

As most of you will have noticed the church looks a bit different this morning. The calendar may say the 3rd Sunday in Lent but we have moved into Holy Week. As I followed the guidance yesterday to wipe surfaces and ensure good hand hygiene I prayerfully did what I would normally do on Maundy Thursday I stripped the church in preparation for Good Friday. But with a difference I have also brought in our Easter candle and David's lovely daffodils for us to enjoy. We may now be in Holy Week, the limbo, the waiting as the Covid-19 pandemic unfolds. But we are in our hearts Easter people who in the midst of anxiety and suffering hold fast to the promise and hope of new life, of resurrection. So today we are in Holy Week however long it lasts.

To say that I found it difficult to know where to start a sermon this week is an understatement. And I have preached at some very difficult times in the past; the start of the Gulf War, the aftermath of 9/11 and perhaps most relevant the foot and mouth outbreak in 2001 when I was Rector in rural Shropshire. But this is different, then it was animals and livelihoods, today it is still livelihoods but it is us, our lives at risk. I berate the lectionary fairly regularly but it could not have given us more appropriate readings for this Sunday.

In the Old Testament the Israelites fleeing Egypt are stranded in the hostile environment of the desert. They fear for their lives. They need life. They need water the thing most necessary for our physical survival: we can last longer without food than we can without water and so as the reading tells: ***the Israelites quarrelled and tested the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'*** A question many of us have been asking ourselves as the Covid-19 pandemic has expanded before our very eyes.

The Gospel story of the Samaritan Woman at the well also speaks to the situation we are now facing. Last week we had Nicodemus's secret night time encounter with Jesus a lesson of God's love and purposes, and the grace we need to respond openly to them. This week, we sit with Jesus in the bright heat of the noonday sun beating on our heads, and we realize that we are thirsty, profoundly thirsty, just as the Israelites were in the desert. We fear for our lives. We need life.

But this is a story is not just about two individuals, Jesus and the Samaritan woman, it is a story of community just as it was for the Israelites. This is a story of social isolation, quite the buzz word just now. The woman, unnamed

as are many key women in the Bible, this woman lives her whole life in social isolation. She is here at the well in the heat of the noon day sun because she is not welcome to join the other women who fetch water in the cool of the dawn or early evening. This woman had no companionship to ease the burden of her work. She is one of societies' outcasts but she is also an outcast in relation to Jesus. In the first century, there were rules about how Jesus, a Jewish male and a teacher, too, should interact with people, especially Samaritan women. The Jews and the Samaritans are like feuding cousins. Like all feuds, there are probably many different, complicated reasons for it, but religion helps to make each group feel more justified in judging and avoiding and maybe even hating other groups of people. And this scene unfolds by a deep well that provides the thing most necessary for our physical survival water. Jesus needs this woman, this outcast, to help quench his very human thirst. She helps him and in return Jesus reaches out to her in love and compassion to draw her back into the community.

St Paul, writing to the Romans, is his usual straight forward self. Basically telling it like it is! ***we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.***

So where does this Scripture leave us in the difficult weeks and months to come. Are we like the Israelites quarrelling among ourselves? Selfishly panic buying rather than considering the needs of others? Are we left asking ourselves '**Is the Lord among us or not?**' Will we allow or even encourage our communities to fragment, to be torn apart? Will social isolation become so embedded in our society that many of us older folk will end up like the Samaritan woman, outcast and alone? Or will we learn to share and ease each other's burdens. I simply do not know the answer but I hope and pray that we will find the Lord among us as this pandemic unfolds. I hope and pray we will discover our very best selves to hold our communities together. I stand with Paul in believing that ***hope does not disappoint us.***

I opened this service by saying that we have moved into Holy Week without the celebrations of Palm Sunday, having to cancel a lunch is a small price to pay in this situation. Holy Week, especially Maundy Thursday, Good Friday

and Holy Saturday, Holy Week is a time of waiting, a time unknowing when all you can do is sit at the foot of the cross, sit with the suffering of others and pray. Pray for ourselves, our communities and cling to the ***hope that does not disappoint us***. Just now this is where we are, Easter is a long, long way off just a distance hope on the horizon. For now we sit at the foot of the cross, looking after each other with care and compassion. 20 years ago during foot and mouth we did not celebrate Easter until the middle of summer when the last of my churches reopened but it was worth waiting for. In that time, like so many other times of trial, anxiety and fear, ***hope did not desert or disappoint us***.

But there are things we need to talk about, decisions we need to make. Churches will close eventually and in many countries they already have closed, including all churches across Shetland. The guidance from the Bishops says that: The SEC recognises that in certain circumstances, a local decision may be taken to suspend services. I think given the age and circumstances of our own congregation here at St Paul's we need to make that decision, perhaps sooner rather than later. We need to make it together considering each other's needs. We are having coffee this morning so this would be a good time to talk it over after serving ourselves and while maintaining that respectful distance. The SEC has plans for broadcasting services in hand, I have set up a FaceBook page for St Paul's, Strathnairn, we have a web site already and I even joined WhatsApp so we could have a group there. There is much we can do to hold our community together and care for each other. It just may not be here on a Sunday morning. The Palm Sunday lunch cannot go ahead but I don't see why those who are happy to can't meet to work outside next Saturday.

These are tough times ahead, we are very likely to be sitting at the foot of the Covid-19 cross for many weeks, if not months. Some of us will be in the thick of it working hard in the health service or trying to hold families and businesses together. Some of us, myself included, will need to choose self-isolation to one degree or another because we are vulnerable to this disease. But we sit at the foot of this cross together, as a Christian presence across our communities. What ever happens we need to hold fast to the ***hope in Christ Jesus that does not disappoint. Amen***