As part of a current project
I am doing a lot of reading about scientists,
including a new biography of Galileo,
Galileo: Science Deniers by Mario Livio.

Unlike virtually all others,
this one is actually written by an astrophysicist
who not only understands the significance
of his many astronomical findings,
but even more, comprehends and emphasizes
his revolutionary scientific methods.

The other unique aspect of historical work
is the way the author connects Galileo’s struggle
to change the accepted ways of thinking and believing
with parallel struggles today, e.g., around climate change.

Despite the uphill battles he faced in his own day,
even found vehemently suspect of heresy by the Church,
and living the last 9 years of his life under house arrest,
Galileo was hailed as the Columbus of the heavens
for his many astronomical discoveries.

One contemporary wrote:
“Columbus gave man
lands to conquer by bloodshed,
Galileo new worlds harmful to none.” (p. 91)

The 20th century philosopher [Thomas Kuhn](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/thomas-kuhn/#ConcPara) coined the phrase
“paradigm shift” to explain this kind of scientific revolution.
Such a shift topples the prevailing thinking on a topic
and supplants it with a strikingly different position,
prompting change across multiple disciplines and terrains.

I was thinking about the Columbus of the heavens,
revolutions in thinking and acting and even believing,
in the midst of this frustrating, even overwhelming pandemic.

Whether we like it or not,
this global health challenge has triggered fundamental changes
in so many aspects of our world and our lives

For example, while telehealth or telemedicine is not new,
and has especially been employed in bringing medical care
to remote regions,
its usage during the pandemic [has recently surged](https://aspe.hhs.gov/pdf-report/medicare-beneficiary-use-telehealth),
establishing it now as an ordinary health tool
not limited to places like the arctic circle.

If a pandemic can trigger paradigm shifts in business and medicine,
education and politics,
it can do the same for worship and even theology.

Think about live-streaming.

This past summer [I presided](https://vimeo.com/443111714)
for the feast of Blessed Solanus in Detroit.
On an average year there might be
1,000 folk who would attend the novena leading to the feast.
And maybe 1,500 at the three Masses on the feast itself.

This year there were c. 12,000 digital participants in the feast.
And a total of almost 40,000 of those who joined
in some aspect of the feast and novena.
Our celebrations of Solanus will never be the same.

Besides the technological changes triggered by the pandemic,
I also believe this global health crisis
shapes the content of our worship and believing.

When I look back on my previous preaching on this feast,
or the multiple commentaries guiding such preaching,
there is an overwhelming emphasis on our call to holiness:
recalling not only metaphorical 144,000
mentioned in the first reading,
but also calling us to acknowledge
the blessedness that surrounds us daily
and to ourselves become holy.

While I believe such an approach is valid,
it does not strike me as either timely or appropriate
in midst of this difficult and anxious health crisis,
exacerbated by a deeply polarizing election.

In previous years, reflections on today’s gospel
sparked images of the peacemakers, the merciful, the meek
who had graced our history or crossed my personal path,
in order to reignite my own erratic spiritual journey.

However, when I read Matthew’s beatitudes today,
I wonder about the blessedness of the meek
whose concerns are drowned out by bullies and the boisterous
and whose dignity often has no advocate.
I wonder about the blessedness of the persecuted
scientists and civic leaders trying to protect our health,
swept aside by those claiming the priority of personal liberty
and erasing the common good.

I wonder about the blessedness of those who hunger and thirst
not just for righteousness,
but in these days
of such high unemployment and underemployment,
the children, the elderly, the families,
who actually hunger and thirst around meager tables,
with depleted pantries and empty wallets.

Most of all, however, I wonder about
the blessedness of those who mourn,
mourn not the mythic 144,000,
or even the very real 235,000 Covid deaths in the U.S.,
but the 1.2 million sisters and brothers around the globe
who have succumbed to this virus.

I think of those who mourn from afar,
not able to hold the hand or kiss the brow
of the parent or spouse as they journey back to God.

I think of the health care workers,
overwhelmed not only medically but emotionally
as they become the surrogate family
of those in ICUs and on ventilators.

And I think of those who mourn,
deprived of the solace of a traditional wake or funeral,
deprived of the ritual comfort of song, word and ceremony.

As I ponder those, in the words of Nathan Mitchell’s prayer,
who die alone, unloved, unmourned every day on this planet.
This feast becomes newly poignant, even difficult, for me.

