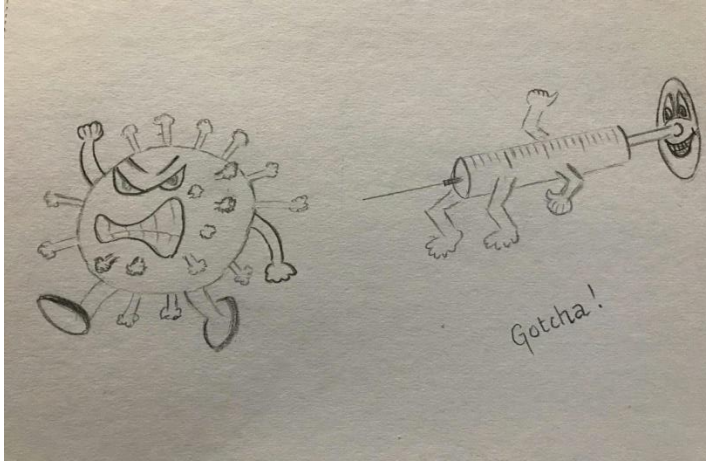
So it is not a matter of simply telling stories as such, or of advertising ourselves, but rather of remembering who and what we are in God's eyes, bearing witness to what the Spirit writes in our hearts and revealing to everyone that his or her story contains marvellous things. In order to do this, let us entrust ourselves to a woman who knit together in her womb the humanity of God and, the Gospel tells us, wove together the events of her life. For the Virgin Mary "treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart" (*Lk* 2: 19). Let us ask for help from her, who knew how to untie the knots of life with the gentle strength of love:

O Mary, woman and mother, you wove the divine Word in your womb, you recounted by your life the magnificent works of God. Listen to our stories, hold them in your heart and make your own the stories that no one wants to hear. Teach us to recognize the good thread that runs through history. Look at the tangled knots in our life that paralyze our memory. By your gentle hands, every knot can be untied. Woman of the Spirit, mother of trust, inspire us too. Help us build stories of peace, stories that point to the future. And show us the way to live them together.

Rome, at Saint John Lateran, 24 January 2020, the Memorial of Saint Francis de Sales

[1] Cf. Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Spe Salvi*, 2: "The Christian message was not only 'informative' but 'performative'. That means: The Gospel is not merely a communication of things that can be known—it is one that makes things happen and is life-changing".

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The eBook is living, growing overtime with more contributions as and when submitted. It is a written record of how we coped with COVID-19 informing generations to come. Please pass on the link to friends and family, spreading the experiences of the Partnered Parishes of Sacred Heart, St Mary's, and St Thomas' the Apostle