

# Some reflections in strange times.

Various Authors.

(Clergy, Ordinands, those exploring vocations, churchwardens)

## Introduction.

I was driving down the M4 as on the news it became clear things were about to drastically change for the foreseeable future. In a world where many are used to having internet access, emails, social media and the like I became concerned for those in my congregations who don't and how they could become very quickly cut off. So, ironically, I put out a plea on social media (and maybe lent on a few people – abusing maybe my position!) and asked for some reflections we could print off for those who don't have access to digital media.

So, here are a few different thoughts from people who range from retired clerics to those exploring vocations and my own Church Warden who has been inspired and unleashed. I thank them all.

In a time of strangeness, it's a small gift from us to you so no one feels completely alone.

Mother Zoë SSF

## The Rev'd Z King writes... On the road to Samarkand.

I like to travel. I've been very blessed to see some far-flung places. On a trip to Uzbekistan we were driving across the desert with the mountains of Afghanistan on one side and at one point turned a sharp turn right to avoid Kazakhstan (all of us nearly falling to floor in the process the driver had 50 miles of straight road so it shouldn't have been a surprise!) when we stopped seemingly in the middle of nowhere.

There by the side of the road was a small old man sat with a donkey and a small cart. The driver stopped the coach, jumped off and unloaded sacks of rice onto the cart, hugged the man and off we went again. The guide explained the rice had been significantly cheaper in the city, so he had filled the empty spaces around the luggage with sacks of rice so that his village could benefit. Not just his family, the village.

We live in strange times, I often think of that small moment, obviously something that happened often. A man waiting by the road with his donkey. Jesus reminded us of the great commandments of Loving God and Loving our Neighbour. In these strange times we need to remember this more than ever and be like the man prepared to share rice with the village not just his own family.

## The Rev'd Stephen Pare Writes...

### “I will lift up mine eyes...”

Times like the present tell us so much about ourselves, (they do tell us much about others too) are we glass half full or half empty? IF we claim to be either, we have forgotten that the glass is refillable and we know where to find the ‘living water’ with which to fill it, or half fill it!

Yes we have to take advice from the professionals around us the medics, those who seek to read the times from the timeline of events elsewhere, but ultimately our hope and trust is in the Lord, ‘who made heaven and earth’, He will support us not letting us stumble and as the poem ‘Footprints also reminds us not just walking with us but at times carrying us when we cannot of ourselves cope. I think it is worth remembering that we might at times need carrying but also might be the means of Jesus carrying others. So all the advice and encouragement from Bishop June, Living Faith and your own clergy to see how and who and where we might reach out and touch the lives of others, carry them through difficulties being faced at this time.

I am sure there are questions being asked about God the Creator and the Coronavirus, human freewill has messed u creation from the Garden of Eden to the present and will on into the future. A virus is really something that takes what is good and devalues or re-values it alters it for the worse, and it is all too easy to point the finger at suspects. The picture is generally more complex that first glance sees.

In reality and in Creation there is sufficient for all to have a fair share, that is how God made it – He ‘saw it and it was good’,

human greed, as seen in empty supermarket shelves and fights over toilet rolls is what has transformed this goodness, is **the** Virus that distorts, devalues whatever form the virus takes.

Lift up your eyes to the hills, to the Lord, in the midst of the Coronavirus, for from the Lord comes our help and support at all times.

**Heather Temple-Williams writes...**

**"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."** Maya Angelou

At first glance this seems an odd quote of choice for a speechwriter. After all, my job is all about the words. I would love to think that my words will go down in history; that one day, a speech I have written will be included in a book entitled "Best Speeches of the 21st Century". The reality however, is that non-political speeches by civil servants rarely go down in history, unless it's for all the wrong reasons. Nevertheless, I still strive to write well. To write speeches that will leave a lasting impression, long after the words have been forgotten.

Jesus didn't need a speechwriter. He knew exactly what to say. He could be challenging, curt and confrontational. He could also be calming, caring and compassionate. Wherever he went, crowds followed him, because the things he said were astonishing and because the things he did were even more astonishing. But I believe that Jesus would not have drawn such large crowds, or kept his disciples for three years and more, if he had treated people with indifference, disdain, or worse. I believe that Jesus' love and compassion for people spoke as clearly as his words. That is why a child was brave enough to go up to him with his lunch. That is why a woman, unclean by the standards of the day, felt able to press through the crowd and touch his cloak.

