



Letters from Lockdown

Wednesday 25 March

The Apostle Paul wrote the book of Philippians whilst he was under house arrest in Rome. He couldn't be with God's people in person, so he wrote a letter to encourage them to work out their salvation with fear and trembling. Of course, the situation we find ourselves in today is very different, but there are obvious parallels. Like Paul, as your pastor I have you in my heart. I am aware this is a hard time, and already feel the pain of being unable to meet together. I would love to be able to talk and pray with you in person, but seeing that we can't do that, I thought I would follow Paul's example in writing a short reflection each day to help us stand firm in the Lord. Obviously, you'll be able to read these using the SRM App, but please pass these on to people in our church family you are in touch with who are particularly isolated at the moment.

In Philippians 1:8 Paul writes, *God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.* Sometimes it is only when something is taken away that we really appreciated what we had, and I think it could be like that over the next few months. We're only on day two of lockdown, but I'm sure like me, many of you are already missing meeting with God's people. Technology offers us new ways of communicating, but they cannot replace gathering together to praise and worship God. As we all experience this physical isolation it perhaps gives us a greater compassion and understanding for those who experience this situation normally; whether that be here in the UK through illness, or our brothers and sisters across the world who are unable to meet because of persecution.

Paul goes on to write what he is praying for the Philippians in verses 9-11:

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ - to the glory and praise of God.

This would be a good prayer to pray for ourselves and one another today - we certainly need discernment amidst all these changes! Might this season be one in which we appreciate the gift that God has given to us in one another. Follow Paul's example today by making the most of whatever means you can to encourage your church family even if you can't be with them. Perhaps you could pray the prayer above for someone specific and then send them a message to let them know.

Love in Christ,

Pastor Matthew

Thursday 26 March

Over the past few weeks many things we took as secure and certain have disappeared. Things we invest so much of our lives in have been taken away almost overnight. premier league football has stopped mid-season; flights and holidays have been cancelled; businesses have shut their doors; children have been sent home from school; exams are off; stocks and shares have plummeted; social plans have been wiped out our diaries. It has been a stark reminder of just how fragile and fleeting things of this earth really are. Jesus speaks about this in Matthew 6:19-21:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The impact of coronavirus helps us to see things for what they really are. This earth is passing away, and its treasures will not last. They can be taken away in an instant. A moment like this gives us chance to reflect on where our treasure

is. So often the bulk of our investment is on earth rather than in heaven, whether that be our time, our money, our ambitions, our prayers.

Jesus urges us to invest in something more secure. What a comfort it is in a time like this, that in Christ we have an inheritance that coronavirus cannot touch. 1 Peter 1:3-5 says:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

If we will allow it the disruption of this virus may well be a mercy from God. It is a glimpse of what will happen when Jesus returns. Suddenly the treasures of this earth will count for nothing, and the secure riches of heaven will be revealed. We would be wise to pay attention and use this opportunity to reflect on where our treasure is. Are we investing in what is passing away, or storing up treasure that will last forever?

Love in Christ,

Pastor Matthew

Friday 27 March

The impact of coronavirus will bring all kinds of trials (1 Peter 1:6), and I'm sure many of us are beginning to feel the effects. This might be in the discouragement of social isolation, the disappointment of cancelled plans, the economic uncertainty of losing income, the stress of rapid social change, the weight of caring for the sick, or the pain of physical suffering. It is hard to see much good in all that is going on. Yet we have a God who is able to work out his good purposes, even through trials and suffering.

The most obvious example of this is the cross. Those of us reading the lent devotional *Sitting at Jesus' Feet* were looking at this today. On the surface of it the cross looks like a disaster. What could be worse than God's chosen King being betrayed, arrested, accused, and killed. Yet we know God in his wisdom was wonderfully working out his glorious plan of salvation.

Our God can work out his good purposes through times of trial as well as times of plenty. Listen to how Peter goes on in 1 Peter 1:7

These [trials] have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith - of greater worth than gold, which perished even though refined by fire - may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.

If we will let him, God can be refining us during this time of trial. Purifying us and perfecting us as his people. In the lent devotional we looked at a very similar idea back in John 15 - as gardener our heavenly Father prunes us. If you've ever seen a tree after it's been pruned it looks brutal, but pruning is not done in malice but in love. God prunes us as his people so that we become more fruitful.

