

OOS 29 3 20
Behind Closed Doors

CTW

Psalm 133

How good and pleasant it is
when God's people live together in unity!
It is like precious oil poured on the head,
running down on the beard,
running down on Aaron's beard,
down on the collar of his robe.
It is as if the dew of Hermon
were falling on Mount Zion.
For there the Lord bestows his blessing,
even life for evermore

Hymn (BPW 473)

Brother, sister, let me serve you

Brother, sister, let me serve you;
let me be as Christ to you;
pray that I may have the grace to
let you be my servant too.

We are pilgrims on a journey,
and companions on the road;
we are here to help each other
walk the mile and bear the load.

I will hold the Christlight for you
in the nighttime of your fear;
I will hold my hand out to you,
speak the peace you long to hear.

I will weep when you are weeping;
when you laugh I'll laugh with you;
I will share your joy and sorrow,
till we've seen this journey through.

When we sing to God in heaven,
we shall find such harmony,
born of all we've known together
of Christ's love and agony.

Brother, sister, let me serve you;
let me be as Christ to you;
pray that I may have the grace to
let you be my servant too.

Prayers of praise and adoration

Lord of all love, how we thank you for all the kindness being shared during this time of crisis.

For everyone buying food for an elderly neighbour....

For every friendly phone call or letter...

For all uplifting messages shared on social media...

For the dedication of health workers...

For all the prayers being shared...

We praise and thank you for all these compassionate acts through which we experience your own tender care for us all.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,

your kingdom come,

your will be done,

on earth, as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread

and forgive us our sins

as we forgive those

who sin against us.

Lead us not into temptation

but deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours

now and forever. Amen.

Reminder:

Jesus said: *I am with you always*

I shared a way of remembering this promise in church a couple of weeks ago.

It's easy - there are five words; one for each finger of your hand.

So take your hand, and as you raise each finger, say it again:

I

AM

WITH

YOU

ALWAYS

The theme of our service today is *Behind Closed Doors!* I wonder what is going in behind your door. We are isolating ourselves to keep away people who may spread the virus to us. But today we remember that Jesus could walk through locked doors and he offers to enter the door of any heart willing to be open to him.

Recently Nick and I wrote a new Easter song and so, to get familiar with it, I thought we'd sing it this morning. It also fits well with today's theme, as it remembers, in its second verse, how Jesus appeared indoors after the disciples had locked everyone out. And, in a time of threat and darkness the song's chorus declares: *Love has surely triumphed.* We hope you enjoy it!

Song

Love has surely triumphed

The women took their spices
to anoint the man they loved
whose life had been cut short
by the ones who clung to power.
But look: the tomb was opened
with angels at its door
saying "Far not, for he has risen!"
He's alive forevermore!

Chorus

Love has surely triumphed!
Jesus lives again!
His life is freely offered to us all!

Cleopas and his friend
were dejected on the road,
sadly talking over
the demise of their dear Lord,
when he drew close beside them
explaining God's great plan
then they finally knew him
as he broke the bread again.

It seemed the dream was over;
the disciples locked their door
afraid of all the violence
that had killed the man they loved.
But Jesus stood among them
and showed his hands, his feet.
He ate the fish they offered

and blessed them with his peace.

So when your hope seems over
and your dreams have died away;
when love seems well-defeated
and evil powers hold sway,
take heart for he is with us
our hope will dawn again
to energise our living
with death-defying power!

Offering

Thank you to each of you who are continuing to support the church financially. If you normally give by cash, I wonder whether you might consider setting up a standing order or making one-off online payments. To do that please call or email Julia Lepoidevin, our treasurer. Do let me know if you would prefer to arrange for cash envelopes to be collected.

We pray together: And now Lord we thank you for the pleasure of giving to others. Make us generous with our money and our deeds, help us to remember individuals and charities in need, and use all our gifts to share your goodness in our challenged world. Amen.

Coping Behind Closed Doors

*And now for a new weekly feature, today delivered by **Louise Prue**. We're asking people to tell us, in five minutes, how they are coping behind closed doors. What are the joys and challenges? What are they doing with their time?*

Louise writes:

Funnily enough, it turns out that "not having enough time" was not the real reason I never get around to do all those jobs that I have been meaning to do - sorting out the kitchen cupboards, hand washing that delicate, tricky jumper, polishing the silver (heh, that sounds grand!), planting my sweetcorn seeds early enough ... it is that really that is not what keeps me interested, motivated, up and running.

