“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair …, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way …”

The introduction to Charles Dickens novel, *A Tale of Two Cities* seems so fitting for today’s readings even though Dickens is describing a period of history far removed from biblical times.

- It was the best of times as the Prophet Isaiah describes: “I have grasped you by the hand; I formed you, and set you as a covenant of the people, a light for the nations, To open the eyes of the blind, to bring out prisoners from confinement, and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness” (42:6-7).

- It was the worst of times. The Gospel writer John tells us that Judas, the thief who steals from the money bag, will betray Jesus. And the chief priests want to kill not only Jesus but Lazarus as well (Jn 12:1-11).

Amidst the worldwide pandemic, we see the best in people, the heroic sacrifice, the conversion of hearts and minds, and foolish though it may sound, one might describe it as the **best of times**. We are grateful for doctors and nurses and hospital chaplains on the front lines. We appreciate the grocery store clerk, the mail man, the short order cook who brighten our day by their willingness to work and help us with much needed food and packages.

God has not abandoned us. Amidst the isolation and the uncertain possibility of death, he walks with us. “A bruised reed he shall not break, and a smoldering wick he shall not quench” (Is 42:32). The Prophet Isaiah continues: “I have grasped you by the hand …to bring out prisoners from confinement, and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness” (42:6-7). There are efforts around the country and around the world to release some prisoners from confinement early or to allow others to stay at home under electronic monitoring.

Those who are truly liberated allow God to take them by the hand and lead them out of the prison of their own sinfulness. He was serving a 27-year sentence for crimes he acknowledges committing when Federal Inmate Number 83582-180 wrote:

> It is just a number to be forgotten in time. But Mr. Patrick Estell Jones is a very good person. Caring, hard-working, free and clean of drugs and a lot smarter now, with a balanced outlook on life.

> I feel that my conviction and sentence was also a punishment that my child has had to endure also and there are no words for how remorseful I am. Years of ‘I am sorry’ don’t seem to justify the absence of a father or the chance of having purpose in life by raising my child.

Patrick has died of the coronavirus but his contrition reminds us of Dismas who asks Jesus from his own cross: “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And the merciful Jesus responds: “Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:42-43).

It is the worst of times. On Palm Sunday and on Good Friday this week, we listen to two different Passion narratives. We hear of the sinfulness of Judas, Peter, the apostles, the chief priests, and the mobs who turn on Jesus to free Barabbas. And if we are careful to examine our own conscience’s, we may contritely admit our own sinfulness as well.

It is the best of times, for in admitting our sinfulness, asking God for forgiveness, and trying to do better, we acknowledge our Redeemer and accept the gift of his mercy. It is the age of wisdom. It is the epoch of belief. It is the season of Light. It is the spring of hope.

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