It is not automatic, however, that hard times will purify us as God's people. Think of the parable of the sower in Mark 4. The seed that fell on rocky soil only had shallow roots, and when the heat comes it withers away.

There is a temptation, when we can't meet together, to pull back from fellowship with God and his people, but this is not the time to do that. Seasons of trials like this are a time to seek God, to walk closely with him, to encourage one another and spur one another on. To that end I'd encourage you to take initiative in using the resources we are making available as a church and be creative in finding ways to connect to other members of the church family.

My prayer for us as a church, is that we come out of this time of trial purified, and more fruitful, rather than withered from the heat. We have a God who is able to work good in the midst of trial, so let's seek him and draw close to him at this time and help one another to do the same.

Love in Christ,

Pastor Matthew

Tuesday 31 March

In our current situation it is easy to focus entirely on the restrictions. Things we don't have. Things we can't do. Inevitably this leads to a fairly negative outlook, and many of us may have already slipped into grumbling, discouragement, or despair.

In Philippians 4:11-13 Paul says it is possible to find contentment as a Christian whatever circumstance we find ourselves in, and I take it that includes coronavirus!

I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

What is Paul's secret? Well, one important part of contentment is thankfulness. However bleak our circumstances might be, there will be things we have to be thankful for. In 1 Thessalonians 5:18 Paul commands us to

give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

Interestingly, in this moment when many 'certainties' of life are stripped away we will have found ourselves thankful for things we previously took for granted. Some of us will have been thanking God for our daily bread in a way we haven't done before. Others will be grateful to God for the family around them, or the house they live in, or the sunshine of spring.

Here is an exercise to do today to cultivate thankfulness. Take a piece of paper or a notebook and try to write down 50 things you are thankful to God for. You might struggle at first but press on. It will help you to notice God's goodness to you in ways that you might not always see.

If you're stuck for ideas try reading Ephesians 1 where Paul reminds us that we have been *blessed in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ*. Or read Psalm 103 which lists many of the benefits we enjoy as God's people so that we might not forget.

Paul had to learn to be content in any and every situation. Might the Lord be teaching us that as his people over the coming months.

Love in Christ,

Matthew

Wednesday 1 April

Christians have faced plague before. In the third century the plague of Cyprian (249-262 AD) swept through the Roman Empire. At one point 5000 people were dying every day in Rome. Amidst this destruction the selfless response of God's people was distinctive and drew many people to become followers of Jesus Christ. There was no state healthcare in that day, and whilst the pagan culture was largely abandoning the infected to preserve their own lives, Christians selflessly risked their own lives to care for those infected with the disease.

This raises the question - how should we as a church respond to the coronavirus? After all Jesus calls us to

Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

But what does selfless and sacrificial love look like in the days of the NHS?

The situation we find ourselves in today is very different to the church in the third century. The NHS exists and has taken responsibility for caring for the infected. We should be grateful for that provision, and it is right NHS workers receive praise as they risk their lives during this time. Obviously if we are working in the NHS, we have an opportunity to be part of that care, but for many of us, acting in love means distancing ourselves from the sick in order not to spread the disease to others.

It struck me, however, that there is a huge need around us which remains largely unaddressed. Over the next few months it seems likely that many in our nation will catch this virus, and a large number will die from COVID - 19. The government recently talked about 20,000 deaths, which in the context of our total population works out at 1 in 3000 people. What many more people will struggle with, however, is the loneliness which comes as a result of self-isolation. There are many, both within our church family, and in the community around us who will go weeks or even months without seeing another person face to face. I doubt that I need to convince you of the difficulties involved in that - just think of the fact that solitary confinement is regularly used as a punishment in prisons.

One of the ways, therefore, that we can love others sacrificially, as God has loved us is by giving our time, and proactively investing in those around us relationally. People will be crying out for meaningful human interaction. Some

of us will now have lots of time on our hands. In three months time we don't want to look back and find that we've selfishly given all of that to Netflix and news feeds. Imagine the impact if instead we chose selflessly to get on the phone to those who are isolated. We could start in the church family, but it would be great to think wider as well. Maybe if we're a family with young children we could think of an older member of the church family who is on their own. We could ring / video call them a few times a week to see how they're doing, and share what is going on. I've heard of someone else who set up a WhatsApp group for all the people on his street, by putting an invitation through their door. People who were disconnected are now sharing messages throughout the day.

