

The first thing I want to say is a huge and sincere 'thank you' to everyone in our District who's responding so faithfully and courageously in these very challenging times. Throughout our society there's been a common experience of tiredness and exhaustion. But perhaps we shouldn't be surprised about that. Our normal patterns of living, working and engaging have been thoroughly disrupted. Many plans and intentions have had to be abandoned or reassessed. There are major anxieties about health, loved ones and the future. No wonder then that there has been widespread fatigue.

But in the midst of this we are seeing inspiring resilience and commitment: people offering front line, essential yet vulnerable, sacrificial service; including medics, researchers and scientists, key workers and chaplains. Within the church, ministers, preachers and worship leaders in all quarters of the District are offering resources – both on and offline. Our pastoral networks – both formal and informal – beavering away, the phone once again being a best friend; letter writing and card sending offering light into people's days. It's great to see the different parts of our body sharing our varied gifts to enable such comprehensive mission and ministry. Fulfilling Our Calling in new ways! Thank you for all the ways in which, despite the suddenness and huge disruption of lockdown, you've continued to offer faithful service and witness.

Of course, we all still carry plenty of questions to struggle with, and emotions to embrace. Many of those questions and emotions are exactly those found in the Psalms. I'd encourage you to keep turning to the Psalms as part of your devotions through these days and see how often the sentiments of the Psalmist are relevant to our circumstances. The Psalms give us a vocabulary for lament, for anger and frustration, but also an antidote to despair and an inspiration for remaining faithful. We can join in with the words in Ps 13: "How long, Lord?" and perhaps wistfully read those words in Psalm 122 "I rejoiced with those who said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord".

And then there's Psalm 42.... Let me read this to you....

¹As the deer longs for streams of water, so I long for you, O God. ²I thirst for God, the living God. When can I go and stand before him? ³Day and night I have only tears for food, while my enemies continually taunt me, saying, "Where is this God of yours?" ⁴My heart is breaking as I remember how it used to be: I walked among the crowds of worshipers, leading a great procession to the house of God, singing for joy and giving thanks amid the sound of a great celebration! ⁵Why am I discouraged? Why is my heart so sad? I will put my hope in God! I will praise him again— my Saviour and my God! Now I am deeply discouraged, but I will remember you— even from distant Mount Hermon, the source of the Jordan, from the land of Mount Mizar. ⁷I hear the tumult of the raging seas as your waves and surging tides sweep over me. ⁸But each day the Lord pours his unfailing love upon me, and through each night I sing his songs, praying to God who gives me life. ⁹"O God my rock," I cry, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I wander around in grief, oppressed by my enemies?" ¹⁰Their taunts break my bones. They scoff, "Where is this God of yours?" ¹¹Why am I discouraged? Why is my heart so sad? I will put my hope in God! I will praise him again - my Saviour and my God!

I find these words so helpful. These days can feel like an exile experience, and Psalm 42 speaks from that exile-place with a real sense of honesty and very human wistfulness – longing to get back to non-exile, more normal times. But also in the midst of all that, the spiritual shaking down of oneself... "Why am I discouraged? Why is my heart so sad? I will put my hope in God! I will praise him again- my Saviour and my God."

Now, it's so important that I – or any of us – don't ever underplay the range of anxieties, the cost, the sadness of illness, the grief of death and bereavement. I don't want to minimise the dislocation and exhaustion that many are feeling. But neither do I want to underplay the riches and truths of our Christian faith. We are an Easter People. At the heart of our faith we proclaim: *Christ has died, Christ has risen and Christ will come again.* We have a Saviour who comes into a locked room and speaks the word "Peace." And we know that when God speaks it heralds creation and transformation! Fear is transformed into joy. The Holy Spirit empowers our lives to be filled and shaped by eternal hope.

And as an Easter People, I want to encourage us to be hopeful, courageous and confident in these days. The world urgently needs a bold, loving, praying, giving, serving Church. Our patterns of being church are different in these days, but our opportunities to be Good News and hope and salt and light are perhaps more than ever. Although we can't go to church, we can thrive all the more as the church of Christ.

And so I want to encourage us all to be a people who are **'flying the flag'** of faith in these days. Just allow me please to follow that "Fly the Flag" thought briefly, as it's been bobbing around in my head for a few days.

Many of you will know that I'm a Lancastrian over here on missionary work! And, I'm a Man Utd fan! But nonetheless, I was interested to see a tweet from Leeds Utd the other day in honour of Norman Hunter star of the 70s, who has sadly passed away. It said, "*We can't get down to Elland Rd to pay our respects, so we call upon you to hang out your scarves or shirts for Norman Hunter at home.*"

It made me think of our context, when we can't 'get' to church but we can still be the church! And then I was listening to a song by Christian singer Matt Redman on his new album which included this line: "*Shout like you know the King is in residence.*" And then I thought about how the Union Flag is flown at whichever Palace the Queen is in residence. The flag tells the world the Queen is in residence 'here.'

So, in these days of our churches being closed, where should the flags be flying? Where is Jesus in residence?

Hopefully these times are a reminder that, *metaphorically at least*, a flag should be flying from each of our homes, and wherever our work takes us. And in the midst of our phone calls and zoom mtgs, and letter writing and praying. In all these contexts, as always has been true, we are the church out and about, at large – the Body of Christ engaged in the world. I'm encouraging us to have renewed confidence in Jesus' words that "when 2 or 3 gather in my name, then I am with them."

So, can we have this image in our minds and hearts? That we're 'flying the flag' that bears an empty cross - symbol of our Easter faith - in all the different contexts of our lives? (*I did briefly wonder about whether we could get 10,000 flags made with a cross on, that we could all fly from our homes and so on!*) But even if not physically – let's "Fly the Flag" of the Risen Christ who resides in our hearts and homes, in our work and our conversations, in our prayers and our care, in our loving & giving. Let's 'fly the flag' as we live out our Easter faith.

Christ is Alive! Let Christians sing
The cross stands empty to the sky.
Let streets and homes with praises ring,
Love, drowned in death, shall never die.

Christ is Alive! No longer bound
To distant years in Palestine.
But saving, healing, here and now
And touching every place and time.
Brian Wren

A prayer by our President, the Revd Dr Barbara Glasson....

We are not people of fear:
we are people of courage.
We are not people who protect our own safety:
we are people who protect our neighbours' safety.
We are not people of greed:
we are people of generosity.
We are your people God,
giving and loving,
wherever we are,
whatever it costs
For as long as it takes
wherever you call us.
Amen.