The gifted pastoral theologian Herbert Anderson
coauthored a classic book on death: All our Losses, All our Griefs.

Anderson believes that the work of grieving
happens between remembering and hoping,
between building a treasured memory
and anticipating a new future.

Grieving can be understood as both a very human act
and an exercise of faith.

From the viewpoint of human development,
grieving is an attempt to fill in a gap,
to reconstruct an individual or family life
in the felt absence of a loved one.

How that occurs is different for each of us,
for the gap is unique,
the loss distinctive,
the feelings particular.

But it is also an act of faith –
as remembering and hoping in Jesus’ death and resurrection
is at the core of our belief.

A few years ago I preached at the funeral
after the sudden death of a friend.
The only daughter grieved publicly
that the “grand twins” would soon forget their grandfather
who spent so much time caring for them
in their first two years of life.

There is no doubt that the grandfather could be forgotten
if the loving memory work is abandoned.
On the other hand, when that work is done,
such a memory not only brings consolation, but even joy.

And while that might sound a little mad … maybe crazy,
suggesting that there could be joy
its own kind of blessedness in the process of mourning,
I contend that is exactly what the gospels are and do.

We call them good news: such a source of hope and joy
that we constantly sing “Alleluia” before we read them.

On the other hand, we can consider the gospels
as seriously inspired memory building,
grief work by a community who had lost their beloved Lord.

So the communities of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John
each created an enduring and living memory of Jesus
that recalled his gifts and some of his rants,
woven into a life giving memory
and enduring legacy of hope.

It’s been almost 20 years since my father died.
He was an avid and accomplished barbershopper,
having won numerous international gold medals,
sung at Carnegie Hall, and even offered a Broadway musical.

When his dear friend and favorite quartet member died,
Dad stood next to the coffin, blew his pitch pipe,
waited a moment,
and then said that he knew that Ben must be dead,
because he didn’t get up to sing.
Dad asked us to perform that ritual for him as well.
And so, before we buried him,
his children took the pitch pipe from his hand,
agreed on the pitch, and blew.

We could not hear him sing back,
and knew that he was gone from us,
so we put the pitch pipe back in his hands,
and made our farewell.

But while he did not sing back to us,
we did not believe that his song was over,
but believed with all our hearts
that it was transformed into the song of God.

Writing about the death of a friend, the poet, Mark Doty, wrote:

*“I believe with all my heart that when the chariot came for him, green and gold and rose, a band of angels swung wide out over the great flanks of the sea, bearing him up over the path of light [that] the sun makes on the face of the waters.  I believe my love is in the Jordan, which is deep and wide and welcoming, though it scours us oh so deeply.  And when he gets to the other side, I know he will be dressed in robes of comfort and gladness, his forehead will be anointed with spices, and he will sing — joyfully — into the future, and back toward the darkness of this world.”*

(Mark Doty, “Sweet Chariot,” *Wrestling with the Angel,* ed. Brian Bouldrey [Riverhead Books, 1995], 9-10.)

I believe with all my heart that our beloved dead,
this unexpected expansion of the communion of saints,
are now learning the song of the Lamb
and are singing back towards the darkness of this world.

But in order to hear them, we need to give them back to God,
to commend them to the chorus of the 144,000,
which some of us may not have been able to do properly.

*Lord our God, Receive your servant,
Lord our God, Receive your servant,
For whom you shed your blood,
You shed your blood.*    (John Bell, “Lord Our God, Receive Your Servant” [GIA Publications, 1996])

And so we invoke those powerful words of our funeral liturgy,
its final commendation
that so many were deprived of experiencing,
in these days when even death requires social distancing,

As we pray:

*Into your hands, Father of mercies,
we commend our [sisters and brothers whom you have called
to yourself in this time of ‘great distress,’
in the sure and certain hope
that together with all who have died with Christ
especially those who died alone, unloved and unmourned,
will rise with him on the last day.*

*Lord our God, Receive your servant,
Lord our God, Receive your servant,
For whom you shed your blood,
You shed your blood.*

Merciful Lord,
turn toward us and listen to our prayers;
0pen the gates of paradise to your servants,
count them among the blessed 144,000,
and help those of us who remain
to comfort one another with assurances of faith,
until we all meet in Christ
and are with you and our beloved forever and ever.

*Lord our God, Receive your servant.*