Gospel …John 9

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

Today is Mothering Sunday, and also the fourth Sunday of Lent, and the Gospel reading you just heard is the one appointed for the fourth Sunday of Lent. I could have used any or indeed all of the gospel readings this morning, because I suspect that anything we read will spiral round somehow to the situation in which we find ourselves today and for the next many weeks.

I have feared since the beginning of this Coronavirus outbreak that some tinpot preacher somewhere would be telling us that the wrath of God is being visited upon us for our many 21st century sins and transgressions. Thankfully this has not happened – yet! - and you will not ever hear anything of this nature from me.

And the reason why you won’t lies firmly in this gospel reading from John chapter 9: the blind man comes to Jesus for healing and the crowd immediately wants to know who sinned – was it the man or was it his parents? In situations of suffering, people always want to know who is to blame/who is responsible. But Jesus is absolutely clear on this point: no one is ‘to blame’.

It really only makes things worse when the President of the United States refers to Covid19 as the Chinese virus – there’s that blame again; let’s put all this chaos on some other beleaguered nation… No, let’s not.

Nonetheless, the man’s blindness is certainly an opportunity for the grace of God to be operative in the world. The whole story of the New Testament – the whole story of the life and times of Jesus – is not to do with the whys and wherefores of suffering, but rather about the overcoming of suffering and pain. That overcoming of suffering is both where we need to seek Jesus and where we need to be ourselves.

Let’s look instead for where God is at work and for where God’s grace is apparent. God’s grace is in the number of people who have contacted me to offer help to the lonely and isolated in our community, whether members of this church or not.

God’s grace is in the number of greetings and farewells that include phrases like: stay safe; be well; take care. We know that, beyond normal handwashing and social distancing, there is little else we can do to keep ourselves safe, but all these phrases express kind thoughts, good intention, the prayers, if you like, of people who care about our wellbeing.

On this Mothering Sunday, I am here in the mother church alone, celebrating the Eucharist in a way far different from how we would have done it had we been able to gather as we usually do. But I am here, on behalf of all of us, knowing the reassurance of God that all will ultimately be well.

The two gospels I could have chosen from for the Mothering Sunday KEYS service that we had planned both told stories of Mary the mother of Jesus: the first is one we heard not very long ago, when Jesus was presented in the temple as an infant, and the aged Simeon, having said Now Lord you let your servant depart in peace, utters that prophecy to Mary: and a sword will pierce your own heart too.

And the second is that bit where Jesus, from the cross, says to Mary and to John: Behold your son and behold your mother, creating a whole new set of familial relationships – relationships of the utmost love and trust and profound caring. Some people have never experienced such relationships themselves, nor had opportunity to express them – and we pray particularly for them today.

We are seeing mothers all over the country now, but perhaps particularly here in this corner of the UK, juggling working from home with having children now at home from school – not in the Let’s all have a nice holiday and do high octane activity stuff because it is only for a couple of weeks – or at most six weeks over the summer, but in the This is how we have to live for an undefined number of weeks that is likely to be many more than six - way. It’s not holiday time – and we can’t go out and about freely and we do have to pay acute attention to stuff we normally barely even think about.

So while we tend to look to mothers at times when we need reassurance, we can see that they too are struggling. We share a yearning to care for all those who are under threat, but the task seems too big.

When it comes down to it, what we all need to hear today and in the coming weeks is that we are held, loved, treasured. However threatening this virus may be – for people we love who are especially vulnerable; for our own mental welfare when the freedoms we take for granted are restricted; for the economy of this country even – we have to remember that this is not a judgement; it is a situation in which we want to be reassured. And we **will** get through this, because God is God, and we are loved, held, treasured.

On the one hand we see around us the crass self-preoccupation of some people, buying up loo rolls and pasta, hoarding stuff they really don’t need, that will delay the recovery of stocks of normal groceries, but on the other hand, we see people coming together, not looking for praise or thanks but simply caring for neighbours.

This is the body of Christ: the hands and feet and eyes and ears of Christ – not in the building, which is the Church only in one sense, but out in the world, where the church is active and living the gospel in every possible sense.

And so the question we should ask is not: Is this judgement or the wrath of God? But How do **we** release the grace of God into this difficult situation? The blind man was told to go to the pool of Siloam to get the mud and then wash it off. He has to join in the act of grace.

I am overloading you with bits of Bible this morning, but check out the story of the man with the withered hand, which you can find in all three of the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). Jesus said to him: Stretch out your hand, and even though it was withered, the man reached out. And was healed.

We need to join in so that God can amplify small acts of kindness and fullness – all these things demonstrate divine love. **They** are what will make the situation better. **They** are what will reflect who God is among us. And God is good.

Pray for me this week, as I will be doing for each one of you. When prayer is all we can do, let us learn how to be faithful in it and to share in the work of the God who is both Father and mother to us all.

**Amen**