Let me challenge us today to start somewhere. Reach out to someone you wouldn't normally, who might be isolated at the moment, and pray that the Lord would use it to bless them.

Love in Christ,

Pastor Matthew

Thursday 2 April

Over the next few weeks we will spend a lot more time on the internet. There is lots to give thanks for in that. We are far less isolated than we might otherwise be. But there are also dangers. It's important we are disciplined about what we take in, what we watch, what we allow ourselves to be influenced by. In Philippians 4:8 we are encouraged:

Brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things.

I think it is significant that this verse follows straight on from those well-known verses where Paul talks about not being anxious, but instead knowing the peace of God which guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. What we think about has an impact on anxiety, and on our minds and hearts being anchored in Christ Jesus.

Of course, in a time like this we do need to be informed about what is going on, but it is very possible to be overwhelmed with coronavirus updates. If we

spend every minute of our waking days scrolling down newsfeeds, or allowing every horror story, conspiracy theory or doomsday prediction to capture our attention, it is unsurprising that we will be left anxious rather than enjoying the peace of God which guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

If we are using the internet or TV to listen to sermons, we also need to be wary of false teaching at this time. There are wolves in sheep's clothing, preachers who claim to be Christians but who teach something other than the gospel of Jesus Christ. In 2 Timothy 3:6-7 Paul describes false teachers who

worm their way into homes and gain control over gullible women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires, always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth.

False teachers have always preyed on the vulnerable, and so sadly at a time like this they have a field day. What is more, people's homes are easy to access because of the internet, so we need to be careful about what we watch and listen to at a time like this. This is one of the reasons we are trying to produce and share resources for us to use during this time as a church, so we can be built up in the truth rather than be led astray by false teaching.

Think again of the language Paul uses of our minds and hearts being guarded in Christ Jesus. If we indiscriminately trawl through the internet or flick TV channels it is like us leaving the big gate of the castle wide open with the drawbridge down. False teaching is the equivalent of allowing the enemy into the castle to begin demolishing the walls - tearing down the truths and promises of God which keep us secure in the midst of hard times.

Instead Paul urges us to think about what is true and noble and right. This is a time for us to be feeding on God's word. To be reminding ourselves of his promises. To be singing gospel songs that encourage us in the truth. This will be the equivalent of building up the walls of God's promises to keep our minds and our hearts anchored in Christ Jesus.

We are used to thinking about our physical diet - whether what we are eating will lead to health or sickness, but what about our mental and spiritual diet. What are we thinking about during this time? Maybe you could get a bit of paper and write down what you've been reading / listening to / watching over the last 24 hours. Then make a conscious decision in this next 24 hours to think about something true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, or

praiseworthy. Hear Paul's encouragement in the very next verse (Philippians 4:9)

Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me - put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

Love in Christ,

Pastor Matthew

Friday 3 April

Many of us will be feeling our weakness at the moment. Maybe we're struggling to cope with the dramatic change of these last two weeks. Maybe we're anxious about what this virus might do to us or those around us. Maybe our patience has been tested trying to home school the children. Maybe isolation is already getting to us and we're feeling low and frustrated. Maybe the stress at work is beginning to make itself felt.

In our weakness what a comfort it is that we come to a God of compassion. Psalm 103:13-4 says

As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.

The Lord sees our weakness. He is fully aware of our limitations, and yet wonderfully his response is not frustration, or anger, or annoyance. No, Lamentations 3:22-23 assures us

His compassions never fail. They are new every morning.

You might begin today all too aware of your weakness: full of regret from yesterday's failures, overwhelmed by the present challenges, or fearful of what the future might hold. Remember that if you are his child, the LORD meets you this morning with new compassion. He graciously comes alongside us in our weakness and invites us, as we begin the day, to turn to him for comfort. To take our eyes off ourselves and look to him. To take our eyes off our weakness and look instead to his strength.

Paul speaks similarly in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.

