

How are you as we gather here today?

I've asked that question at almost every one of the 20 funerals I've taken during lockdown, to give people a chance to acknowledge what they are bringing, and that there will probably be as many emotions and experiences of lockdown as there are people in the room, to acknowledge that we come here today having faced different lockdowns. We have, and continue to, weather the same storm, but in very different boats.

So some of you will gather here today with a tremendous sense of excitement to finally come back to one of our church buildings, alongside others in the family of God, to share the Sacrament of holy communion together.

Some may be gathered here today with a sense of anti-climax - the service looks and feels so different to usual that you're not sure how to respond to it yet.

Some may have gathered out a sense of duty, still others with an underlying sense of fear and anxiety.

For some there is a great sense of grief, for the loss of loved ones, of time together, of worship, of what was.

And of course there are many who have not gathered with us this morning, through not being able to, not being ready to, not wanting to.

We have arrived at this point with different experiences -let's be gentle with one another.

As I was preparing for this service, the words of the reading from Romans were going round and round my head: the spirit knows us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

I will admit, I struggled with writing a sermon for today - should it be celebratory, should it be a sermon of lament, how much should it acknowledge Covid-19 (surely we've all heard enough about it, but then the church should speak about relevant things!) Should I try to be all things to all people.

The Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And I thank God for that. Because no matter how we come today, or have not been able to come, we probably don't have the words to sum up everything we are feeling, all we have experienced. And we certainly don't have the words to express how someone else has come through lockdown.

But the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

When we don't have the words, the prayers, the Spirit does. When we don't know how to put into words where we are, the spirit does. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Let's be gentle with one another, and let the Spirit intercede on our behalf with sighs too deep for words.

So I don't have many words for you this morning, but let me tell you a story instead, about bread....

I know many of you have been making bread throughout the last months. There were weeks when flour was a precious treasure to be found, and could well have been used in the Matthew passage as the treasure found in the supermarket.

I've seen pictures of perfectly risen, golden brown bread, and I've seen pictures of some of the breadtastrophies that have happened - bread that could have been used to hammer in nails!

But I'm reminded of a colleague who makes bread and told me about the time when she set about making bread. She has made bread many times, in fact it is some of her pictures that I recall when I think of the perfectly risen, golden brown bread made in lockdown.

She told me about how, on this occasion, she was elbow deep in kneading the dough, finding a rhythm and a comfort in the action, knowing that she was providing the best chance for the yeast to do it's thing and spread throughout the dough...and then the doorbell rang.

Of course it was something she needed to go out and attend to, and so she cleaned her hands, pulling bits of dough from underneath her fingernails, and brushing flour out of her hair...but what did she do with the dough? It wasn't ready. She decided to place the half kneaded dough in a bowl, cover it and put it in the fridge. Not exactly the best conditions for yeast to work, but all she could think of.

She was gone for several hours and when she finally arrived home she had given up hope of making bread that day - she resigned herself to the fact that she would have to waste all the effort, and the precious flour and yeast.

But when she opened the fridge door, the yeast had risen. Despite all the wrong conditions, despite sometimes having all the right conditions and not rising, this time the yeast had caused the dough to rise, and she was able to place the dough into the oven, and enjoy the fruits of her labour and the work of the yeast.

"The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

We have gone through a time of trial, of lament, of confusion and anxiety, we are still not fully through it.

The conditions were not right, in our eyes, for hope to be at work in people's lives, for the kingdom of God to be seen around us, for treasure to be found, and yet despite all that has happened, all that people have faced, there have been stories and moments of hope in a world that needs hope more than ever.

We need this promise of 'the yeast', the kingdom of heaven, and the certainty that it can and does draw close, even when we least expect it, even when everything is working against it. Without a doubt, the world needs that, too.

We need the promise that hope beats despair, and life prevails over death. Even here. Even now. Even in this. And even perhaps, like ordinary yeast which makes our bread rise --- hope is given even through ordinary 'us.'

Like yeast can be a powerful thing, spreading through lifeless dough and bringing it to life, so too you and I are people who have the Good News of the Kingdom of heaven, Good News which also brings life to dark, unlikely places, even when none of the conditions seem to be right.

And when we ourselves don't know how to offer that Good News, don't even know where to start, don't feel like we are in a place to believe the Good News ourselves, let's be gentle, because at this point we have the promise that

the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

So welcome back to this special place, for this very special sharing of the meal in which we remember all that Jesus did when he poured out his life for us, but do not be fooled into thinking that it is only now that God has been present, working in and through you like yeast.

Every time you have phoned someone, every time you have done someone's shopping, every time you have humbly accepted the help of others, every time you have prayed for someone, every time you have protected someone else by not going out - the kingdom of heaven has been drawing closer and has been working in you, and through you.

So when you come to stand at the rail, bring with you all that you have been through, and hold it before God as you hold out your hands. Allow yourself to receive from God as you receive the bread, the body of Christ - give yourself time to do this - you won't be hurried. And pray for those who cannot yet meet with us here.

This morning, and in the days to come, let's be gentle and remind one another of the hope, that there is nothing, nothing, nothing, that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is found in Jesus Christ our Lord, not even Covid or lockdown.

For Christ is our hope, yesterday, today and forever.

Amen