

8<sup>th</sup> May 2020

Dear Friends,

I am sitting to write this just after having stood on my driveway, socially distanced from my neighbours who were doing the same to mark the 2 minutes silence for VE day. We had done the same just over a week ago to show our respect for the NHS staff and carers who have died during the current pandemic. Just as it is in many places our community is pulling together and relationships have deepened and strengthened. That said I am very aware that I am extremely privileged living where I do, and how I do, I am not worried about finances, I have a nice garden and home to live in. For many that simply is not the case. People have lost their jobs, and are worried about their future, some families are struggling with no outdoor space and are concerned about putting food on the table. The number of people using foodbanks in this country has risen, and while it is good to be able to help people out, and I am overwhelmed by the community responses to help others, I will say what I say over and over again, foodbanks are not the answer, there is something very wrong with a rich country relying upon foodbanks to help out its most vulnerable people!

Expanding our vision to the wider world, I am reminded that this week marks the beginning of Christian Aid Week, a time when we would normally be coming together to think of others, when we might be posting envelopes through doors and as we do at one of my churches share in an afternoon tea to raise funds. Obviously, none of those things are possible this year, but we can still give, and I would encourage you to do so if you can.

Jesus so often challenged the religious and political leaders of his day to be mindful of the poor, and to welcome the stranger, the outsider, and the oppressed ones. He pointed to himself as the way to live and to be, saying that in him we see the heart of God, God's inclusive and all-encompassing love for everyone and everything. He calls us not to be consumed with fear, and points to a day when there will be a place for everyone in His Father's house. Read these words from John 14: 1-14

*'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.'* Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'

*Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.'* Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.'

Jesus points to himself as the way, and calls us to live in his way, to emulate his way of living for in doing so we will be living in the way that God calls us to live. It is worth noting here that this discourse is set in between the gathering of the disciples for the last supper, and on the way to Gethsemane, Jesus knows that the cross is very near as he speaks those words "Do not let your heart be troubled". His certainty that all will be well is deeply challenging for us in these days of Covid-19. How might we encourage one another to live that out. Perhaps the last part of the passage which is a call to prayer is key. When we live his way, we catch what is on God's heart, and so our prayers will be in line with what God wants. Jesus is one with God and calls us to be one with him. Just pondering that is challenging, living that even more so, thank goodness for the gift of the Holy Spirit who comes to help us in our weakness. Just to add that I still invite you to light a candle in your window at 7pm each evening, I also know that some people have shared that with their family, friends and neighbours, even if you have no words to pray, a silent prayer will be heard by God, for he knows our hearts.

I offer you my prayer:

*Ask you say,  
well some days  
we do not know what to ask  
or how, but here we are  
praying that you will still  
the storm that rages all about us,  
longing for your peace,  
and seeking the still small voice  
whose breath  
is more powerful than the thousand  
questions and accusations  
We find rushing through our brains,  
here we are seeking to be  
more like you,  
longing for your work of transformation  
to take us to new levels*

*of faith  
but straining to see  
the way through the tangled wilderness  
of these days  
so, we are knocking,  
no, railing against heaven's door,  
will you answer,  
will you grant your  
gift of grace  
for you are the answer we need,  
and it is you we are seeking,  
will you help?  
will you strengthen?  
will you wrap your arms around us?  
We are asking, seeking, knocking  
in obedience to you...*

It is okay not to know what to ask, our prayers don't need to be long and full of the right words, just coming mindfully into the presence of God is enough, for then we might just hear the whisper of the Spirit, who longs to show us the Father. So I will share with you some of the words from my letter written not with my local ministers hat on but with my Superintendents hat, it will be coming out alongside this letter, and I have to say that it was very hard to write, and will probably for some be hard to read, as it states that we will not be making the June to August plan, and don't anticipate public worship until September at the earliest.

***"I was asked today where I felt God was in all of this, my response was probably wholly inadequate, but I will share it with you anyway. I see God in the healing of creation, the lack of pollution due to our changed circumstances has brought dolphins back into Venice, and a much higher air quality, apparently there was a deer photographed wandering around Sheffield, and a badger seen wandering along the station platform ( I wonder where he was going). I also see God in the coming together of communities for mutual support, and in the support offered to others. I see God in the God who weeps and groans with us in our prayers as the Spirit takes our wordless sighs as we encounter pain and grief and transforms them into deep prayers. I also see God in the suffering servant Christ who gave his all for us and asks us to walk and work with him in these days so that all might be well. Finally I reflect on some of the words of our Covenant Prayer, where we pray " let me be laid aside for you". We have been laid aside as a***

***church, our usual activities have ceased, but the Spirit is still at work among us, and calling us to find signs of the kingdom. I suspect there are many, and invite you to reflect upon that. When you ask the question where is God on all of this, how do you answer it? I would be grateful for your answers, for together we need to think about how to be church in this day and age."***

I wonder where you are connecting with and finding God in all of this, recent statistics have shown that 1 in 4 adults are accessing online worship in these times and more and more people are turning to prayer. I have been sharing prayers every evening via a facebook live stream, and each one has had many more people joining it than I would ever have seen at a prayer meeting, some of them have been viewed over 100 times. If you want to join me and are on facebook you can on either my page, or Wesley Hall, Walkley Ebebezer of Stanwood Church pages, or the Circuit Holy Habits page. I share them at 7pm, from Sunday to Thursday, usually taking Friday and Saturday off, they can be viewed at any time. Please know however, whether you are connected to the online stuff or not, that I am praying for you, and if you want/ need to talk, just give me a call.

Finally I leave you with a hymn:

*What a Friend we have in Jesus,  
all our sins and griefs to bear!  
What a privilege to carry  
everything to God in prayer!  
O what peace we often forfeit,  
O what needless pain we bear,  
All because we do not carry  
everything to God in prayer.*

*Have we trials and temptations?  
Is there trouble anywhere?  
We should never be discouraged;  
take it to the Lord in prayer.*

*Can we find a friend so faithful  
who will all our sorrows share?  
Jesus knows our every weakness;  
take it to the Lord in prayer.*

*Are we weak and heavy laden,  
cumbered with a load of care?  
Precious Saviour, still our refuge,  
take it to the Lord in prayer.  
Do your friends despise, forsake you?  
Take it to the Lord in prayer!  
In His arms He'll take and shield you;  
you will find a solace there.*

How wonderful it is to have a Saviour who calls us friends and is our friend!

Take care.

Many blessings



Reverend Sally Coleman