Hello

Firstly I hope you are all ok and are not getting too down in this isolation. I would like to start with a reading from Philippians 4:10-13:

*I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it.**I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.**I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.**I can do all this through him who gives me strength. Philippians 4:10-13*

Great words in our current situation, I so wish that I could live by them every day. The truth is that on Saturday morning I woke up and thought what is the point of today – I may as well stay in bed. I have good days and bad days. But I got up and Jamie and I did our virtual service. It’s lovely when I ring you in the week and you tell me about what you thought of the service and readings and what music you’ve listened to - thank you. One reason that I suggested that we do this on Saturday is so that we can all watch the BBC service on Sunday. It’s great that this is another experience that we can share, even when we are apart.

If you did any of the services last weekend, you will know that the reading was about doubting Thomas, although I discovered this week that this name is inaccurate. Paula Gooder, who is a very clever Christian, tells us that the original passage did not mention doubting at all. The Greek word in 20:27 is apistos, which means unbelieving. Jesus says therefore….. “don’t be unbelieving, be believing’ This came as a huge relief to me and I imagine that it may be the same for you. Jesus doesn’t criticise those who doubt. So if you are struggling (like me at times) - if you feel that doubting is the best you can offer - that’s ok. We all doubt that God is there sometimes and we all doubt that He could possibly love us.

I doubt that I’m doing enough and I doubt that I’m being effective, which really gets me down. Thomas was more than a doubter, He was an unbeliever – but even so Jesus responded to Him graciously and with love. Jesus seems to be ok with Thomas asking to stick his hand in Jesus’ wound – I believe Jesus is saying ‘If that’s what you need, put your hand here.. I’m ok with that.’ There doesn’t appear to be any rebuking at all. So let’s be honest with God about how we feel at present.

I am constantly having to remind myself that there are some good aspects to the current situation, we have blessings to count. Jamie and I are able to spend lots of time together, that usually only happens when we’re on holiday. We are making time to pray properly together each morning. Our son Chris was a stay at home dad for the first three weeks and he was loving it – him and the children were being really creative and enjoying the time together. We’ve been able to face time our grandchildren more than we usually would. Our daughter Kelly who is on the front line is well. We’ve had the chance to allow God to come into our lives, to stop doing things constantly and to spend time building our relationship with Him. I’ve been listening to other preachers on YouTube so I’m being fed.

But of course there are costs to the current situation. “MOPpers”. Middle of the Path persons who walk, run or cycle in the middle of the path at the back of our house, forcing us to dive into the bushes to keep far enough away from them. If we walk on the busy path with Lucy, we can come back feeling very stressed. We have now found the beauty of the Dene in Newburn and Throckley, which is less crowded and a much more enjoyable place to walk. One time we were in the Dene and Lucy ran off so I shouted for her. We then heard a voice shouting ‘Is that Allison?’ It was Stuart with Isaac and he realised that it was me just from hearing me shouting the word ‘Lucy’! So was that my dulcet tones or the naughty dog he recognised? Probably a bit of both. It was great to see him and Isaac, smiling as he was carried on his Daddy’s back. When we’ve seen others while we are out, it has been such a joy to stop and talk (at a safe distance of course).

On Easter Sunday I rang people to wish them a Happy Easter but after calling a few people I had to stop because I burst into tears. It wasn’t right not to be together to celebrate that our Lord had risen. Easter is the most special time for me in the Christian calendar; it was the first time that I had not been in church on Easter Sunday in over 30 years and I know that for some of you will it will be even longer. This time has reminded me that we are called to be the body of God, to be in communion with each other, to live as a Christian family. We are the body of Christ and without each other we are less.

If we read the Bible, there is encouragement in seeing that we are by no means the only generation of God’s people to face difficulties. The Israelites were in slavery in Egypt, Job suffered terribly and the early church was scattered and persecuted. When I feel the frustration of not having opportunities to speak to people about Jesus, I remind myself that Paul – whose whole life was about taking the gospel to new people – was imprisoned and limited to praying and writing letters. (He also could not be sure whether people would be bringing him food, so he had a lot more to worry about than me!)

So we are not the first to suffer but I am looking forward to us all being together. I have also reflected how life becomes dominated with activity, for me as much as anyone else in church. Why do I not get time to see friends? Why do I not get time to listen to other people preach? One thing I want to do with the rest of the lockdown time is to prayerfully consider the things that I spend my time on: what does God want me to do less of and what does he want me to do more of, once we can be with other people again?

I am praying for this to end soon, but I doubt that it will….. I’m so sorry that so many of you are living on your own. Thank you for your chats each week. I’m finding myself being so much more emotional than usual, crying at good news stories, crying that I can’t worship with you all and that I can’t see you and hug you.

Thank you to those of you who contacted me to let me know about giving to the foodbank. As a church we sent £1,060 to the food bank the week after Easter. If you didn’t get in touch with me, don’t worry - just keep hold of your money until we are together again.

Many of you are asking about your giving. If you give in packets, please keep them for when we get back together - we still have all of our bills to pay. If you give through the Parish Giving Scheme and don’t increase your giving with inflation automatically, please consider this. The increase will only be 2.7% so, if you give £100 per month, this figure will go up to £102.70. If you give £100,000 per month, this figure will go up to £102,700. You will be contacted each year to ask if you are happy to make the increase. Jamie and I have done this and it stops us from forgetting about our giving. If you’re still giving what you did 5 or 10 years ago then in real terms your giving will have gone down. We often don’t consider that our giving should increase with every increase in our salary, pension, etcetera.

As part of our worship when we come together I’d like everybody to draw round both of their hands and cut out the drawing. Then write your name on one side and decorate the other side in any way that you want (paint, glitter, collage whatever). Bring the hands with you on that great day when we are able to worship together again.

There is a quotation I’ve seen, there is some debate as to its authorship, some attributing it to C.S. Lewis and some to Catholic priest Jerome Zeiler. Whoever it comes from, it is highly appropriate for this time:

*Satan: I will cause anxiety, fear and panic. I will shut down business, schools, places of worship, and sports events. I will cause economic turmoil.*

*Jesus: I will bring together neighbours, restore the family unit, I will bring dinner back to the kitchen table. I will help people slow down their lives and appreciate what really matters. I will teach my children to rely on me and not the world. I will teach my children to trust me and not their money and material resources.*

I hope this speaks to you as together we consider and pray about our life and about what really matters.