It is out of the comfort that we receive from God that we will be able to comfort those around us. As you receive comfort from God this morning, I encourage you to share that with someone else. Send a message with the verses that have helped you. Call someone and pray the same promises into their life that have helped you.

Remember how Jesus responded to the needy crowd in front of him in Matthew 9:36

He had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

In our weakness, we have somewhere to turn.

Love in Christ,

Pastor Matthew

Monday 6 April

As Christians we are called to be holy. To follow Jesus in the way we think, speak, and act. Yet I'm sure many of us are finding that godliness can be a challenge under the current conditions. Boredom, isolation, and self-pity are often a lethal cocktail when it comes to succumbing to temptation, and many of us will already regret the ways in which we have responded to the pressure of the last few weeks.

Of course, this is why we must continue to live in grace, and daily come to Christ for the forgiveness that we find at the cross. A focus that should be made easier this week by the approach of Good Friday. At the same time, however, with the help of God's Spirit we must resist temptation and strive for Christlikeness. Perhaps you feel like you've got bigger things to worry about right now, but remember Jesus words in Matthew 6:

So do not worry, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

This time of trial is a time to seek God, and fight for righteousness. It won't be easy, but in that struggle God will be maturing us as his people. Listen to what God says in James 1:2-4

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Romans 5:3-4 says something similar:

We also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.

This time of hardship won't be wasted by God. Trials are an opportunity for growth and development. Think of a budding mountaineer who is just starting to get into climbing. He can only get so far by training at his local indoor climbing wall. At some point he'll need to be exposed to the challenges of the Alps or the trials of the Himalayas if he is going to continue to develop. So God can use these times of trials and suffering to develop spiritual maturity, to grow us in Christlikeness. Think of the way Jesus responded in the desert (Matthew 4), the spiritual equivalent of Everest. He was completely isolated, physically exhausted, and facing intense temptation. Yet he did not give in to temptation, but persevered, choosing instead to rely upon God's word in his time of need.

This trial is an opportunity for us to learn perseverance as God's people. To grow in Christlikeness. If we can learn to resist temptation and rely upon God's word under these conditions, how that will serve us in the years ahead. The local climbing wall of everyday life will come far more easily if we've learned to keep going in the mountains.

Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings. And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will

himself restore you and make you strong, firm, and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 5:8-11)

Love in Christ,

Pastor Matthew

Tuesday 7 April

Over the centuries, when God's people have found themselves facing difficult situations their first response is to cry out to God in prayer. It has always been this way. When Nehemiah hears the report that God's people back in Jerusalem are in great trouble and the city wall is broken down how does he respond?

I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. (Nehemiah 1:4)

When David is fleeing for his life from his son Absalom how does he respond? He cries out to the Lord in the words of Psalm 3:

LORD, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me! Many are saying of me, 'God will not deliver him.' But you, LORD, are a shield around me, my glory, the One who lifts my head high.

When the early church faced persecution in Acts 4 and Peter and John are seized by the authorities, how do God's people respond?

When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. (Acts 2:24)

One of the frustrations some of us may be wrestling with at the moment is a feeling of helplessness. How can we help those around us? What can we do to change this situation? Surely, like generations of God's people before us, one of the best things we can be doing at the moment is to come before our heavenly Father in prayer. To cry out to our almighty God on behalf of those around us. In Ephesians 6:18 we are encouraged to

Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.

When Paul was imprisoned he found himself separated from those he would have loved to have visited. He can't be with them in person, but listen to what he says in his letter to the Philippians:

I thank my God every time I remember you.

Paul can't be with them, but he is praying for them. When people come to our mind, when we feel the sadness of not being able to be with them, let's follow Paul's model and bring them to our heavenly Father in prayer. We might not know how to help them, we might not be able to be with them, but we know the one who can help. Maybe after reading this you could take a few minutes to bring to God a few people who are particularly on your heart at the moment.

One person it would be good for all of us to pray for today is Boris Johnson. In 1 Timothy 2:1-2 we are urged that

Petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people - for kinds and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.

As our prime minister is treated for COVID -19 in intensive care, let's ask God to have mercy on him, that he might recover and be able to lead our country at this difficult time.

