**22nd March 2020**

***Call to Worship***

***based on Psalm 23*

The Lord is our shepherd,
we shall not want.
He makes us lie down in green pastures.
He leads us beside still waters.
Come, let us worship the Lord, the holy God, the faithful one, and let our souls be restored.**

**HYMN Great is thy faithfulness**

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**A gathering prayer**

**Jesus, our shepherd,
holy and anointed one –
as we gather here today,
open our eyes to see you,
and hearts that we may grow in faith.
Amen.**

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**A prayer of approach**

**As we come before your throne,
take away our blindness, Lord.
Open our eyes that we might truly see you:
our shepherd, our comforter, our redeemer.
Amen.**

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**A prayer of confession**

**God of grace, forgive the blindness that stops us
from seeing the best in people,
assuming that we are always right, so others must be wrong.

Forgive the blindness that sometimes makes us
regard some people as inferior,
or when we haven’t allowed them a point of view
because of disability or status.

Forgive our blindness to poverty, to prejudice, to injustice.
Forgive our blindness when we see people as ‘nobodies’.
Forgive us, Lord, and open our eyes to wonder and to possibilities,
to relationships and to community.
Amen.**

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**A prayer of praise and adoration**

***based on Psalm 23*

Thank you, Lord, for the good gifts that you have given us.
We praise you because you have prepared a banquet for us:
you have anointed us with oil and our cup overflows.
Thank you that your goodness and mercy
follows us all the days of our lives,
and we will dwell in your house our whole life long.
We give you thanks and praise that when we are far off,
when we are blind to everything around us,
you do not abandon us,
but you come and find us, you seek us out.
Thank you, Lord.
Amen.**

**The Bible encourages us to pray if we are worried and ask God for our needs: so invite you to join with me in praying the prayer Jesus taught us:**

**Our Father,who art in heaven,**

**hallowed be thy name;**

**thy kingdom come;**

**thy will be done;**

**on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread.**

**And forgive us our trespasses,**

**as we forgive those who trespass against us.**

**And lead us not into temptation;**

**but deliver us from evil.**

**For thine is the kingdom,**

**the power, and the glory**

**for ever and ever. Amen**

**Gospel: John 9.1-41**

There’s a website[[1]](#endnote-1) I’ve come across called ‘got paper’ that helps you calculate how many toilet rolls you actually need. The website asks you how many poops you make a day. How many wipes you take and how many sheets you use for each wipe. It asks the same about pees. The average toilet roll has about 200 sheets and therefore the website calculates how many toilet rolls you need each week whilst in quarantine. It tries to get over the message – only take what you need in this present crisis.

I’ll come back to toilet roll later. This sermon is going to be a bit loo-dicrous!

Our gospel reading is John 9. Let’s look at this passage and see what it says to us in our present crisis.

The context is that Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem during the Jewish Feast of Booths (see John 7), which commemorates Israel’s time in the wilderness under Moses after they had escaped from slavery in Egypt. On the festival’s opening night, four golden candlesticks were lit in the Temple to symbolize God leading his people through the wilderness by pillars of cloud and fire (Exodus 13.17-22). This ritual informs John’s testimony to Jesus in this passage as the light of the world (8.12).

It is appropriate to apply that comparison of walking into a wilderness to our present situation. The Israelites walking in the wilderness were together against the adversities, but they were also at times afraid, quarrelsome and desperate. I know for many people we are entering into a time when anxieties over the coronavirus and if or when you might get it, your fears for loved ones, especially those more vulnerable to the disease, your anxieties over money, jobs, businesses, mental health, food provision, care of children and the disabled and frail elderly are causing much concern. In these difficult times we all need a guiding light – to lead us through the wilderness.

Times like this will bring out the best and the worst in humanity.

Already people are showing great acts of kindness and compassion to others. People are collectively standing together. Locally many people have already volunteered to be street volunteers in a scheme coordinated by GL11 and supported by churches schools and statutory organizations. If you can support and deliver services for approx. 60 families and individuals within specific street/s within Dursley/Cam, then let me know and I will pass on your details.

In our own congregation I’m aware of health workers on the front line who are dealing with people with coronavirus, people in the food industry who are ensuring that our supermarket shelves are replenished, teachers caring for children of key workers, mothers and fathers looking after their own children. One of our members has his business now making ventilators. WE all have a part to play even if it is only in the act of self-isolating or keeping that social distance: ‘Don’t stand so close to me’ as the Police sang in the old days! The strategy is that if we do that over these coming months, we may save hundreds of thousands of lives.

The government has been trying to support people in their financial concerns. Jesus told an astute story about the man forgiven his own huge debt, then beating someone up for a small debt owed to him. (Matthew 18.21-35). As we worry for countless businesses, mortgages, interrupted wages and redundancies, we pray for our financial institutions, that when a modest debt is set before them, they will remember how much they were bailed out in another crisis and find ways to set people free.

In all these ways we can be carriers of light in a time of darkness. Jesus said in his sermon on the mount that we are the light of the world. Here he says ‘I am the light of the world’. God is working through us, through scientists, through medics, through delivery people, through teachers, through you and through me. Let’s shine a light where we can.

