

Palm Sunday 2020

*Whenever you pray, go into your room
and shut the door and pray to your
Father who is in secret.*

I have been thinking back to our last major social event, our Pancake Party, which we had just before Lent on Shrove Tuesday. It was a typical, parish get-together involving a good meal, deliciously produced pancakes, and then the inevitable raffle and a game of bingo. It all seems a very long time ago now.

The following day at our Ash Wednesday services the Gospel was taken from the sixth chapter of St Matthew's Gospel which

includes this verse, ‘Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you’.

In the second half of Lent this year this verse has proved to be particularly prophetic. In the middle of March, we were advised to introduce precautions in our worship to protect ourselves from the Coronavirus. So, we did not share the Chalice at Holy Communion and we ceased from exchanging the sign of peace.

But no sooner were we becoming used to these restrictions on our usual practice, than public worship was suspended altogether,

and then a week later, our churches closed not only for worship, but also for private prayer.

We then have had no other choice than to go to our own rooms, shut the door, and pray privately, confident nevertheless that our heavenly Father who sees in secret will reward us.

This sudden change in the middle of this penitential season to a time of quiet, reflective and private prayer, has probably come as a shock to many of us. Our extensive programme of extra services and events, including our midweek lunches, our services of Compline, and the weekly Lent

course, have all been subject to cancellation, as we have attempted to stay at home, save lives, and protect the NHS.

Although this is an unprecedented time for everyone, many will have experienced something similar when the usual round of activities in our lives have been altered, perhaps because of sickness or bereavement. Anyone who has had a serious illness will know how hospital appointments, test results, and medication can take over our lives and become all that we are able to think about. In these present circumstances, we are being asked to stay at home, not because we are necessarily having to contend with our own health problems,

but to protect ourselves and others from catching the virus.

In the late 1980s, the Archbishop of Canterbury's envoy, Terry Waite, was kidnapped and spent nearly five years in a room on his own, blindfolded and chained to a wall, and was only allowed out for five minutes each day. He has said that in the current situation we must adopt the mindset of not 'stuck at home', but 'safe at home'.

This time of isolation could be a time when we focus on our spiritual lives and develop a particular way of praying which may mirror how we might encounter God, as if we were on a retreat. We can therefore perhaps seek

out God in the silence and the unusual quiet of our own homes. We read often of how Jesus sustained himself through prayer: ‘very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.’ (Mark 1. 35). And again, ‘the news about Jesus spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.’ (Luke 5. 15-16).

So, at this time when we are obliged to be in our own houses, with the doors locked and very limited contact with others, let us endeavour to make it a time when we can

draw nearer to God, asking him to sustain and encourage us.

The Way of the Cross

It is already clear that Holy Week this year is going to be like no other we have ever experienced. Even if in the past, you have been unable to take part in any or most of the services in this week, you would on those occasions at least, have had the reassurance that the Christian community was at worship on your behalf. In 2020, however, it is our current isolation that will dictate how we keep these important days in the Church's year.

Since the suspension of public worship, there has been a great amount of writing in church circles which has spoken of our current situation being a great opportunity to ‘rethink Church’ or to ‘do Church differently’.

While I am sure that the intention behind these sentiments is positive and well-meaning, it ignores the fact that many of us will feel particularly bereft and disorientated by being unable to meet together and celebrate the great days of our salvation, which the observance of Holy Week usually affords us. It is more than reasonable that we should lament the absence of our Holy Week liturgies this year. These services are

not only about re-reading the passion narratives, or even about drawing close to them prayerfully, rather the liturgy, especially in Holy Week, is about what we *do* together; it is primarily about meeting and joining with each other in worship.

But as we are so restricted in what we can do in Holy Week 2020, we must accept and make the best of our situation.

At Christmas we often hear the phrase in the Bidding Prayer at carol services, ‘let us go in heart and mind even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, and the Babe lying in a manger’. At the beginning of this Holy Week, it is essential

that we now go ‘in heart and mind’ even to the Mount of Olives, to Jerusalem, to the Upper Room, to Gethsemane, and then to Calvary; to live out, as best we can, the transforming events of this week, and to worship God with hearts and minds renewed.

