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Dear Friends

For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you (Chronicles 14b).

There is a silence in Rectory Close not heard for weeks. There are no car doors slamming outside the medical centre, no thwack of balls from the tennis club, no sound of children playing or adults chatting, and the road beyond is quiet. The church is locked, the hall is locked and here am I gazing at the place where some of us worship and chatter over cups of coffee to write to you ahead of our Dedication and Gift Day Sunday. Tomorrow should be the day to celebrate the mission and ministry of our churches to give thanks for all that has been and to pray for the future. It should be the day when in gratitude for all that we have enjoyed we give back to God a portion of the many gifts God has given us.

If only the churches were open so we could dedicate them and ourselves to God's service once more. If only we, God's people beloved and perhaps even chosen, could meet. But we must learn patience, again. Some of us are frustrated. We want to get on with our lives. We want to spend time with our families. We fear family weddings will be cancelled again. We are sad the couple whose marriage I conducted yesterday were not even permitted to hold a reception but stood in the car park munching sandwiches after the service. We are disappointed that there will be no receptions after funerals in the coming weeks, no All Souls Memorial Service and no large gathering to honour the fallen on Remembrance Sunday. Oh and let's be honest we just want to live a little, start Christmas shopping and see our grandchildren at half term. Of course we say we want to save businesses, prevent unemployment but we would be the first to weep if this virus spiralled out of control and our loved ones died yet we are struggling to see how a "Firebreak" will save the health and prosperity of our nation. And where is God in this?



When times are hard, when we are suffering, when we look death in the face or see those dear to us suffer or die then, with Jesus, we find ourselves uttering those heart-rending words "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" We want answers to this haunting question and when we get none and the silence is deafening we concoct our half-baked theologies to explain away our pain or grief. I'm sure you've heard a few already for they are doing the rounds even propagating the myth that Covid is a sign of the end of time or that we are being punished for human sinfulness. Others see Covid as an opportunity to encourage their friends to turn to Jesus. Surely we didn't need a pandemic for that!

Some of you know that when I die mourners will sing "There's a wideness in God's mercy" (to the tune Coverdale) and listen to fragments from the book of Job and the ending of Mark's gospel. I love the Book of Job. From its beginning the reader is in on a secret; Job's predicament has nothing to do with his sinfulness. The Book of Job carefully explains why Covid is not God's call to repentance. Whilst Job longs for justice and someone to stand between himself and God, he discovers there are more joys and sorrows in heaven and on earth than his friends' rotten theology can dream up. There is no satisfactory explanation to the problem of evil and no happy ending, well not unless you believe having more children is a replacement for the ones who die. Job receives no answer, only a sense of awe and mystery as he stands in God's presence. In the agony of loss, Job's so called comforters are useless. As Mark's gospel ends the grief stricken disciples face an empty tomb and are commanded to go back to Galilee "for that is where they will find him". They are sent back into the rough and tumble of life where they find Him in moments of inclusion, forgiveness, and love.

The Hebrew bibles, and our Christian scriptures, speak in two distinct ways. Firstly, we hear the story of Israel. God's people are called to work with God in rescuing humanity and restoring creation. Alongside this there is the story of the human race infecting creation with its greed, idolatry and injustice. Narrative after narrative speaks of the way in which people have to suffer, to enter into darkness, even exile before they can emerge into new life. In the life, death and resurrection of God's Christ we see with hindsight that there has always been a darkness that tries to undo all God's handiwork. Evil, stalks creation. None of us, if Job is to be believed and if Jesus teaches us anything, understands this. Like it or not Covid may well be our teacher too.

So perhaps weeping with those who weep, lamenting the situation we find ourselves in and giving thanks not just for the NHS but for all who are caring, and putting themselves at risk is the right response to this pandemic. We cannot and must not use Covid as an excuse to wheel out ancient myths or shoddy theology. It should not take a pandemic for us to share our faith with others. When we feel healthy but may be carrying a killer virus, when our churches are shut and we must cover our faces to go shopping, when we see our neighbours as a threat and we cannot gather publicly, let alone pray with those who are suffering, then with Job and with Christ we can only offer our prayers of lament knowing there are no easy answers.

