

Well this is the first service here for quite a long time, and I'm so happy to be back physically in the Body of Christ.

But it looks so different. We look different. I'm still stood here at the front but we're behind masks and I can't see if you're smiling. Or maybe not this is a sermon after all. There's no "Peace" hugs or handshakes and communion has changed.

But we are here together in this *new normal*, or *new reality*, and I think it is wonderful just to be with you all. Whether I wish to sit quietly, or pray, I am able to experience the comfort of being back with my fellows in a church gathering to worship God.

Today's readings and Gospel are an inspiration. They remind us, in Romans, of God's promise.

*If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved*

and our Gospel reminds us that the hand of Jesus is there whenever we feel that we are sinking, and all we need to do is take it.

*Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?"*

We all find personal comfort and peace in The Lord, and today's reading also reminds us that when we bear witness to Christ we show others that He is the way of peace and love.

*"How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?"*

We have none of us found it easy, but we are here together. And I thank the Lord for that.

Things have moved so unbelievably fast.

In March Jo and I flew to Lanzarote and at the time people were just realising that Coronavirus may spread further than China, in fact Italy were dealing with a major outbreak but I think at that time we were still unaware of how quickly and violently the virus would spread. A few people on the plane had wipes for their seats and meal trays, and

Jo and I did take sanitiser for our hands. But I suppose things were still pretty much in the background of our everyday lives.

And then seven days later we landed back at East Midlands Airport and walked into the start of lockdown. And then on the Sunday I nipped round to the shop to get a few essentials and I was stunned by the empty shelves. In seven days our society had changed and we had missed it. In a week toilet rolls had become more valuable than gold and meal planning went out of the window to be replaced by “eat what you can get”. Of course it did offer the opportunity for some off the wall menu’s such as Basmati rice, hot dog sausages and Alphabet Spaghetti! Yuck!

Society split. Key workers such as supermarket staff, telephone engineers and delivery drivers found that their work load doubled and trebled to meet the demands of those at home on furlough or shielding because of age or medical conditions; and all this was set against a background of tragic deaths where people couldn’t grieve together and couldn’t hold each other’s hand for comfort. I would think that there’s very few here that haven’t been affected by the loss of a loved one. But all of this you already know and we’re all sharing this journey in our own way that’s dictated by so many different things. And it’s affecting us all. Whether we admit it or not. We are changed in our behaviour and we are in such a time of uncertainty.

And God has been there all the way with us in the amazing actions and words of people around us. We have all seen these exceptional people, these inspirational people performing extraordinary acts of mercy and goodness. Not just the well publicised cases such as the truly inspirational Captain Sir Tom Moore who’s story everybody followed with amazement and his achievements were shared by everybody; but those who shopped for others, collected prescriptions or contacted people on “Zoom” who they knew were lonely and isolated. Oh yes he was there.

And God has been there alongside us all. He has been walking across the water towards us holding out his hand. As we walked towards him through this strange existence that none of us have experienced before he has been there. He is there in our isolation and when we are

gathered together. As I said before today's reading and Gospel are not only a reminder, but an inspiration for us all.

*If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved*

This promise is real and remains unchanged as it always will. In the words of the Psalm "Though I walk through the shadow of the valley of death I shall fear no evil for you are with me". God's promise will be fulfilled. In these strange times we know that as sure as the sun will rise in the mornings, that God's promise is the truth.

But it is not easy. We're alone far more. When we are feeling down, as we all do sometimes, our Gospel reminds us that the hand of Jesus is there whenever we feel that we are sinking, and all we need to do is take it.

*Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him.*

Jesus is always listening. We need only ask and he is there whenever we feel disheartened or lonely. We find comfort and peace in The Lord.

But there are so many people who have never had the opportunity to know about Christ. They have never been told of God's everlasting love..

*"How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?"*

OK, preaching is going too far unless we're asked, but today's reading reminds us that when we bear witness to Christ we show others that He is the way of peace and love.

We have none of us found it easy, but we are here together, and we will always be together with millions upon millions of others all around the world in The Body of Christ.

And I thank the Lord for that.

Amen