The question for today is, how do we make people feel? Do we make them feel inadequate with our religious knowledge? Do we carry out good deeds with bad grace? Or, do people feel loved and at peace? Do we leave people better than we found them? Jesus commanded us to preach the gospel. Not all of us will do that from a pulpit or a platform, but we can all do it through kind words and kind deeds. People will forget what we say and even what we do. But the most important thing is that they remember how we made them feel. Because then they will know that God loves them.

## **The Rev'd Andrew Davies writes...**

Life as we know it is in turmoil, we see empty streets on our television screens such as Trafalgar Square and its surrounding area. We are told that certain television programmes such as EastEnders and Casualty have halted their rehearsals. Life for many appears on hold, and fear is creeping into the lives of many.

However, within all this we see some good, we see compassion, we see others concerned and caring for those around them. people ensuring that neighbours are cared for, extra food being given to Foodbanks and the list could go on.

That is because in all this turmoil human goodness still prevails.

In Judges 6: 23-24 we are told that the "Lord said to Gideon 'Peace do not be afraid.' So, Gideon built an altar to the Lord and called it 'the Lord is peace.'

In John 14: 27 Jesus himself says "Peace I leave with you; my peace I leave with you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

So, I offer you this prayer:

Father, we' re in need of your peace and truth  
to soothe our hearts and spirits right now.

When we find ourselves awake in the middle of the night,  
our pressing needs and worries can feel overwhelming.

We need to be reminded of your constant love,  
healing, and grace.

We ask for your Mighty Power to surround us.

And we thank you that you have set us free  
and that you are bigger than anything we face in this life.

We lay our burdens before you, every single one,  
for we know they're much safer in your hands  
than our own.

Amen.

## **Ordinand Jimmy Page writes...**

We who are many are one Bread, one Body; for we are all partakers of the one Bread (CiW 1984). This week I had the pleasure of experiencing my first online Mass. Initially, as this situation evolved, I hadn't seen the point of all these online Masses people were planning to do. I had been a pretty vocal advocate of online services generally, and in particular of live streamed services which I considered more personable, because you see them as they happen rather than hours or days later.

But I had seen the idea of an online Mass somewhat superfluous, thinking that since I would be unable to partake of the sacrament myself, watching someone else do it was rather pointless.

I was mistaken.

As I discovered when Brecon Cathedral (the mother church of my own diocese and so holding a special place in my own heart) announced that they would be streaming/broadcasting online their Sunday Eucharist. The joy I felt when I heard this was wonderful, though a little surprising and my brain had to do a complete and very sharp U-turn to keep up with what my heart was telling it I now believed.

These feelings were fully confirmed by the service itself. Once I had turned my laptop sideways so I could see what was going on, I began to feel a real connection not only to the three people in the Cathedral but also to all the others watching... and in fact all

the people that weren't. At the point when the peace came and I shared the peace with my own family, I found I was much more conscious of the Body of Christ. Humans are generally quite simple creatures, and when we say

'One Bread ... one Body';

it is easy to think of that in terms of the congregation currently gathered. But take that congregation away, lock us all in our houses and rather than causing me to feel separated from the Body of my own congregation it made me feel more aware of, and more connected to the Body of Christ as a whole.

As St Paul writes in Romans 12:5 "So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another."

Some very trying times are ahead of us, there is no denying this, but right now I am taking comfort in these words. We are members of one another and whatever challenges face us in the days to come, we will face them together, as the Body of Christ. If we remain true to each other and hold each other in prayer then nothing can separate that One Body.

## The Rev'd Canon Ruth Moverley writes...

Genesis 12: 1

***Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.'***

I am always awed by the thought that Abram would leave all that is familiar and travel, facing all the dangers of the unknown, to settle in a place that was literally and alien land. The unknown seems to be one of the biggest causes of anxiety. We like the comfort of what is familiar, familiar places, familiar routines, familiar people and then from that place of safety we will venture forth, knowing that we have a bolthole that is secure to which we may return if we feel at all apprehensive.

