

March 2020 – Letter to the Vale of Stour Churches



Dear sisters and brothers in Christ

It is only a week and a half ago - last Monday - that the Prime Minister announced that we should no longer be meeting in social groups. Ever since then, each day has brought new and more stringent steps needed to protect ourselves and our communities from the threat of coronavirus. I know that many of you are now isolated in your homes and that this is likely to continue for some time.

Forgive me but I had intended to write to you last week but family circumstances meant that that was not possible.

Having returned to circuit I have spent the last few days chatting with people on the phone, finding out how people are doing in their different contexts. For some, your work is threatened and this may impact on your income, for others key medical treatments have been postponed and for many access to loved ones in care is no longer possible. These are but a few of your stories.

I am however greatly encouraged by the wonderful Christian response of the churches and our pastoral teams as together we have sought to identify who may be on their own and in need of support. Each of our churches in different ways has started to generate creative responses to this unprecedented situation. Children's activity packs, worship materials for home use and simple but important telephone conversations are all contributing to ensuring that no one is left out.

Indeed, we can see that in the face of this common adversity, despite a few people behaving poorly, many more in our society are stepping forward to volunteer in supporting a wide range of community initiatives.

I was ordained to 'word and sacrament' and on the face of it I can do neither! It seems to me that we are facing a re-imagining of church. The circuit leadership team do not have the answers to this so we welcome your comments. What is church? Word and worship, discipleship and pastoral care, Mission through evangelism and service. I wonder what these might look like and how these might happen in this current context?

I am acutely conscious that worship is traditionally what we might call the glue that holds the church together so it would be good to hear ideas about how we might share despite being isolated.

When we look at the experience of the early church in the book of Acts we see frequent examples of how adversity lead to growth. When Stephen was doing great work for the early church a false witness accused him of blasphemy and he was brought before the Sanhedrin. He delivered a powerful defence of Jesus as the Messiah and he was dragged out and stoned to death. And yet just a few chapters later in Acts 11:19... we read of this event leading to the church spreading its wings, speaking to new people in new ways and - with the hand of God with them - 'a great number became believers.'

I wonder if we might dare to step beyond the language of survival and instead of talking about how we might cope with this situation can we not pray and speak in the language of mission and growth?

I wonder how new people might come to hear of Jesus Christ and come to faith in him through this situation? How might we speak and share him now?

Meanwhile - looking at practical matters:

Michael Payne has kindly **prepared a Holy Week pack**. 400 copies are bring made so that this can be shared both electronically and posted through the doors of those not on-line.

Meanwhile we are exploring how we might **live-stream worship** for Easter Day so watch this space. Once we get the hang of this I want to offer regular on-line acts of worship.

And of course – **it's still not too late to join the circuit Lent WhatsApp group** to receive a daily reflection from me for Lent which includes daily prayers and a link to a related hymn. To do this contact Elaine (see below).

May God bless you and keep you at this difficult time. **Rev Alan Combes**

Isaiah 41:10 Do not be afraid—I am with you! I am your God—let nothing terrify you! I will make you strong and help you; I will protect you and save you.

Stop Press: Elaine has relocated the circuit office / email to her house. The email remains the same but we have a new circuit mobile number which she will check regularly: 07712 332075