

Fifth Sunday of Lent, 29th March 2020

Dear Friends,

What a week it has been! Last Sunday, we grappled with celebrating Mothering Sunday from home in order to slow the spread of Coronavirus. The very next evening, our Prime Minister explained that we were now in a 'Lockdown' situation, with only key-workers able to leave their homes. We have all needed to make serious re-adjustments to our daily lives in order to honour this preventive control and to ensure social distancing is safely observed - even amongst family members within our own homes. By Thursday evening, though, the indomitable British spirit got creative!

At 8pm, communities joined together to give thanks for our fabulous NHS staff who are working at the coal-face of the Coronavirus pandemic. The BIG APPLAUSE was a creative way for us to circumvent isolation and show our gratitude to our nurses, doctors, GP's and carers - from our front doors, windows, balconies and gardens. It was amazing to hear clapping and cheering and car horns hooting all across the country! In Winchester, a friend told me that from the top of the hill near Peter Symonds College, it felt as if she could hear the Little Town of Bethlehem below!



In the midst of so much change and anxiety, it is a joy to see many wonderful things happening as we re-ignite our gift of compassion and community. Our local COVID-19 support groups are hard at work. I was deeply moved this week to be a recipient of this kindness myself, as a Crawley resident collected a prescription for me. His generosity has moved me more than I can express. This sweet trinity of new-born lambs is another wonderful sign – they have arrived in our world to remind us of the eternal greatness of God. No matter how much we have abused His gift of Creation, our loving Father continues to show His love for us. What names would you give to these three beautiful creatures, I wonder, if you tried to encapsulate in mere words the many blessings God has poured upon us through the riches of His grace?

'Did I not tell you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?'

(John 11: 40)

On this Fifth Sunday of Lent, our Gospel reading (John 11.1-45), clearly speaks into our current predicament. John paints a picture of disease and uncertainty in the lives of Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha. Lazarus had died after a devastating illness. His sisters, unable to help him, are distraught. They had been desperate for Jesus to come and save their brother, but now the women are *furious* that Jesus seems to have disappeared just as they need Him most. When He finally comes back to Bethany from Jerusalem (only about two miles away as the donkey trots) and FOUR days after Lazarus has died, Jesus experiences the meaning of the phrase *'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned!'* Both sisters are incandescent and grieving. Individually, they unleash their anger and bewilderment at Jesus, who, to their immense surprise breaks down in tears. He cries for his beloved friend, Lazarus. His human heart understands the grief we all feel when someone we love dies. We feel Jesus' compassion as He shares the sisters' loss. Tenderly, he says to them:

'I am the resurrection and the life. They who believe in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.'

At Lazarus' tomb, Jesus spends time in prayer asking God for Lazarus to be given new life. Jesus trusts in the saving grace of His Father's compassion for those He loves. As Lazarus walks from the tomb, blinking in the sunlight, the sisters fall at Jesus' feet. They believe He is the Christ and they give their lives to Him in the hope He offers. The miracle of Lazarus' resurrection is a blessing to us in our Lenten Journey to the Cross and a comfort as we face the scourge of Coronavirus. It helps us understand God's desire to be fully present in our human experience, and points us to the meaning of Jesus' own death and resurrection. Lazarus is blessed with the same God-given gift of new life which is open to each of us. If we trust in Jesus' saving love, our faith will set us free from the bonds of earthly death, whenever and however it comes to us.

So what would you call those three beautiful lambs? I think I would call them Faith, Hope and Charity. These are the qualities which encapsulate the selflessness of NHS workers as they care for our loved ones. They are the same gifts which inspire us to reach out to our neighbours in need. In prayer, in hope and in care of others, maybe the post-Coronavirus world we inhabit might indeed reflect the glory of God as we make radical changes in our lives to honour the blessing of Creation He gifts us with.

With my love in Christ for you all,

Jax

Revd Jax Machin, Rector, The Downs Benefice

Collect Prayer for the Fifth Sunday of Lent:

Most merciful God, who by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ delivered and saved the world: grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross we may triumph in the power of his victory; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.