

April 2020 – Letter to the Vale of Stour Churches



Dear Brothers and Sisters
Amidst the terrible daily loss, risk and isolation of coronavirus many of you will have family and friends who are affected. We hold them and our local communities in our prayers.

In the face of such suffering across the world we hold in tension our understanding of God as all present, all knowing and all powerful set against the clear reality of suffering caused time-and-again, through human action (or inaction) - from

human trafficking to global resource exploitation, or by the capricious nature of the natural world as it continues to evolve – whether that be through plate tectonics and volcanoes or the microscopic scale of infectious diseases.

There are no easy answers here and many books by theologians far more clever than us have been written about the Christian understanding of suffering. Sadly, I heard someone suggest that covid-19 was some kind of judgement by God. We clearly need to be very careful of this kind of dangerous theology and language in relation to a virus that randomly infects people. The premature death of an elderly person or an innocent child are not part of God's nature, purpose or plan. This is not the God of the cross that Jesus showed us.

It is natural and right that when we face events like this we cling to the hope that God is in control, yet at the same time if God were to step in and stop every infection, every accident just before it happened or calm every storm even before it grew, or stop each selfish thought as it emerged in our heads - then all of the processes of creation, our thinking and our lives would grind to a halt. There would be no suffering, but there would also be no life.

God knows all that is and will-be and yet at the same time has given freedom to us and creation. God wants us to freely choose to follow Jesus for it is our free choice that makes our love of God genuine. And so perhaps we begin to see that suffering is integral to that freedom – our freedom to love or not love, to care or not care, and creation's creative freedom to grow and change.

Of course much of the suffering we see could be avoided or lessened if we were not so greedy or short sighted in how we treat this planet and each other. It is within our power to feed, house and treat all people but we do not. This is squarely our responsibility not God's.

All of this may be little comfort to those of us who have lost someone **so at the heart of God's answer to suffering is, of course, the cross** - the place where God in Christ voluntarily laid down his life and suffered for the sake of the world. God knows the very heart of our suffering and whilst Jesus does not take our suffering away he offers to travel through our suffering *with* us.

Uniquely in Christ, hope and suffering walk hand in hand. Being a Christian is to be a co-heir with Christ, to enter into his suffering, to see and know how his heart is poured out for those in need. Being a Christian is about engaging in the suffering of the world believing and knowing that God's grace is sufficient to redeem it, to bring goodness and salvation out of the very worst of circumstances and to sustain hope when all around seems dark and lost. Karl Barth, in the face of Nazi oppression, reminds us that 'in the cross we may take confidence that God's grace ultimately triumphs over evil even if that is difficult to see today.'

As we face a broken world and pray for those affected by coronavirus, may our prayer be one of thanks that God in Christ has provided a pathway not out of but through this chaos. Christ's hands flung wide, suspended by cruel nails and cradled in the loving arms of the Holy Spirit show that the wisdom of God is not our wisdom or way. God, whose response to our violence is self-sacrifice, offers us overwhelming and all-embracing love. May our response be to enter into the struggle and rededicate all that we are to God – father, son and Holy Spirit. **Amen**

May God bless you and keep you safe. **Rev Alan Combes**

Psalm 27:1-2 The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

News from around the circuit:

Caring and supporting each other: We recognise many of our folk are not on email. We have done our best to establish telephone and paper based pastoral support networks across all our churches. You should be receiving calls and over Easter we distributed more than 400 paper booklets. With this letter you should also receive another booklet in paper or electronic format. Please call your minister if you are not being contacted.

Requests for Help: Rev Josephine has kindly offered to be our central contact person for anyone who is not online but who may need help. Please feel free to call her on: 01384 821854

Foodbank Support: Our local foodbanks are struggling without their regular donations. One alternative option a number of churches have explored is to gather financial gifts/pledges and then to make a financial donation instead.

VoS Virtual Church: Whilst recognising not everyone has a computer... with a lot of hard work in a short time we have created - VoSWorship. On Easter Day we had over 80 connections, our server struggled and we know that some people's experience was not so good. We want to thank you for your perseverance. We are working right now on a solution which will remove all of these problems so watch out for an email update and/or **keep an eye on the Virtual Church Tab of the circuit web-site.**

Meanwhile, last Sunday morning there were TWO wonderful services led by the Rev Michael Payne and most folk had a better connection.

Circuit Website Resources for home worship and activity: If you can – take the time to visit our wonderful circuit web-site which has many links to services and resources that you may find helpful in isolation - as well as a new 'Virtual Church' tab with links to our online worship space.

WhatsApp Broadcast - Thought for the Day: This group was started across the circuit for Lent and by popular demand has continued. If you would like to join, please email or phone Rev Alan. Your mobile details will remain confidential, will not be used for any other purpose and will not be shared with the whole group. alan.combes@methodist.org.uk 01384 823146

AND IF you want to contribute a day or a week of reflections please contact me. Equally if you want to offer a video blog reflection let me know!

The Preaching Plan: People have been asking about the next plan. We have decided not to create it until we know when we will be allowed to meet again in our churches. We will be given clear notice of this as part of a staged return to more normal life. At that time we will create a short one-month plan to allow time to plan further ahead.

THANK YOU to everyone who is working so hard on the phone, through paper and technology and especially through prayer. **THANK YOU** to those in our midst who are on the front line. We pray for you and for our local communities.

Photos of just a few of your wonderful Easter Crosses: what a wonderful witness...