Abram took an immensely courageous step in leaving his home and his kindred. The bible tells us he did this because he believed he was following God's will. His security lay in the belief that God would be travelling with him.

When I was on the pilgrimage to Santiago, one of the profound experiences was the setting out each day and not knowing what lay ahead. I didn't know whether the place I was heading would have a bed for me for the night as there were so many pilgrims on the road. I didn't know whether I would have enough stamina to complete the section of the route I had planned. For me the "not knowing" was both scary and a bit exciting. I was travelling alone and yet I was not alone, because I knew that I was accompanied by God. And indeed God sent me guardian angels, fellow pilgrims who were also a source of re-assurance.

Life can be settled and safe and then something will happen which is completely out of our control and we are faced with a future full of questions and uncertainties. Sometimes it is necessary to remind ourselves that GOD IS WITH US and that his presence is the place of comfort and the source of security that we crave.



## **Church Warden Ian Fergus writes...**

### **Pilgrimage**

When the Diocese launched its year of Pilgrimage, they could not have imagined that, three months into 2020, we would all find ourselves on a very different kind of journey. One that finds each and every one of us involved in a voyage of discovery about ourselves and others.

In the last few days social interactions have been suspended, sport has been cancelled, theatres and cinemas are closed, and we have all been strongly advised to avoid unnecessary social contact or take any journeys unless they are essential. Even our Churches are now closed for public gathering although at the time of writing the clergy are opening churches to allow individuals to visit to pray and find the comfort that so many experience when within.

There is no doubt that all of this, together with whatever will be coming our way, will have a profound effect on us all. Perhaps though, there is a potentially positive outcome for us all and humankind as a whole.

We are all being starved of that thing we enjoy, social interaction, our normal lives have been turned upside down and what was normal a few weeks ago has changed, not forever but for, at least, the foreseeable future.

Maybe this is our opportunity to reflect on how precious the simple things are to us, a handshake, a hug, the chance to meet friends over a cup of coffee, spending time with people, a chat with friends and neighbours. How much pleasure we can get from a trip to the theatre or cinema, watching a sporting event. All the things that maybe we have, in the past, taken for granted because they were always there.

And for us, when the worst of this crisis is over, the chance to look at ourselves and possibly then become the sort of people we always imagined we could be. Kinder, more tolerant, more peaceful, forgiving, loving and prepared to help others when they are in need. We are all just starting on this pilgrimage now and together, although apart, we can help one another become those people we need to be because we will have taken this difficult journey together.

*Ian Fergus is my church warden and has obviously been inspired...*

## **Grumpy Old Man**

My wonderful wife has announced that I am becoming an even grumpier old man! Now I admit, I have had my moments as I have aged, but I do realise that, with the recent events I think I have found I am becoming just a little less tolerant and a little quicker to an opinion than maybe in the past.

Now, it's nothing to do with Corvid 19, there is nothing I can do about that, or it would seem can anyone else. What is making me, allegedly, grumpier is the response to whatever strategies are suggested to control the spread of the virus and the apparent focus on me, me, me that is becoming more and more obvious. I wrote before that I hope that this would eventually become a positive new start for humankind and that we would learn from this dreadful experience. However, as I write this, my hope is fast diminishing.

Why? Well, first, following advice to socially distance, it appears that many people, particularly in the UK capital city are showing a disregard for everyone's safety by populating pubs, restaurants and other public places and our PM had to say today that unless people make the right decisions he may have to move to enforcing the advice.....not good! It begs the question, why are people being so dismissive? Maybe, and this is a grumpy old man's theory, it is because we have a generation who have not experienced significant tragedy close to home. The most significant threat in the last 40 or so years has been terrorism, and the general response to this, regardless of the scale of the

tragedy, has been to carry on as normal, and probably rightly so. Unfortunately, faced now with a threat that could have much wider consequences, it seems that the "carry on as normal" mindset is still in operation for a significant proportion of the populous.