I hope you have all received a copy of the Bible readings for Holy Week, and as well as these you will be able to find the Passion narratives set out in the Book of Common Prayer. The Prayer Book has St Matthew’s account on Palm Sunday and the passion from St John’s Gospel on Good Friday. In addition, St Mark’s account is given on

Monday and Tuesday, and St Luke's passion on Wednesday and Thursday.

If you have access to the internet, there is a great variety of resources for worship, with many services being live-streamed and a library of devotional material available as well. If you can't access the internet, do consider tuning in to the worship which is available on the television and radio during Holy Week and on Easter Day.

Among the many programmes being broadcast, there is 'Easter from King's' on BBC 2 with music and readings from King's College, Cambridge, with the world-famous

choir singing some of the best-loved choral music for the season.

On Easter Sunday a special edition of Sunday Worship will air on BBC 1, with an Easter service coming from Bangor Cathedral in Wales, and also on BBC 1, *Urbi et Orbi* will see Pope Francis delivering his Easter Message and Blessing, live from St Peter's in Rome.

On BBC radio there is an assortment of spiritual and traditional music called 'At the foot of the Cross' on Radio 2 on Good Friday, and the Archbishop of Canterbury leads Radio 4's Easter Sunday Worship,

while Prayer for the Day will continue throughout Easter.

During the Coronavirus crisis, there will also be a virtual church service on Sunday mornings across local radio in England, led initially by the Archbishop of Canterbury, as well as the regular broadcasts of Songs of Praise on BBC 1 and Choral Evensong on Radio 3.

This year we will need to walk the Way of the Cross alone, or perhaps only with those in our households, and below there are the fourteen traditional Stations of the Cross, with Biblical references for meditation at home, which I hope you might find helpful.

The voice of prayer is never silent

Throughout these strange and anxious times, it is important that we maintain our bonds of love and fellowship through daily prayer for each other.

In the daily news conferences, the government has said that it wants to wrap its arms around all in our country who are struggling through the social distancing we are experiencing, as well as those who are battling the illness itself.

This image of arms being wrapped around the nation is a strong one, and it is one which must be true of ourselves as a

worshipping community in this place.

Through the prayer of the Church, we must wrap our arms around those who are struggling in our town, our Diocese, our nation and the world; and especially at this time for those who are sick and for those who care for them.

In my prayers, I am continuing to use the daily cycle of prayer for the streets of our Parish, and I have also begun to pray regularly by name for all on our electoral roll in these uncertain times. Each day the prayer of the church is said, and the Mass is offered for all in our parish and in this town.

As we celebrate Holy Week each in our own private rooms and houses this year, may we be assured that the Lord walks with us day by day, as we join with him on the way to Calvary.

Jesus has told us that ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me’, let us do that this Holy Week and look forward to the time when we will worship together again, and be glad when we can once more return to the house of the Lord.

Stations of the Cross

First Station

Jesus is condemned to death
John 19. 14-16

Second Station

Jesus takes up his Cross
John 19. 17

Third Station

Jesus falls for the first time
Isaiah 53. 4-6

Fourth Station

Jesus meets his mother
Luke 2. 34-35, 51

Fifth Station

Simon helps Jesus to carry his Cross
Matthew 27.32 & 16.24

Sixth Station
Veronica wipes the face of Jesus
Psalm 27. 8-9

Seventh Station
Jesus falls for the second time
Isaiah 50. 6-7

Eight Station
Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem
Luke 23. 28-31

Ninth Station
Jesus falls for the third time
Lamentations 3. 27-32

Tenth Station
Jesus is stripped of his garments
Matthew 27. 33-36

Eleventh Station
Jesus is nailed to the Cross
Matthew 27. 37-42

Twelfth Station
Jesus dies on the Cross
Matthew 27. 45-50, 54

Thirteenth Station
Jesus is taken down from the Cross
John 19. 32-34, 38

Fourteenth Station
Jesus is laid in the tomb
Matthew 27. 59-61