Facts and reason can shine a light on any fears in a crisis. There is a risk to life from this disease, but all the facts suggest it is a small risk – even in the most vulnerable groups – so we need to remind ourselves of that – shine a light into those anxieties and fears. You are not alone, and others can help and want to help – that’s the best of humanity.

One of the beautiful things about being part of a church is the intergenerational and cross-community relationships that are made within it. My hope – and what I am already beginning to see - is that in these times those connections will be strengthened, and indeed new relationships will be formed. Physical distance does not have to bring social distance, thanks especially to advances in communications technology such as we are using today to come together.

But inevitably, because we are only human, times like this will also bring out the worst in us.



The blind man in the gospel story, is not just low in economic status as a beggar, but also stigmatized as a sinner because of his disability (v.2). The man’s condition excludes him from Temple worship (Leviticus 21.16-24), and affects his parents, who are reluctant to identify too closely with him later in the story (vv.2,20-23). The Pharisees are critical, both of the blind man and of Jesus.

In the present situation people will inevitably be asking questions and participating in the blame game. President Trump, always one to spread division and rancor, accused the Chinese for starting this and then blamed Europe for its spread. People are being blamed for panic buying and stockpiling. The Italians responded to coronavirus lockdown by singing from their balconies. We respond by buying up toilet rolls!

I chuckled at this cartoon:

One dinosaur spots an asteroid coming towards them. The other dinosaur says, ‘Let’s get some toilet paper!’

In the gospel story the blind man gets picked on because he has a disability. I have talked with many people who feel picked on because they are in the vulnerable group and see themselves as expendable; or being accused of being irresponsible. The blame game is never good and is corrosive when we need to work together – let’s try and continue to spread light not fear and accusation. I pray in our current confinement that when tempers flare and hurtful words fly, we will be sincere in apology and with the balm of God’s forgiveness we may heal one another’s hurts.

The Pharisees ask the deep philosophical, indeed theological question ‘is the man born blind because of his sin or his parents’ sin?’ This was in a time when if something bad happened to you it was assumed that it was your fault somehow. I have already had a few people say this is the End of Days, the Apocalypse, Armageddon! God sent plagues to Pharaoh in the time of Moses God is sending us coronavirus to punish us now!

I don’t claim to have a hotline to the almighty as others may do – but I can only go on what I know, what has been revealed to us about the nature of God. The Bible says Jesus is the full revelation of the nature of God and in this story, for example, Jesus didn’t say anyone was to blame for the man’s blindness but that he had come to bring light in the darkness, healing and hope. Jesus sees here an opportunity to do God’s work. God is not in the business of punishing people but inspiring us to acts of healing and hope.

Back to my dinosaurs and their reaction to the asteroid coming to hit them. It is always interesting how people react in a crisis. What they think is the most essential thing to do. What matters most to them. Who do they turn to?

The world is making those decisions now. What about you?

This is Mothering Sunday and I’m sure many of us need our families around us. The blind man in this passage was disowned by his family. We may be appalled by the parents’ lack of support for their son. On Mothering Sunday, we bring to God all our flawed family relationships to be healed in the warm light of Christ’s love. We can only pray that God may show us what it means to honour our mother and father even when they have let us down. We pray for any parents struggling with their children’s life choices. We pray for families divided by regret. We pray for the mental health of children, absorbing anxiety from the adults around them. We pray for those children feeling hard done to because they will have to continue in school because their parents are key workers at this time. May God give us pause to hear their feelings and be healed by their capacity for play. Children playing can transport us all away from our worries if we let it.

For many of us on this day due to our enforced separation, may God show us how to be there when we can’t be there. God bless you in your Mothers Day celebrations.

But Jesus says in this passage he is our light. He promises to be there for us, for each one of us.

The blind man in this story is so thank full for his encounter with Jesus and the literal touch Jesus has had on his life. Jesus returns to find a man whose faith has grown so much in the face of adversity that he is able to make a confession of faith: ‘Lord I believe’ he says (verse 48). As such, he is an example in John’s Gospel of the courageous faith the first Christians need in their struggles with adversaries.

One person told me of how they met up with a ninety year old in the supermarket this week, shopping for essentials. ‘Were they worried about the present situation?’ they asked the old person. ‘Yes’ they said. It is concerning. But whatever happens, so long as I am with Jesus, I’ll be OK,’ they replied.

In a moment we will sing that well known hymn ‘Now thank we all our God’. It reminds us of the blessings in life we have, from our mother’s arms onwards. It echoes St Paul’s encouragement to give thanks in all circumstances (Philippians 4). He said that from prison whilst awaiting execution. He wanted to remain positive and be thankful for whatever circumstances had come his way.

It’s a positive discipline to have – that while we lament for our isolation and the challenges it imposes on us, we can also be thankful for the new possibilities it opens up to us – to appreciate each other again, to phone friends, take up new interests, find time to catch up with ourselves and those we love, to think deeply of our world and how we have related in the past – perhaps selfishly, independently, individually and how when it comes to the crunch, we need each other, we need to support each other. Let us be thankful for these lessons and how we may reshape our world when, God willing, we come out the other side.

