

Reflection for the Fourth Sunday in Lent (Mothering Sunday), 22nd March 2020

On Sunday 1st March, the first Sunday in Lent, just before my sabbatical was due to start, I ended my sermon with these words:

'It may be that in lent, you can give something up, remove those things that get in the way of us hearing from God. And that may come through a fast. But I am wondering about something else, and this may be because I am about to start my sabbatical. Instead of a fast, I am pondering the idea of a slow. That in Lent, and for me in my sabbatical, we commit to slowing ourselves, that we might pause to listen for the voice of God above all the other voices, which then causes us to pause before we act and think and speak, that we might do so peppered with the truth and grace of God.

That we might slow ourselves to be reminded of the God who is always present, even in the wilderness and who loves us. Slow down and be reminded of the God who brings life and light and hope and joy even in the face of defeat, the God who never, never leaves us or allows the voice of evil to ultimately have the final word.

That we might slow ourselves to tend to his word, reading and reflecting and praying that it would guide us and lead us in the right ways, to experience life and help us to resist the temptations around us.'

And as I said those words, just three weeks ago, we knew that there was Corona virus and that it may be very serious, but we had no idea how much it was going to impact in the coming days and weeks. The words, at that stage were for myself as I thought about my sabbatical ahead, and for everyone as we pondered how to do Lent.

I wonder how they sound now?

For some, life has been slowed down, almost to a halt, due to ill health, pre-existing conditions, age or self isolation for other reasons.

For some, life has been slowed down because they can no longer do their job, or they no longer have a job, or their job is now based at home.

For some, life has slowed down simply because many of the normal activities they engage in, including coming to church, have been cancelled.

For all those on an enforced slowing, hear again:

'be reminded of the God who is always present, even in the wilderness and who loves us.....be reminded of the God who brings life and light and hope and joy even in the face of defeat, the God who never, never leaves us or allows the voice of evil to ultimately have the final word.'

I also hope and pray that this time can be used creatively, to read, to sew, to garden, to draw, to listen, to birdwatch, to cook, to pray, to pick up the phone or write a letter, to find things which take on a new importance. To discover a new stillness.

For others though, the call to slow down simply cannot be heard or heeded.

For some, all the 'key workers', not least those in the NHS, in government and in our shops, life has ramped up to levels of extreme activity, busyness, stress and pressure.

For some, time is spent administering change and processing enormous amounts of new information. A teacher was quoted on Friday as saying 'I didn't realise the apocalypse would have so much admin!' I totally get that comment. Since deciding to postpone my sabbatical on Tuesday morning I, like many others, have spent my days emailing and cancelling and organising and phoning and receiving calls and writing cards and checking information.

For some, this is a time for their creative energy to be harnessed as we seek new and creative ways of being in contact, of being the church that can no longer meet together, of learning new technology and systems to enable this and to be a focus for the many ideas and offers of help.

For all those whose lives are busier and more stressful at this time, hear again:

'be reminded of the God who is always present, even in the wilderness and who loves us.....be reminded of the God who brings life and light and hope and joy even in the face of defeat, the God who never, never leaves us or allows the voice of evil to ultimately have the final word.'

We have heard the word 'unprecedented' in the last couple of weeks more than ever. But it is appropriate. Who would have thought even a month ago that supermarkets would have to have staff acting as security for the loo roll shelves? Who would have thought that the Church of England, the established church, would cancel services in every church in the land for the foreseeable future? Who would have thought that all British pubs and restaurants would be asked to close?

So what are we to do?

First lets be kind. Lets remember that we are all operating in unprecedented times, we don't all know exactly the right way to react or the right decisions to make. Lets be kind to one another in our attitudes and in our actions.

Second, lets embrace the moments of enforced slowing down. It is a chance to discover so much, to be creative and to pray.

Which brings me to my third suggestion. Let us pray!

We need to pray for our government and world leaders, for our NHS and emergency services, for our schools and local businesses, for our churches and cathedrals, for each other.

There is a lot at the moment that we can't do. But there is so much we can do. Please rest assured that I am praying for you all, and for our community, country and world and looking for ways to rediscover

'the God who is always present, even in the wilderness and who loves us.....the God who brings life and light and hope and joy even in the face of defeat.....the God who never, never leaves us or allows the voice of evil to ultimately have the final word.'