So how shall we live now, in the present, as Christians? This is the question, in all our lockdown frustration we should be posing. This is the question we must ask rather than mourn the closure of our churches this weekend. On that first Easter Day, when the doors were closed and tears of grief and despair flowed, a new world began. As the first disciples made their way back to Galilee they focussed not on floods and famines, on locusts and disease, they did not try to frighten people into belief but, in the rough and tumble of their lives, they saw little glimpses of their friend who in an upper room and at a last supper commanded them to do the same. And so it was they tried to shape their lives after His; they tried to live as He lived.

It is well documented that in the great plagues of the early centuries Christians put their lives at risk caring for the population. They built the first hospitals and hospices, and they made education available for the poor. In days gone by, disease was a given and Christians rolled up their sleeves and tended the sick and many paid the price. Is it enough to lock our doors, count on the health service, say our prayers at home and hand over the task of caring to others? No it is not. We are called to open our eyes and unstop our ears and recognise that God does not need our church buildings, love them though we do, for his work of healing and saving to go on. God is in the midst of this pandemic on the frontline, teaching our children, healing our sick, burying our dead, weeping with those who weep, delivering medicines and shopping to those who need it and simply lifting a phone to ears to support friends and neighbours. Despite the closed doors of our churches we can and will seek to protect and save the vulnerable.

Perhaps this makes no sense to you? "How", you ask, "can we feel the power of the Church when we gather tomorrow for a live streamed Eucharist?" Is this the real thing, when the music is grainy and the bread is ordinary? We feel like those who wept in exile by the waters of Babylon. Yes, we are grieving for normality.

Here and there voices suggest that when this is over we will find renewal. But how? Will we value our key workers as never before? Will we be willing to pay our nurses, emergency workers teachers and delivery drivers more? Will we walk and cycle more to save our planet and for the health of our nation? And how will we raise to new life those whose jobs and livelihoods are lost and who see no light at the end of this tunnel?

If as Christians we believe in a God who is love, that we are not suffering because of an angry god, then how shall we respond? Surely, when it's over we cannot just return to life as before? Have we learned something, have we learned anything? I write from the comfort of a warm and dry Rectory. I'm not fearful and hungry or living in a refugee camp. This is a minor nuisance right now. Others are suffering in ways I cannot imagine.

Could it be that this strange season is an opportunity? Is 2020 my opportunity to be thankful, to pray, to change, to turn myself afresh to God and to our hurting world?

When God's people corporately and individually have looked death in the face they have been raised to new life, from exile, from the grave and from the sinfulness that would destroy them; we see this in both the Hebrew bible and the life of Christ. In the recent months our churches have reached out in love and service both to those who love our buildings and those who never darken their doors. And now this weekend we give thanks for all that our churches mean to us.

Tomorrow we shall read 1 Chronicles 29. 6-19. As David's kingdom and crown passes to Solomon, he affirms his son and challenges the community to bring themselves and their gifts to his young and inexperienced successor. But firstly, to encourage the community to be generous, David gives his own personal fortune for the building of the temple and the people respond enthusiastically. In his prayer of thanksgiving he says "but who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to make this freewill offering?" David knows that, despite being aliens moving towards a Promised Land, Israel's life and Israel's offerings are entirely dependent on God. The land though promised of old to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is not Israel's property. They are passing through. At his last, David names this truth as he gives back to God what is rightly God's for the building of God's house and David prays that his son will keep God's commandments

I hope this Sunday we will be inspired by this and the other chosen texts (Ephesians 2.19-22 and John 2.13-22) as we offer our churches and ourselves back to God and respond with generous hearts. Perhaps the closure of our doors is not so much threat or punishment but opportunity to open our hearts to God, to each other and to this hurting world we live in.

With my love in Christ,

Vicki

(Pictures taken in the grounds of Christ Church this morning by one of Cardiff's Photography Group – showing the wonders of God's Creation.)

