



*Chaplaincy of All Saints' Marseille
with Aix-en-Provence
and the Luberon*

*14th June 2020
1st Sunday after Trinity*

*Church in the Luberon
Reflection
The Revd John Smith*

So much has happened since we were last together at the beginning of Lent when I was wishing you a happy Lent. It would have been a nightmare scenario had it not been real. And even though we are seeing the number of coronavirus cases and deaths declining in Europe, I think we will be living with the health consequences for several years to come. It is not only those people who have had the virus that will suffer premature deaths because of permanent damage to their lungs and other organs, I suspect that there are many others who will suffer because of having care postponed either by health care providers or by people postponing seeking care themselves. Have you tried to see a general practitioner in the last eight to ten weeks in France? You certainly could get an appointment as visits to general practitioners in France dropped by 44 percent between January and April 2020 and outpatient visits to medical specialists dropped by 71 percent in the same period. And these are the physical consequences. The mental health consequences will be significant too. Calls to help lines and mental health charities have increased significantly. And who knows what the long-term consequences on our children will be.

There hasn't been a moment like this in my lifetime. It is taking its toll not only in many thousands of deaths, but in the stress and distress of millions who are shut in without company or help, or at the mercy of abusive partners, or losing jobs and livelihoods; or simply those whose temperament plunges them into depression after a few days of being confined.

Being a tactile person, I have found not being able to touch people the hardest thing to adjust to. I have found that harder than the isolation. It feels absurd not being able to touch people we love. I have been disappointed by the dialogue that has dominated the airwaves. It's as if

there is a choice between only two things: healthy bodies or a healthy economy. As if the world were defined by those two things. As if we humans were defined by those two things; the physical and the financial. There is an emotional cost of being isolated. The emotional system is not an isolated system. It is part of a super-system that operates the immune system, the hormonal apparatus, the cardio-vascular system, the nervous system etc. Touching is a physiological need that we have. Touching releases soothing hormones, relaxes the nervous system, eases blood pressure. And we haven't begun to talk about our spiritual lives. And the church? The church, faced with a major crisis and a major opportunity, has fallen in line with the secular lead kowtowing to the politicians and scientists. I have received lots of info, most of it very good, on how we implement the guidelines from the church but little on how we influence those guidelines. What would the response have been if the Archbishop and the Queen together (perhaps with the chief Rabbi and Imam) had called the nation to two days of constant prayer? Why didn't we do that at the outset before the draconian, denial of human rights called the lockdown?

I would like to say things will get better. We have seen so many acts of individual kindness, neighbourliness, opening up, coming together, a sense of community, expressions of heartfelt gratitude. And several people have expressed the hope that when the pandemic has passed these things will continue. We will have a kinder, gentler society. We shall pay our nurses much more. We shall be prepared to give more in taxes to support health and social services. We shall give much more help to the hospices. We shall have enjoyed the fresh air so much, unpolluted by thousands of cars and planes, that we will want to travel less, and spend more time with family and neighbours. We shall celebrate our emergency services, our delivery companies, and all the people who have looked after us. I wish I thought this were true. I fear, however, that as soon as restrictions are lifted there will be a gradual reversion to how we were and what we have learnt and valued will be forgotten by Christmas. I hope I am wrong but nobody who is desperate to avoid bankruptcy is going to think twice about using the car again, or the plane, if it will help. We are told on all sides that the economic effects of the lockdown are already catastrophic and could get worse. The weak will go to the wall again. They usually do. After the 2008 financial crisis, the banks and the big businesses, having accepted huge public bail-out money, quickly got back into their old ways, while the poorest parts of Britain just got poorer and have stayed that way.

So, what are we to make of this as Christians? I have read some interesting responses from Christians. Depending on how extreme an evangelical you are you may have heard that the pandemic is God's judgement on the world for our sinful ways. But would you believe in a god who deliberately allowed a dangerous virus to escape from a Chinese laboratory or market in order that, by killing innocent people, he could issue a call to repentance to those who were left? Now, we may have lost our moral compass in the last three or four decades but if that's your 'god', many of our contemporaries would rightly think, don't expect us to want anything to do with him. God did not need to kill hundreds of thousands to get us to repent it was sufficient that one died for all mankind.

