

29th March: Lent 5 (Passion Sunday)

Texts: Ezekiel 37.1-14, Romans 8.6-11, John 11.1-45

[As we are not able to hold church services at the moment I have prepared a short homily which you may find helpful in your devotions at home.]

Romans 8 v6: *To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.*

In normal times Christians are beginning to think about the end of the season of Lent, and starting to concentrate their minds on the events leading up to the Crucifixion and Resurrection. There is always a danger of becoming morbid at this time of year. For the poet T S Eliot:

*April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.*

It is difficult to contemplate death when all around us flowers are blooming and the birds are nesting. The annual phenomenon that is Spring is a burgeoning of Life all over the northern hemisphere. But these are not normal times. This year we are being asked to lead lives that separate us from one another, deny us social intercourse, make us fearful of contact.

Paul goes on in his letter to the Romans: *For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law - indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.*

So, at a time when we should be contemplating God, we are being forced to do this almost on our own. Perhaps this a common human dilemma. At times of sickness and isolation many will turn from God, many will start to rely on their own resources rather than trusting in God for help. And many who normally spend at least part of their lives caring for others, will find that this is increasingly difficult. So, at a time when we should be together helping one another we are separated and, for some of us, totally alone.

For the young and fit this whole pandemic may be an inconvenience, a mild dose of 'flu, something that is preventing us temporarily from enjoying the social buzz, but for many others the lifelines of human contact are disappearing fast. There is a serious risk that infirm, old and lonely people will be forgotten as they have been in Spain.

It may sicken the heart to see greedy people stuffing their trolleys in the supermarket, but it is infinitely more sickening to know that a lot of people are dependent on others for their shopping, cleanliness, even their sanity, and that help may be slower, or less personal, or may even stop altogether.

Reading Paul's letter to the Romans we are struck by his huge faith in God. If we do not live in the Spirit we are hostile to God. A superficial reading would make it seem that human interaction is in some way unworthy and in opposition to God.

As we concern ourselves with our own wellbeing, and worry perhaps impotently about how others are coping, we must remember that God lives in us not just by our own piety, but by the fruits of that piety in our lives. The gift of the Spirit is not just righteousness, it is also life in all its manifestations. And one of the manifestations of life at the moment is that we have to find new ways of socialising. There is still the telephone and email or letter, the bag of shopping or bunch of flowers left on the doorstep. If we love one another we may want to say so face to face, but at the moment we cannot. Being forced to think about life in new ways can only be good. Being shaken up by God is beneficial spiritually and emotionally.

This crisis is being described as the worst ever to hit the world. It is not. It is not even the second or third worst. But it is still something that means serious illness, or even death, to some, and therefore has to be taken very seriously for the good of society as a whole.

As we start once again on the road to Gethsemane in our annual spiritual journey, we may perhaps be more acutely aware this year that for Jesus it was a journey he took on his own. We are being thrown on our own resources, and like Jesus we have to trust in God to provide for our spiritual needs. Like Jesus too, we may have to trust in our community to provide for our daily bread, and to be prepared to provide it for others.

Out of all this can be born a new view of society and community. The second world war pulled the whole country together, and a whole generation learned an attitude to life that was realistic, self-reliant, understanding of dependency, caring of one's fellows. It was the generation that gave us the National Health Service after all.

Where we differ in these times is that society is being isolated and prevented from coming together for the common good. Our enemy is not just a disease or a worldly enemy, it is something that separates us, something that prevents us from experiencing the human virtues in their most basic form – the physical acts of caring.

How we emerge from this as a society is not yet clear. If we become less self-centred, and more tolerant and understanding of those around us, it will be good, but as time moves on we might, in our isolation, lose some of society's cohesion. Our duty as Christians is to bring about the first outcome, that of greater caring and understanding.

Read Paul's letter to the Romans and feel his sense of renewal in the Spirit moving in himself. That Spirit is what brings about what we all desire, a hopeful and optimistic trust that all will be better in due course, brought about not by enforced idleness but by activity in isolation.

Julian Pearcey