

## The Third Sunday of Lent: 15<sup>th</sup> March 2020

(the second, maybe third, weekend of real anxiety over coronavirus)

### Romans 5:1-11.

#### *Is the Virus a Test?*

I admit to not having heard it said *yet* about the coronavirus, but one of the things that usually does get said whenever anything difficult comes along is: maybe it is a test. God is testing us. Testing our faith. He's trying to see whether we're good enough for him.

I have always struggled with this kind of language. I find the idea of a God who experiments like that, who inflicts suffering and even death on people just to see what the reaction is. It's especially odd if what he's meant to be testing for is our levels of love for Him, trust in Him. What kind of love and trust would a God who deliberately engineers suffering as a test deserve? Not very much, I suggest.

No, I don't think God sets tests.

But that said, in a way, reality certainly does. How we respond to what happens, especially difficult things, shows what we are. Suffering produces endurance, says St. Paul in today's reading and endurance produces character. He's quite right, but even more straightforwardly, suffering *exposes* character. Suffering – or even, it seems, the mere prospect of suffering – reveals who we truly are. And to that extent, even if God didn't sit there dreaming up the coronavirus as a test, this new bug is certainly functioning that way.

And in some ways, the results so far don't look good.

Our shopping came on Thursday morning. As it happens, we'd ordered some loo roll. Just the one pack, mind – although in fairness I will confess quite a large pack, sixteen individual rolls. I actually felt quite sheepish about this. I was worried the delivery people might think we were panic-buying. But no. Instead, they told me about the last house they'd just been to – which had bought twenty packs of sixteen loo rolls. Twenty packs of sixteen. I am only sorry I own no shares in Andrex.

Well, maybe in a few months time, I'll be ruing this sermon and realising that those people weren't being quite as silly as I first thought.

However, right now, what it looks like ordering quite so much loo roll exposes is this. It exposes panic, and worse, it exposes greed. An attitude of, 'who cares whether my neighbour goes without?' Who cares what's going on next door, or in the next street, I've got what I need'. Suffering exposes character – and of course, nearly all of us except the very unlucky few haven't even really begun to see the suffering yet. If the coming reality is as bad as the predictions, what will this week's loo-roll hoarders be like then?

Underlying all of it, of course, is fear. People are frightened – to a large extent understandably and reasonably, and then with a large dose of hysteria thrown in. We're so used to living in peace, and with standards of wealth and medical care previous generations could only dream of, that we're not very used to mass vulnerability, to projections of tens of thousands of deaths. Coronavirus strips away the protection of our usual comfortable existence, and reminds us *en masse* that underneath it all – not far beneath – that to be human is to be frightened and threatened.

What does the Gospel have to say to all of that? Not, as unbelievably some believers still seem to think, that Christians (*real* Christians) won't get sick, or that if they do, they won't get *too* sick. Not that prayer is going to ward the virus off. No, I'm afraid that God does not work that way and that we will get as sick as anyone else. Indeed, maybe, maybe, we'll get even sicker because – whilst being sensible - we will refuse to totally hide away from each other. We'll go on loving and caring and sharing and being with people even when they're sick.

And that is because, fundamentally, we're not frightened. Not at the very deepest core of our beings, not heart-frightened. Because we know, again as Paul says in Romans 5, we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. We know that what happened on the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus are bigger, much bigger, than any little virus. Even if that virus did its worst – and we know that for most of us, it won't – but even if it did, even if it killed us, it could not take from us our destiny. Christ died for us. How much more will we be saved by his life? You and I are caught up in something which even the most terrifying history – and coronavirus is bad, but it's not that – cannot destroy. We boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God, and next to that death is nothing at all.

That's what difference faith makes in the current crisis. We need to drive that message home, deep into our own hearts, so that it comes out naturally in our lives and how we act. People who know they are going to share in the glory of God will not panic. They will not be driven by fear, they will not buy hundreds and hundreds of loo rolls, they'll look after their neighbours. In short, they'll do something like our Bishop has told us to do. These are what Bishop Alan calls his 'golden rules' for the coronavirus – and they're well worth hearing:

**Golden Rule One.** Each one of us can think about how we can protect and support our neighbours. So much of the public rhetoric is sowing fear about the danger of other people. So, taking all the official precautions, offer help and reassurance to others – and don't demonise anyone or any group.

**Golden Rule Two:** Think about who may be suffering more than me. For those of us who are healthy there is much less to worry about but the elderly, the housebound and those with chronic health conditions may be very anxious. How about each church undertaking an audit of all the vulnerable people they know and sharing out the responsibility to phone them each day. There's nothing like a friendly voice to offer solace when someone is worried. A smile can bring cheer, even on the phone. If you visit, follow all the official precautions or don't go.

**Golden Rule Three.** Don't give into panic and start hoarding food. There is plenty to go around, so practise the Christian discipline of sharing. Ask your neighbours what they need and do your best to help them get it. If you are self-isolating you will of course need some supplies.

**Golden Rule Four.** Live today to the full. None of us ever know what the future holds. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6. 25 – 34), Jesus challenged his followers to live each day fully and not be afraid. Every time we are tempted to give in to fear we need to make a conscious choice to respond in trust and openness.

And, along with just over half the adults in the UK, don't forget to pray.

Here's a suggestion from the Revd Louise Collins, a Team Vicar in Borehamwood, Herts:

*Dear God our Shield and our Defender, guide and protect my neighbour in this time of health emergency; deliver them from all harm and may your love and care ever grow in this place. Through Jesus Christ, Our Lord, Amen*