For me, these days to come will, I know, be a real challenge because I like to rush around 'being helpful and useful' - I am not contemplative by nature - or perhaps just by habit. So I will need to learn a new way - and that feels scary - and not very welcome. I have realised that I don't like change, lack of routine, not knowing what to DO.

I also know that I am surrounded by those who love me. As every day we are having to tighten and adjust our contact with others, it is a case of exploring new ways of showing love to others.

I line manage 4 wonderful adult literacy tutors – we have set up a WhatsApp group on our phones and we start the day with lots of encouragement, banter, funny anecdotes ... and they are contacting their learners to support them, give them stuff to work on, help them with their children's home study work, most of all to show they care and they are there. And all around me there are examples of how people are caring for each other. On our allotments, 2 mins from our house, gardeners are enjoying the sunshine – with the sound of birdsong, and rotavators and mowers! “Big AL” is getting a megaphone to shout across the plots, gardeners are respectful about keeping apart but wave to each other! They are sensible and caring people, gardeners. Our lovely neighbour, John, is an engineer at University Hospital, setting up ventilators in new wards – his planned annual leave forgotten.

I am worried about my mum and brother in Kent; I facetime Baby Dylan, my 11 month old grandson, but I can't smell him or cuddle him or try to help Will and Sarah to encourage him to eat any solids. The problems and worries that we experienced before this crisis haven't gone away – they are just intensified – and there is less travelling involved!

I have been planning to finish paid work with Adult Ed this summer so that Martin and I can have more time together! As I write this, in my improvised study overlooking a deserted Hearsall Common, Martin is recording different parts for a song for this service; my phone pings with messages; my lovely colleague, Linda, has tried to video call but my image is upside down and it looks as if I am hanging from the ceiling. We laugh, fight the technology and win! And we are sad – and share that.

Last Thursday we closed all Adult Ed classes – and I felt so sad, especially for the parents and carers of adults with learning difficulties, who often have other complex needs and feel isolated at the best of times. On Monday we closed Tile Hill Library where I am based – and we said goodbye to each other and our regular borrowers and computer users. We borrowed as many books as we could carry. We couldn't hug.

So my top tips:

- Get dressed! – as early as possible! And wear a bright scarf – and thank you to everyone who has given me lovely scarves over the years – I am thinking of you.
- Don't let the technology defeat you – we can beat it into submission and make it work – or if stuck ring someone who understands.
- Praise God for springtime – a delight in the small things – daffodils, unfurling ferns, birdsong.....
- Ring! – use the phone, computer, Face time – whatever
- Keep reading!

This is the song that keeps running through my head:

*Praise God from whom all blessings flow, #
Praise him all creatures here below.
Praise him above you heavenly host,
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.*

And now Sarah Lewis leads our prayers of intercession:

Prayers of intercession led by Sarah Lewis

Heavenly Father we come to you in prayer to ask for your support and guidance in this deeply troubling time. We know that you are always there for us, and we bring our concerns and worries, both for others and ourselves, to you in prayer.

We pray and ask for your support for those who are facing what would normally be times of celebration, but who are faced with the disappointment of cancelling or postponing; perhaps a wedding, a baptism or a big birthday party. Lord, we name people we know to you in silence. Be with them Lord and help them to look forward to celebrating and on a different time.

Loving father – hear our prayer.

We bring to you Lord people who are facing what would normally be a worrying experience that is now magnified in these uncertain times. Perhaps people who have recently lost a loved one, with the difficulties involved in organising a funeral, people attending hospital for tests, treatment or surgery that simply cannot be put off until better times. We ask for your love to surround them all and give them strength to face the weeks ahead. In our silence we name those we know.

Loving father – hear our prayer.

We think of women who are pregnant and will give birth during this period into an uncertain world. The excitement of motherhood with its usual concerns but with happiness tinged by worries for healthcare professionals with an anxiety about keeping the baby safe. We pray for pregnant women worldwide but name in our silence those we know.

