

# Our Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic

*Last week I wrote about how the world will look upon our efforts to make a safe environment for parishioners during this pandemic, and how well we do in this task could effect us for years. This week I want to take a different tack.*

*Like last week, I am writing this in a way that is designed to be slightly provocative (or shocking) in order to provoke thought. And as I said last week, if you don't like what is written here, let me know your different take on this subject! But please think about the big issue.*

## Introduction

Sherlock Holmes said to Dr. Watson “You see, but you do not observe.”<sup>1</sup> I am going to take three things that we ‘see’ regularly – e-cigarette smokers, hand washing and seatbelts – and then have a little think about what we can observe!

## E-cigarettes or Vaping

Recently I was driving behind a car, and despite going at about 60km/hr, I could see a cloud coming out of the driver's partly opened window. The driver was obviously vaping, and the cloud was vapour from his lungs. This got me thinking about how far and wide we spread our moisture, and thus any viruses that uses the moisture from our lungs as their preferred vehicle of travel!

Just like on any very cold morning, breath can become visible to everyone when someone ‘vapes’. Perhaps because we are used to seeing cigarette smoke, the vaping cloud seems unusually voluminous. But cigarette smoke is smoke, while what comes out of the lungs from e-cigarettes is vapour (or to be more accurate, aerosol). With a vape cloud we see just how far and wide our breath goes.

Seeing the size of a vape cloud might amaze us as we see just how much comes out of our lungs, but this should not be a surprise. About a hundred metres from my front door there is an apartment block with balconies on each floor. Occasionally someone will stand on one of the balconies and smoke some marijuana and inevitably I can smell it as soon as I walk out of the door.



<sup>1</sup> 'A Scandal in Bohemia' by Arthur Conan Doyle

Now if they just lit a marijuana joint and left it there, would I be able to smell it? Or is it because the smell has been ejected from the lungs that it reaches so far? Certainly the vaping example gives us a very simple illustration that the lungs do project their contents far and wide.

So why, having eyes to see all this, do we stand close to someone and think we won't be affected (or indeed, infected) by anything on their breath?

If someone was vaping and we knew we had to avoid their 'secondhand vape', then we would obviously stand a good few metres away; we would wear a mask if we could; and of course we would only want to meet them outdoors or in very well ventilated spaces. So what about avoiding 'secondhand coronavirus'? Surely all the same principles apply, but sadly without the wonderful visual assistance of all that vape cloud, we often struggle to observe these principles!

## **Hand Washing/Sanitising**

I found this interesting history on a website ([globalhandwashing.org](http://globalhandwashing.org)) dedicated to the issue of hand washing:

*Ignaz Semmelweis, a Hungarian doctor working in Vienna, is known as the father of hand hygiene. In 1846, he noticed that the women giving birth in the doctor-run maternity ward in his hospital were much more likely to develop a fever and die compared to the women giving birth in the adjacent midwife-run maternity ward. He decided to investigate, seeking differences between the two wards. He noticed that doctors often visited the maternity ward directly after performing an autopsy. Based on this observation he developed a theory that those performing autopsies got 'cadaverous particles' on their hands, which they then carried from the autopsy room into the maternity ward. Midwives did not conduct surgery or autopsies, so they were not exposed to these particles.*

*As a result Semmelweis imposed a new rule mandating hand washing with chlorine for doctors. The rates of death in his maternity ward fell dramatically. This was the first proof that cleansing hands could prevent infection.*

*However, the innovation was not popular with everyone: some doctors were disgruntled that Semmelweis was implying that they were to blame for the deaths and they stopped washing their hands, arguing in support of the prevailing notion at that time that water was the potential cause of disease. Semmelweis tried to persuade other doctors in European hospitals of the benefits of hand washing, but to no avail.*

*A few years later in Scutari, Italy, the Crimean War brought about a new hand washing champion, Florence Nightingale. At a time when most people believed that infections were caused by foul odours called miasmas, Florence Nightingale implemented hand washing and other hygiene practises in the war hospital in which she worked. While the target of these practises was to fight the miasmas, Nightingale's hand washing practises achieved a reduction in infections.*



This is relevant because the greatest effect that a non-medical face mask has is to prevent the spread of the virus *from us to others* rather than to prevent the infection *of us by others*, which masks do less well. So first and foremost, the wearing of a face mask is something we do to help others; an attempt to minimise the larger moisture particles in our breath travelling so far, and thus minimising the chances of the spread of any virus hitching a ride on that moisture.

So if, as Christians, we believe that we should put the interest of other people before our own interests, then face masks make complete sense. We might almost say that wearing a mask is a Christian thing to do exactly because it is a sign of curtesy and respect, and dare I say it, love of others rather than an attempt to protect ourselves.

## Seatbelts

The First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, told the BBC last week that she hoped that putting on a face mask in public would become as automatic as wearing a seatbelt in a car. And for those with memories long enough to remember, when seatbelts were introduced there was a great kick-back against them for lots of reasons. Again, by looking at this safety aid that we are all so familiar with, perhaps we can gain some insight into the new safety aids of social distancing, face masks and hand washing.

Of course, we don't want to look at our good friends in church and think, 'There is a potential virus carrier', rather when we see our good friends in church we want to greet them and show affection for them in our words and, as is so natural, in our body language – which usually means moving closer to them. It is really hard to say, 'I have missed you so much, but can you please stand a bit further away'. But I am sure when seatbelts were new people didn't want to look at their friends who were drivers and see them as potential accident makers, and I am sure that it was difficult saying, 'I know you are a good driver, but where is the seatbelt buckle?'

But turning this around, when we see our good friends in church we want to greet them and show affection for them in our words and in our body language. But because they are so important to us it is perfectly natural to say, 'I have prayed for your health and well-being, and now I have a chance to show my friendship for you by doing something practical, so I am going to wear a mask and keep my distance to ensure that you don't have to stand in the invisible cloud of my breath.' This, I suppose, is similar to saying, 'Because you are in the car I will drive as carefully as I can, but all the same, because I love you, please put on your seatbelt!'

The point here is that none of this is new; under different guises we have been through this before, and what used to be new and uncomfortable is now the norm. Let us learn from history and move on.



## **Conclusion**

This week I let myself wander onto ebay – always dangerous – and as a result I have bought a nice navy blue N95 mask with ten replaceable filters, and four non-medical mask in assorted colours also with replaceable filters. My sadness was that I couldn't get colours to match the liturgical seasons! So having written all the above, what I will have to do when the masks arrive is to look at them and say, 'Here is my gift to the parish. Here is a tool I can use to better serve others.'

And as I keep my distance, as I wear my lovely new masks and as I sanitise my hands, I won't be thinking that this is what I have to do because someone has told me to do it; it won't even think that this is something that might protect me; rather I should try to think of my love for all those around me and then, with joy, use these actions as practical and visible expressions of my love.

And, of course, if I struggle with this, then it is the most natural thing in the world to look up to heaven and say, "Lord, send the breath of your Holy Spirit upon me to help me love."

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