

Mothering Sunday: 22 March 2020

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts give glory to the living God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

So, a happy Mothering Sunday to you all. And a special greeting to all mothers, grandmothers, Godmothers and others who are finding today particularly challenging, since you cannot gather together with those you love. Today, the fourth Sunday in Lent, Laetare Sunday, is supposed to be a day for rejoicing. But I suspect, like me, you're more likely to focus on those words from today's Gospel: "A sword will pierce your own soul too." Prophetic words from Simeon, warning Mary of the sorrow that is to come. But what fitting words for our day, when so many of us are fearful about daily life, about the virus, about the kind of the world that might emerge at the end of it all.

Of course I am greatly encouraged by people's stoic resolution and determination to make the most of this time: Pamela tells me our garden will be worth a Chelsea medal by the end of the summer! There's certainly something about the current scenario that mirrors Jesus' wilderness experience. We've all been given space - the retreat some of us have longed for, and some of us have been nervous to try. With time to catch up: I intend to clear my email inbox, read some of the books that have been piling up; re-fill my fountain pen to write some letters, maybe even a journal. Time also to do those things that Lent is meant for: spending more time in reflection, prayer, contemplation; renewing my relationship with God. Now is the time to deepen trust.

But that is not to overlook the underlying worry facing the nation, including those who have major concerns about their financial future, and the many in our cathedral community who will be particularly vulnerable at this time. You are much in our thoughts and prayers, and we are very conscious that the Gospel teaches us that the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ has particular compassion for those who are weak, or suffering or afraid. "Come to me," says Jesus, "all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

The issue that's been exercising me above all this week is the one of Christian community. For in the past I have pooh-poohed those people who have claimed: "I don't need to go to church to be a Christian." My argument's long been that our calling is to be part of a community that forms us, upholds us, challenges us, loves us; and that together we become the Body of Christ in today's world. That's what Church is. So how does that work when the very same Church tells us not to come together, to stay at home, and suspends public worship, telling us we must become a different kind of Church? It goes without saying that I hope we are all following this instruction, not just for our own safety of course, but out of love for our neighbour, and for the wellbeing of our world.

It's very rare in our cathedral's history: public worship being suspended. Diane Walker's been doing some research. 400 years ago attendance at sermons was restricted when the plague struck

Exeter. That's the only previous occurrence we know of in peace time. During the Civil War, we closed for 9 months initially, and then for a further 14 years from 1646. Possibly worship ceased following the arrival of William of Orange in 1688 - we know Dean Annesley fled from Exeter in alarm at his approach. And during the Second World War, following the bomb, Morning and Evening Prayer were said privately in St Edmund's Chapel just by the entrance, with public worship transferring to the Deanery opposite and to the Green outside. But now in 2020, something I'm sure we've never even dreamed of: for the time being the people of Exeter Cathedral can no longer be the gathered people of God.

But that does not mean we have to abandon our ideas of Christian community. We just have to re-think and re-shape them for our current situation. We believe of course in the communion of saints, that we are all one in Christ, and that is true even without physical connection. So when we pray as one, we bolster the community and become more conscious of it. That's why we hope as many of you as possible are joining in with morning prayer at 10 o'clock each day and evening prayer at 3.30. That's why we hope you'll be able to join our live stream of worship each Sunday at 10. And there will be further opportunities for worship on line in the near future. The people of Exeter Cathedral as one battering heaven with their prayers goes a very long way to strengthen the community, and to build a prayerful rhythm into our day. A chance to rediscover just how powerful that can be.

The other thing we can do as a Christian community is to keep in touch with one another. Thank God for modern technology. Not just the telephone but the computer as well. Lifelines in these difficult days. Previous plagues have not been blessed in these ways - nor indeed with the National Health Service. So please give thanks in your prayer for all scientists and doctors and nurses and those on the front line caring for us all. And of course pray for the Prime Minister and Government with such tough decisions to make.

When it comes to keeping in touch, please take a moment to think about those you know from the cathedral who'd love to hear from you. Or who may need some shopping dropped off. This is not the time to be shy about making contact. Please be sure to let Chris Palmer know if you are poorly or self-isolating. I think what I'm saying is that through this crisis, we need to make more time for the community, rather than less, while staying safe at home. This is our opportunity to grow in prayer, grow in trust, grow in love and grow in compassion. Precisely those qualities that we would usually think about and celebrate on this Mothering Sunday. But today we see them in a new light.

I'm really sad we cannot be together physically here this morning, but I pray you will all have a peaceful and joyful day. And please pray for all of us who are seeking to keep the cathedral open and running as best we're able.

Jonathan Greener