Loving father – hear our prayer.

Father God we ask for your support, care and wisdom for those helping in the fight against this virus. In particular we think of frontline staff working on the wards, paramedics, GPs and others working in key services. We pray that you will guide the scientists looking for a vaccine and treatment and ask that, regardless of nation, they will come together and form a bond and shared wisdom. Lord we have all benefited from the skills and wisdom of our healthcare professionals and from services brought by frontline staff. In our silence we name those helping to keep services functioning and pray for their safety.

Loving father – hear our prayer.

Finally Lord we ask for your love and guidance for us all. We ask that you keep us safe and help us adapt to a new way of living; in particular to learn about what really matters in life. We have all faced a major change in a short period but think particularly of people termed vulnerable or extremely vulnerable. Calm their worries, help them find coping strategies and ways of living over the next 12 weeks. Lord help us all to realise that we all have a role in this crisis; be it as a shopper, a phoner, a listener or as a media user. Guide us to appreciate what is really valuable in our lives – our friends, our family, our neighbours and even strangers who have become friends. Lord we all need your support and love but in our silence we name people we know who are really struggling right now.

Loving father – hear our prayer.

Readings

Luke 1: 26 - 38

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.'

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants for ever; his kingdom will never end.'

'How will this be,' Mary asked the angel, 'since I am a virgin?'

The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called[a] the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail.'

'I am the Lord's servant,' Mary answered. 'May your word to me be fulfilled.' Then the angel left her.

John 20: 19 - 23

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

Again Jesus said, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.'

Revelation 3: 14 - 22

'To the angel of the church in Laodicea write:

These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing." But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so that you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so that you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so that you can see.

Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Sermon

Behind Closed Doors

Well I've come to War Memorial Park on a beautiful afternoon - it's Wednesday afternoon, the sun is shining - I'm hoping you'll hear some birds now and again, maybe the hiss of the cars, maybe some joggers going by. What keeps God out of the world? What keeps God away from people?

I was at a Baptist Ministers' conference recently and the worship was very zippy with lots of exciting modern songs, and one of them had a bridge - that's a section towards the end of the song that gets repeated and more emotional - and it was saying:

there's no wall you won't tear down, coming after me

there's no wall you won't tear down, coming after me

And people were worshipping away but I was a bit disturbed by the song. I was thinking, well, is that the way God operates, tearing down the walls?

What keeps God out? Will a locked door keep him out? A high wall? A fence? What will keep God out?

Well forgive me this Sunday for ransacking the Easter stories and picking the one about the locked room. The disciples had seen their Master Jesus condemned and abused and stripped and mocked and crucified and buried. They were part of a defeated movement. And they feared that they would be the next to be arrested, so they locked the doors to that upper room out of fear.

Once when my daughter was living in Hertfordshire and my wife and I lived in Bristol with our youngest son Thom, my daughter Kate decided to visit us in the middle of the night without telling us. But she told Thom and he let her in and she bedded down on one of the sofas in the lounge and then hey presto! There in the morning was Kate! Well it wasn't breaking and entering of course. She came through a door that had been locked, but she was 100% welcome, as well as 100% unexpected!

And what might have kept Jesus out of that upper room would not have been the locked doors, but an unwelcoming heart. As it was he appeared before them, and said *Peace be with you*.

My wife Ruth, to mention her again, she used to lock her phone with a passcode and it amused me that she wouldn't tell me the number of the passcode. It amused me, not because I wanted to read her messages or use her phone, but because she seemed to think that the reason I would not use her phone was because she had the passcode on. Whereas of course the reason I would not use her phone was because I respected her and trusted her and loved her.

In the same way what keeps Jesus out - it's not a locked door or a high wall, but an unready heart. Famously, as we heard from Revelation, it's not just an unready heart, it's **a lukewarm heart**. And maybe we could think that indifference is the opposite to love, not hatred. And the Laodeceans, to whom that letter was written, were famous, were wealthy. And wealth seems to have been the problem. It cooled their spiritual fervour to a tepidity. They felt they didn't need other people; they felt they didn't need God, and that lukewarmness had closed off their hearts.