You may also have heard that it is a sign of the end times and the imminent coming judgement. And by the way, bible verses are quoted to support these points of view.

What has intrigued me about this pandemic is its timing. Why should it occur at this time of the religious year? I don't believe that God's timing is ever, ever accidental or coincidental. His timing is precisely right but why should this pandemic occur around Easter, Passover and Ramadan, the three mono-theistic faiths, then start to recede in western Europe? You may be thinking I am making too much of this, another conspiracy theory, but I think God is calling Jews, Christians and Muslims alike to re-examine our lives. We Christians are not going to get any answers to the questions we have that are not Jesus centred. Jesus is the answer to every question we have not only about this pandemic but every question that we have about our lives. And so, we take our lead from Jesus asking how he dealt with personal and communal challenges in his life on earth.

When the world is going through great convulsions, the followers of Jesus are called to be people of prayer at the place where the world is in pain. We don't know what to pray for as we ought to; but the Holy Spirit pleads on our behalf, with groanings too deep for words. Prayer is our vocation: to be in prayer, perhaps wordless prayer, at the point where the world is in pain. At those very moments when we find ourselves weeping with grief at the death of a friend or family member, or at the impossibility of having a proper funeral, or at the horror of millions of the world's poorest being at risk, or simply because being locked down is inherently depressing.

And we should embrace lament as a vital, initial Christian response to this pandemic. Lamenting that things are not as they should be. A lament uses words of complaint: of question, sorrow, anger and frustration and, often enough, bitterness. In a time of acute crisis, when death sneaks into houses and shops, when you may feel healthy yourself but you may be carrying the virus without knowing it, when every stranger on the street is a threat, when we go around in masks, when churches are shut and people are dying with nobody to pray by their bedside, when people are buried with nobody to pray at their graveside – this is a time for lament. When we suffer strange sicknesses with no apparent reason, let alone cure – at those points we are to lament, we are to complain, we are to state the case, and leave it with God.

But we are also to act. We seem to spend most of our time pondering why this has happened and in particular why God has allowed this to happen but there are more important questions to be answered. The more important questions are: what needs to be done here? Who is at most risk? How can we help and, as the early church asked, who shall we send?

For better or for worse God has left the running of the world to us on earth. The Holy Spirit, we celebrated a couple of weeks ago, was given so that individual believers would take up our responsibilities as God's eyes and ears, His hands and His feet to do what needs to be done. As Jesus said, "As the father has sent me, so I am sending you". And remember that Jesus said this to a small group of people who were locked in because they were afraid. Sounds familiar? The point is, and it is bigger than the pandemic, that God's kingdom is being launched here on earth and the way it will happen is by God working through His people.

There is nothing new in this for Christians as throughout history Christians have visited the prisoners, cared for the wounded, welcomed the stranger, fed the hungry, and led in providing healthcare and hospitals, housing for the poor, hospices, education for the poor.

Even today, our best schools in England are not our private, fee-paying schools but our religious sponsored schools. When faced with a plague, early Christians would pitch in and nurse people, sometimes saving lives, sometimes losing their own. Their strong belief in God's promises of life beyond the grave gave them a fearlessness which enabled them both to keep cheerful in the face of death and to go to the aid of sufferers whose own families and communities had abandoned them for fear of the disease.

Yet when government funding is cut, and the health services can no longer do what they need to, Christians should be the ones – but often are not – to raise our voices in protest and to step in and help. We have a long track record on medical work, much longer than any other society or company. Suddenly to be told that we cannot and must not do it, but must leave it to 'the professionals', feels like being told that we cannot and must not be the Church. Others claim to know best (though actually the scientific advice is worryingly diverse) and we aren't wanted.

I am sorry that I haven't even referred to one of the texts set for today. As always there is at least one text that is perfect for the day and today it is, unusually, the psalm. In Psalm 116 the psalmist is giving thanks for recovery from illness. He says that when death and the grave threatened me, when I suffered distress and anguish the Lord protected me. The psalmist finishes off by saying because of this I will honour my vows and go and serve you. May we say and do the same.

Amen