Might we learn, as generations of God's people have before us to turn to God in our time of need, for he *is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble (Psalm 46:1).*

Love in Christ,
Pastor Matthew

Wednesday 8 April

We live in a culture that always wants to put a positive spin on things, and sometimes as Christians we can fall into the trap of thinking that spiritual maturity means we always see the sunny side of things. There are, however, circumstances and situations where the godly response is to lament. To express the sorrow and sadness we feel as we acknowledge what is going on around us. Yes, we still have things to be thankful in a time like this. Yes, the

Lord is able to work out his purposes in the midst of suffering. Yes, there are opportunities in a day like this, but there is also a need to lament as we see some of what is going on around us at the moment:

A father in his 50's dies from coronavirus. No one is able to visit him in hospital. His family are not allowed to attend his cremation.

An older lady, who already struggles with loneliness and depression, is confined to her own home with only her thoughts for company.

Millions of people in places like Gaza or Malawi face coronavirus with neither well-equipped hospitals nor government bailouts.

Domestic violence surges, with some trapped in a house with an abusive partner.

Romans 8 tells us that our world is broken. Frustrated. Groaning. In lament we rightly join in with that groaning as God's people, acknowledging that things are not as they ought to be.

Think of the book of Lamentations. Written by Jeremiah as Jerusalem is destroyed and Israel is led away into exile. If we know any verses from Lamentations it is probably 3:22-33, but this refrain of hope is surrounded by five chapters of bitter lament. The book starts with these words:

How deserted lies the city, once full of people! How like a widow is she, who once was great among the nations!

Think of the Psalms. So often we turn to Psalms of praise, but there are also many songs of lament whether individual (3, 22, 31, 39, 42, 57, 71, 88, 120, 139, 142) or corporate (12, 44, 80, 94, 137). It is healthy as God's people to express our sadness and sorrow to God, as well as thanksgiving or joy. Psalm 88 is one of the bleakest expressions of lament, and yet I imagine some of its words resonate today:

Lord, you are the God who saves me; day and night I cry out to you. May my prayer come before you; turn your ear to my cry... You have taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them. I am confined and cannot escape; my eyes are dim with grief.

Jesus also knew how to lament. He wept at Lazarus' tomb. He wept over Jerusalem. The words above are words his mouth could have spoken. We

visited Jerusalem a few years ago, and I remember climbing down into a dark dungeon, which is traditionally understood to be where Jesus was held overnight at the High Priest's house. The stone pit is completely bare except for a small stand with a Bible opened to Psalm 88.

One of the reasons lament is so important is that it recognizes the good that has been taken away. It refuses to accept these circumstances as normal. This is significant for us as a church over the coming months. Yes, we should give thanks for what we can do together over Zoom, but it is important also to lament what has been lost.

We are unable to gather as God's people to praise the living God. Unable to sit together and pray. Unable to baptise those who have come to new life in Christ. Unable to share the Lord's Supper as one body gathered together.

It is appropriate for us to express our sorrow at the situation in which we find ourselves, and long for the day we can meet together again.

What is distinctive about God's people is not that they are never sad, it is that our lament always contains hope. However bleak our situation we don't have to fall into despair. The book of Lamentations does contain the reminder that God's compassions never fail. Romans 8 describes our world as groaning, but it is *groaning as in the pains of childbirth*, looking forward to when the children of God are revealed in glory. Our sorrow may be resolved in this world, but even when it isn't in Christ there is hope in our lament for

Our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. (Romans 8:18)

Perhaps this will be a season where along with the Psalmist, along with Jeremiah, along with Jesus we learn to lament. To express our sorrow and sadness at all that is wrong in our world, in the hope that one day Jesus will return to put all things right.

Love in Christ,

Pastor Matthew

Thursday 9 April

We are walking through difficult days. Over the last couple of days I've spoken with someone who deeply misses leaving the house to spend time with others, someone who has spent the last two weeks in bed fighting COVID-19, someone who is feeling the strain of three energetic kids stuck in the house, and someone who was unable to be at her own sister's funeral because of travel restrictions.

Today is Maundy Thursday, when we focus on Jesus' final evening before his crucifixion. It is a great reminder that Jesus is no stranger to difficult days. He has walked the path of suffering before us.

Jesus knows sorrow. Matthew's gospel speaks of what happened after the last supper (26:36-39):

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, 'Sit here while I go over there and pray.' He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, 'My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.' Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.'