If you like art you'll probably be thinking already of Holman Hunt's *Light of the World* picture in connection with this reading, where Jesus is depicted carrying a lantern, standing outside a door waiting for the door to be opened because there is no handle on the outside of the door; it can only be opened from the inside. And Jesus can only come into the human heart if it's opened from the inside.

It's not that Jesus lacks the power to get in, it's just because that heart is not positioned in such a way that it can hold the love of God or any real love. It's a bit like wondering why a closed fist won't hold water. If we want to take some water in

our hands we have to open them so they become a container for the water. In the same way if we want to hold the love of Jesus in our hearts we have to open them up to contain his love.

In Florence there's a Convent or a monastery - the San Marco Convent - and most of its walls were painted with beautiful frescoes by Fra Angelico, and one of them is of the Annunciation. And you can see Gabriel and Mary in that beautiful painting depicted outside with Roman-style porticos around the edge of the garden because the artist was trying to depict the scene as the same as the surroundings in which it was painted, where the monks would see the painting. He was saying to the monks: Here's a way of imagining Gabriel visiting Mary in your very home; in your very garden.

So now, as we face lockdown, seclusion and separation, it's wonderful to think that, if our hearts are open, maybe God will send his angels to us too, maybe we too will reach out in love.

Here at the park I can see couples walking, but they're walking some distance from each other. I can see lots of individuals. I can see families out on bike rides, but there are far fewer people than we would normally expect. It's a strange old time. We're all separated off, most of us not seeing many people. I don't know about you, but I'm home alone most of the time. Separated from my grandchildren and my daughter and son-in-law over the road. I've not seen my girlfriend: she's in her house; I'm in mine. I'm living on my own. Well, no different from what many of you are doing!

But it's hard isn't it? It's not easy when we're used to being with people, and what I've found is that what perks me up sometimes, what makes me feel a connection to God, is just reaching out in love in whatever way I can to the people who are around me: Making a phone call, sending a message, posting on Facebook, finding any way, sending a letter, posting a card, doing anything we can to reach out to the people that we love, and even the people we don't know all that well... Because we just miss them! We're made to be together! And that distance between us pains us. And I suppose I'm finding that the attempt to breach that distance is what heals me, and what shapes my heart to be open to receiving love, as those hands might have been able to carry water.

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. It's not that Jesus can't get through a door; he can get through a door! But our hearts need to be shaped right if we're going to hold his love. So I'm finding, in this time of social distancing, of seclusion and isolation, that if I reach out in prayer, in messages, on whatsapp, in whatever way I can, that those bonds of love seem even more precious and perhaps I feel them with even greater strength.

So don't let a virus or a locked door, or a government regulation separate you from the core reality of love. That love is what really does make the world go round. But shape your heart to receive and to share that love. To hold that love!

I miss you all so much. It's why I keep phoning you up! It cheers me up when I phone, and maybe, who knows, it might cheer you up too. And if I haven't phoned you up yet, well watch out, I'll be on your case next week or the week after, probably. Humour me! It might help me, even if it doesn't help you! Because we ARE one! We belong together! And the bond of love is ever more precious as we spend this time in social distancing.

So, stay strong! Stay believing. Stay trusting! Because we **will** get through this, together. Won't we? Amen!

Song

Let my soul be as a sponge
soaking up the water
of your gentle way of life.
Let my soul be as a drum
forever resonating
with the rhythm of your heart.

Chorus

*Your parenting brings confidence!
Your kingship perfect harmony!
Your will is shared prosperity!
Your bread is baked for everyone!
Your pardon cascades liberty!
Oh rescue me from counterfeits:
I choose to live your way!
I choose to live your way!*

Let my soul be as a boat
coursing on the current
of the river of your love.
Let my soul be as a child
tenderly enfolded
in the cradle of your arms.

Let my soul be as a star
shining as a portent
of the coming of the king!
Let my soul be truly wild
energised to labour

for the way things ought to be.

The Grace

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ;
the love of God;
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with us all
now and always. Amen.

Sung blessing

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you
wherever he may send you;
may he guide you through the wilderness,
protect you through the storm;
may he bring you home rejoicing
at the wonders he has shown you;
may he bring you home rejoicing
once again into our doors.



The Light of the World, by Holman Hunt



The Annunciation, by Fra Angelico