Maybe this is a symptom of the "me first" culture that has grown in our country over the last few decades. Considering others seems to be lower down the list of priorities than 'doing what I want to' is! Even in these days of worldwide media and instant news, there seems to be a denial that it is going to be "that bad" here.

Where does that leave us, well, I go back to my hope, that, as seems to be inevitable, once the real horrors of this virus become apparent people may take stock and begin to think about their fellow beings. I still have the belief that we are basically good and that people can focus their efforts for the benefit of others. There are already countless examples of selfless actions taking place to help mitigate the effects of this situation, particularly for the elderly and the vulnerable, this reinforces my belief.

The real tragedy, for me, is that it takes something of this scale, worldwide, to make people realise that we do need to take care of each other. We do need to be kind and considerate. We do need to love our neighbour as ourselves. That way, we can, with the expertise of the scientists and medical teams, find a way to beat this virus. In the meantime, it is up to us to do what we can to make life and this world just a little bit better for those that really need our help at this time.

## **Grumpy's Paradise**

Self-isolation is a new term for most of us, what is it? It sounds like some kind of masochistic punishment but in reality it is not something new, in fact Jesus spent a period in self isolation although it is fair to say he only did 40 days, not quite the 12 weeks that the elderly or vulnerable are being asked to do. That being said, self-isolation in your own home is probably a lot easier than 40 days in the wilderness!!

This current situation is changing everything for everyone but, if you are in the unfortunate situation that you are confined then maybe it is time to think about how you can use your time most effectively. One suggestion that I have heard is that people begin keeping a diary or journal of what is happening, after all, this is a fairly unique set of circumstances. It will become a chapter in world history and the personal perspective of individuals affected by the events will become a valuable resource for those that come along after us. This is pretty much what the biblical writers tried to do, although many were written in retrospect, but imagine being able to tell the story of Coronavirus in your own words that can be passed down to generations. How we coped, how people reacted, what, if anything we learned and most importantly how we all changed after the event? Maybe we should encourage our children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews to do the same, especially as they are going to have lots of time on their hands following the closing of schools. It will make interesting reading in years to come.

I am going to keep a journal (although my musings through this medium will also contribute) and I claim the Grumpy Old Man stance!

### Ordinand Ian Yemm writes...

Whenever I find myself in need of spiritual help, I return time and again to the writings of Thomas à Kempis, particularly The Imitation of Christ. He no longer enjoys the popularity that he once did and for obvious reasons. There are not many laughs to be had and he doesn't have a high opinion of the world or of learning. And yet, once upon a time, this text was published together with the New Testament in pocket-sized books and carried around by many Christians, including in the inside pockets of the uniforms of those who fought in one of the two world wars.

At a time when we are deprived of what we so often take for granted - namely, meeting our friends at Church, singing hymns together, hearing the Scriptures read aloud, praying familiar prayers with those who share our memory, knowing Christ's presence in receiving bread and wine, and offering each other hospitality - I wondered if Thomas à Kempis, my reliable spiritual friend, might offer some words of wisdom or comfort.

"You are strong enough as long as no trouble comes your way. You are also pretty good at giving advice to and offering words of comfort to others. But when some unexpected trouble comes knocking at your own door, well, then your good advice and words of comfort vanish into thin air. Pay attention to your own weakness, which appears whenever you have problems or trouble of any kind. Remember that troubles and anxieties give you an opportunity to let your faith become real."

*(The Heart and Soul of Imitating Christ – A Fresh Look at the Thomas à Kempis Classic, by Mitch Finley,)*

With each day and challenge, to ourselves and to others, in prayer or in action, may your faith and mine, become ever more real.

## Ordinand Geraint John writes...

“Then sings my soul...”

What makes your soul soar?... or dance?... or sing?

People often say that there’s nothing like good weather to lift your spirit. But when things aren’t going well, it can be all too easy for us to lose sight of the things which lift us up when we are feeling down.

Written in 1885 ‘O Store Gud’ (O great God) was written by the Swedish poet Carl Gustav Boberg. The poem was later translated into German, and then into Russian, before Stuart Hine translated the poem into English and it became one of our nation’s favourite hymns: ‘How Great Thou Art’. In addition to the theological and doctrinal assurances of God’s grace, the hymn also recognises that there are many day-to-day occurrences which have the ability to make our souls sing... But the greatest of all these things is the greatness of God.