*Now thank we all our God* was written by Martin Rinkart who was a Lutheran minister who came to [Eilenburg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eilenburg%22%20%5Co%20%22Eilenburg), [Saxony](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saxony) at the beginning of the [Thirty Years' War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thirty_Years%27_War). The walled city of Eilenburg became the refuge for political and military fugitives, but the result was overcrowding, and deadly pestilence and famine. Armies overran it three times. The Rinkart home was a refuge for the victims, even though he was often hard-pressed to provide for his own family. During the height of a severe plague in 1637, Rinkart was the only surviving pastor in Eilenburg, conducting as many as 50 funerals in a day. He performed more than 4000 funerals in that year, including that of his wife. Yet he wrote this hymn:

Now thank we all our God,
with heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things has done,
in Whom this world rejoices;
Who from our mothers’ arms
has blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love,
and still is ours today.

O may this bounteous God
through all our life be near us,
With ever joyful hearts
and blessed peace to cheer us;
And keep us in His grace,
and guide us when perplexed;
And free us from all ills,
in this world and the next!

God grant you a thankful and hopeful heart. God protect you and guide you. Be a light of compassion and care at this dark time. May God’s grace be with us all.

**Prayer of lament and resistance by Revd David Warbrick[[2]](#endnote-2)**

We grieve with the lonely, friendly visits, safe social spaces, lunch club lifelines now out of reach.

We grieve with one another when our mental health feels fragile and the very contact that would help is prohibited.

We lament with those suddenly needing benefits, frustrated by pernicious delays.

We lament with leaders wishing they could solve things, fix things.

We grieve for those who have died because of Corona Virus and other more prevalent, more preventable disease.

We lament any arrogant carelessness that has under resourced health and social care, while praying, too for countries less well served.

We grieve with one another wanting a Mothering Sunday kiss.

We lament with those whose wedding plans are in tatters.

We grieve with those whose bereavement is surely enough to bear without having difficult decisions about funeral gatherings.

We grieve with musicians and sports men and women who so enrich our lives but whose livelihood is threatened.

We long to forget this preoccupation with contagion.

We long to get back to meaningful work.

We long for a pint with a mate, coffee with another new parent, a swim, or a great concert.

We long to go out and play.

We long for carefree hugs. Especially today, with our mothers.

As we do so, God, deepen our respect and sympathy for the people for whom isolation, poor sanitation, lack of safe space to play, or economic deprivation have been the norm for ever.

Defiant and determined to learn, we dare to thank you that a virus ignores social class, does not notice ethnicity, does not obey national borders. As we put huge energy and ingenuity into making a vaccine, in the meantime may your Spirit begin to heal our prejudices. Work on our hearts to recalibrate our priorities as a church and as a nation. Match resistance to disease with openness to each other. In the hurt of enforced isolation, in the longing for freedom to interact, in the ache of imposed solitude, reveal to us the foolishness of isolationism and individualism, so little questioned when all seems well.

Refresh our confidence that every human being is your precious child;

Help us to see the brothers and sisters you have given us to care for.

 Like the blind man in the gospel story give us such resilient joy, and kindle our eagerness to grow in knowledge of you and be a light to those around us.

We ask these prayers in Jesus name. Amen

HYMN: **Now thank we all our God**

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| Today is the National Day of Prayer and Action re. the Coronavirus panedmic, organised by the [Presidents of Churches Together in England](https://thykingdom.us14.list-manage.com/track/click?u=18e8eab990ad0445d3b3aacf9&id=6930b30319&e=ae45ff3a42).Join in prayer throughout the day, but particularly at 7pm (GMT), to light a #candleofhope – visually symbolising the Light of Life, Jesus Christ, our hope and source in prayer.Share your #CandleOfHope images with @ChurchesEngland on social media. |

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| ***'The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.'*****Philippians 4: 6 -7** |

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Remind you of the activities and resources Bobbie our children’s worker and Steph our youth worker have posted on the Tab’s website for today – on the Tab Too and Tab youth page.

Prayer on the Tab youth page on our website dursleytab.org.uk

Ask us to:

Take a moment to talk to God about anything you are worried about, and pray for people in your family or community, today may think especially of our mothers. And then a prayer:

Jesus, light of the world,
help us to shine with your light
in everything we do this week.
Help us to follow in your footsteps
and to give you glory
when we see your healing hand at work.
Jesus, send us out in your light.

**Amen.**

The blessing of God Father Son and Holy Spirit be with us all.

Amen

1. <https://got-paper.com/?fbclid=IwAR0VkLQEuXP1VTrIQBgWqiswKFdepqX2565nHX9i_svgPNLcVDwohl4qXg4> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Revd David Warbrick* [*https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2020/106-march-april-2020-a/lent-4-mothering-sunday/postscript*](https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2020/106-march-april-2020-a/lent-4-mothering-sunday/postscript) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)