Jesus knows suffering. Matthew's gospel describes the way he was treated at the high priest's house later that evening (26:67-68):

Then they spat in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him and said, 'Prophecy to us, Messiah. Who hit you?'

Jesus knows isolation. It wasn't just that he was unable to see his friends, but his friends turned against him, whether in betrayal, denial, or desertion.

We hear Judas asking the chief priests, *'What are you willing to give me if I deliver him over to you?'* (26:15)

We hear Peter outside in the courtyard insisting, *'I don't know the man!'* (26:72,74)

We see what happens in Jesus' hour of need. *Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.* (26:56)

We do not have a God who is removed from hardship, or indifferent to suffering. We have a God who enters into the brokenness of our world, who walks through suffering with us, who tastes death himself. The big difference, however, between our suffering and Jesus' suffering, is that the suffering we face has been forced upon us by coronavirus. Jesus, on the other hand, willingly chose this path.

When Jesus talks about drinking the cup, he is talking about the wrath and judgement of God (c.f. Isaiah 51:17,22; Jeremiah 25:15-29; Revelation 14:10). The physical suffering our world is currently experiencing through coronavirus is not the worst suffering we will face. It is a picture of the terrible outpouring of God's wrath which will come on the last day of judgement. The worst suffering Jesus experienced was not the physical agony of crucifixion but taking upon himself God's right anger at sin. Jesus drank the cup we should drink, so that we might be spared the great suffering of God's wrath.

What a wonderful Saviour we have. A great high priest who sympathises with our weakness. Who knows sorrow, suffering, and isolation. Who walks this hard path alongside us, and who chooses to drink the great cup of judgement so that we don't have to.

If you have time today, I encourage you to read Matthew 26:17-75. Reflect on the path Jesus chose to walk. Lift your eyes from your own suffering and fix them instead upon your Saviour.

Love in Christ,

Pastor Matthew

Friday 10 April

This will be the last of these regular *Letters from Lockdown*. After Easter I am planning to write a daily devotional for us to use as a church, called *Crying out to God*. It will focus on one of the Psalms each day, and contain a comment, reflection question, and a prayer. In that sense it will follow on from both *Sitting at Jesus' feet* and *Letters from Lockdown*, for those who have been using these resources. I will try to release *Crying out to God* on the App each morning so that people can use it to come before the Lord at the beginning of the day if they want to.

Today on Good Friday we focus particularly on Jesus' crucifixion in which we see the depth and commitment of his love for us. John's Gospel uses the picture of a shepherd looking after his sheep:

'I [Jesus] am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me - just as the Father knows me and I know the Father - and I lay down my life for the sheep.'

In the ancient world someone had to sleep out in the fields overnight to protect the sheep from predators. It is when the wolf comes that we discover the depth of their commitment to the flock. The hired hand saves himself. This is just a wage for him, there is no real commitment to the sheep. The good shepherd, on the other hand, sticks around and faces the wolf himself, willing even to lay down his own life so that the sheep might be safe.

At the cross we see the depth of Jesus' love and commitment for us. He didn't run away. He faced the brutality of calvary to protect us. He chose to suffer so that we could be safe. If you ever doubt Jesus' commitment to you, if you are ever unsure of his love, then lift your eyes to the cross. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

The future is currently very uncertain. None of us really know what the coming weeks, and months ahead. Perhaps as you look ahead you are apprehensive about the suffering and hardships that may come. How will you keep going as a Christian? The strain of isolation is already beginning to bite, and you wonder how you'll be able to endure if weeks turn into months. Listen to what Jesus says a few verses later in John 10:27-29:

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.

We are secure because Jesus has got hold of us, and he won't let go. Whatever may come our Shepherd will not abandon us. If we are ever in doubt of that then look again to the cross. That is the extent of his commitment to you. That is how much he loves you.

Sometimes it may feel like we are clinging onto God, and we worry that our grip will fail. Wonderfully Jesus assures us that it is he who has got hold of us, and his grip is secure. Wolves may come, but our Shepherd isn't going anywhere.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=936BapRFHaQ> (He Will Hold Me Fast)

Love in Christ,

Pastor Matthew