“O Lord my God! When I in awesome wonder  
Consider all the works Thy hand hath made.  
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder,  
Thy power throughout the universe displayed.

When through the woods and forest glades I wander  
And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees;  
When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur  
And hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze.

When translating the poem, Hine also added two verses of his own. One of these verses (below) didn’t make it into the modern hymnals but is particularly relevant at this time. The Covid-19 epidemic has caused fear and uncertainty in our world, but God’s greatness and God’s love (which can often be found in the most “ordinary” of places) is steadfast and endures forever. This knowledge does much more for my soul than the sunshine...

“When burdens press, and seem beyond endurance,  
Bowed down with grief, to Him I lift my face;  
And then in love He brings me sweet assurance:  
'My child! for thee sufficient is my grace'.  
Then sings my soul...”

## The Rev'd Rose Hill writes

Hope is one of those words in the English language, like love that is used in modern parlance regularly and without thinking. One might hope to go to a party or to the cinema. One might hope that it will not rain tomorrow. It is a word that rolls easily off the tongue and is not easily replaced with any other word. Yet, as G K Chesterton once suggested, we only ever know the true meaning of hope once we are hopeless. At the heart of our faith is our fallenness and our hopelessness. At the heart of our faith is the realisation that on our own there is no hope, that our hope rests in God, our hope rests in the resurrection. And there is the rub, in our heart of hearts we know that our hope rests in God our saviour, yet time and time again we distance ourselves, we make ourselves hopeless. Henri Nouwen once said ““A waiting person is a patient person. The word patience means the willingness to stay where we are and live the situation out to the full in the belief that something hidden there will manifest itself to us.” Thus to be hopeful is to live in a state of patience and anticipation. In the darkest of times it can feel very much as if we wait on nothingness, that our very being hopes and prays for an ending to a situation are ineffective at best or at worst even futile, but our inability to be patient often prolongs our suffering. In Paul’s letter to the Romans, Paul articulates this sense of patience beautifully: endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us

Thus hope is not only bound up in patience and waiting it is also an activity of endurance. It is not a passive act in which we sit helpless and forlorn. It is an active moment, a moment in which great transformation takes place. It is in moments of our greatest hope that we experience our greatest grief. It is in these times that we realise that in our moments of need, we must place ourselves in what feels like the utmost place of vulnerability. Our truest moments of hope are the times that we must abandon all and place ourselves at the foot of the cross. We place ourselves in the embrace of God. To truly hope, in the Christian sense, is to abandon all sense of self and individualism. True hope is to endure in the sure certainty that it is only in the Trinity that our hopes may be realised and our endurance rewarded.

This can at times be an almost impossible task. Like the Ancient Mariner of Coleridge’s great poem we often view God like the sun imprisoned in a cage. At our most desperate times we feel the absence of God. Not because God is absent, but through our inability to see beyond the slime and sludge of our personal circumstances to the hints that God is there if we were able to move beyond our own personal hopes and to place our hope and trust in God. It is at these moments that we must pray. St. Teresa of Avila’s famous prayer is beautiful in its simplicity and is yet possibly one of the most difficult prayers one could pray. Encapsulated in it is the need to set aside one’s fears, to accept change and to hand all to God in the sure and certain hope that all happens in God’s time:

Let nothing disturb you,  
Let nothing frighten you,  
All things are passing away:  
God never changes.  
Patience obtains all things  
Whoever has God lacks nothing; God alone suffices.

And yet, the lines that ring in our hearts and in our heads are often more likely to be akin to that of Psalm 22: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? It is during the moments that God seems so distant that God is at God's closest. There are times when we look up to heaven crying out to God and all we see is the back of a tapestry, the scraggy ends and all the untidiness of life. Yet we forget, that on the other side of that tapestry is God, God sees the finished product, God sees the intricate beauty of the silks of our lives and the knots in the thread. Like any great creative act patience is rewarded by beauty. And thus if we endure with patience and prayer we are able to hope. In those moments of true hope we stand at our closest to God. The action of hope is to abandon oneself to a force far greater than ourselves and to embrace inaction as well as practicalities. It is in the waiting, it is in the enduring that we grow and transform the most. When we are able to truly live in God's time and give over all that we are to God in the sure and certain hope of God's enduring love then we live in hope

## **The Rev'd Rebecca (Becky) Evans writes..**

We were eating lunch; crackers, cucumber, carrot, crisps and...sardines! We'd raided the cupboard for something to put on the crackers...

Until the beginning of this week, since the beginning of Lent we'd decided as a challenge and discipline, to use up the food we already had in the cupboards and freezer. It was a fun challenge and good discipline and resulted in some new meals with unexpectedly tasty results. Now we're eating things from the cupboards for a different reason...

The sardines had been lurking in the cupboard for a while – probably bought for good reason; they're an economical source of protein, can contribute a portion of oily fish as we're encouraged to do – yet they'd sat there...not being eaten – not being used for what they were intended. I was surprised by how delicious they were! But would they have been if we'd had another option? Who knows!

What else can this apply to at this strange time? As our circumstances change, some things that we might normally not appreciate to the same degree might take on new meaning. Is there a Bible sat on a shelf waiting to be read – to offer the hope and promises of our loving Heavenly Father to us, when we perhaps need to hear them more than ever? Is there a Christian book in that pile 'for a rainy day'?

For many at this time, things look very different, perhaps you've got more time on your hands. How can this be filled positively? Perhaps it's time to dust off that Bible or that devotional book you've been meaning to read...perhaps you're able to read more of the Bible than usual? Can you call a friend and have a chat or arrange to read Sunday's readings and then talk to a friend about them? What might we be able to appreciate in new ways at this time?

## Ordinand Ceri Holloway writes On Psalm 31...

We never know what stresses our lives will bring. A few pressure-points are predictable, moving home or changing your job for example, but most are not. Some changes we face will be quite unpredictable and unannounced, just like this pandemic - they will barge into our lives like an intruder in the night. That sort of change in life can put tremendous stress not only on us as individuals, but also on our families and friends too, and we may wonder if the Bible, written thousands of years ago, can have much to say about how to deal with this sort of stress.

In Psalm 31 we hear that David went through a time of stress few of us, if any, will ever experience. David had a whole team conspiring to kill him, so we can be assured that whatever stresses we face now, or in the coming year, David faced equal or greater ones. This Psalm isn't coming to you out of the ivory castle of a king, but from the crucible of a person who's been there. And David gives us a key to handling the stress in our lives: "But as for me, I trust in you, O Lord, I say, 'you are my God.' My times are in your hand." (Ps 31:14-15a)

Both David's times and ours are marked by instability – we may think we control "our times" but we don't. One day David was a powerful King, the next he was running for his life from his rebellious son. We never know what stresses our lives may encounter, however, for David, the "times" may have been unstable and changing, but David's God was stable and unchanging. David's times were in the hands of David's God.

The whole Psalm is personal and intimate- and personal trust in our Sovereign but personal God gives us inner stability in the midst of outer instability. Trust is the vital link that connects God's love with our own distress. For me, personally, when I trust God he doesn't remove my source of stress, but gives me stability within the midst of the crisis, offering me hope and comfort from there.

This Psalm shows us that trust isn't easy, it makes the journey from anger and anxiety to assurance twice over within the Psalm for a start! But personal trust is like that isn't it? I know that I wrestle with my anxieties for ages before giving them to God and experiencing his peace, only then to take them back on myself and struggle again with my fears.

But I think that this is the point here, trust in God isn't a passive resignation to fate, it's actively and personally laying hold of the character of God as revealed in his Word and in our worship and applying it to our own particular crisis at that time, and if, because of our own human frailty, we need to repeat this, again and again, then so be it.

There is a sense, of course, in which our times are in God's hand whether we trust in God or not. But David's times were in God's hand because David was deliberately determined to put them there.

"But as for me, I trust in you, O Lord, I say, 'you are my God.' My times are in your hand." (Ps 31:14-15a)

It was a personal, conscious, deliberate choice.  
Trust always is.