



ST JAMES AYR – SUNDAY REFLECTIONS – 22 MARCH 2020

## Introduction

Dear all,

Welcome to our first Sunday Reflections, which will be available online while our churches are closed. At the moment they follow as closely as possible the format of the Sunday Service you are used to. I will, however, develop this resource in accordance with **your** needs and so your feedback is important to me. This is a new situation for us all, myself included. There is an additional offer for children at Kid's corner on this webpage. I am working on a system on how to keep as much of our congregational life open as possible, for instance with regard to pastoral care and supporting the foodbank. (Board and Session are involved through emails and letters) and I will keep you updated as best I can.

I do have a request to make: not everybody has a computer. Would you print this reflection off for people who would like them and do not have access to the internet? Also, please spread the word, that this is available. TOGETHER AND WITH GOD WE WILL GET THROUGH THIS.

And now I invite you to find a quiet space, alone or as a family, a space where you feel comfortable. You might like to light a candle as you read through this reflection. You may wish to read it aloud to each other or quietly on your own.

The psalmist says: God is our refuge and strength, A very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth should change and though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea; Though its waters roar and foam, Though the mountains quake at its swelling pride. (PS 46, 1-3). So, let us worship God on prayer and reflection.

Prayer

Loving God,

It is hard to understand what has happened to all of us, how our lives have changed in a matter of weeks and days. Empty shops and deserted streets are our new reality. Be with us Lord, as we try to adjust, each in their own way, as we try to come to terms with our new lives, comfort those who need reassurance, strengthen those who need encouragement and let us remember the things we can be thankful for.

We give you thanks for the covenant you have made with Noah and with all of us, the promise that you will never again destroy the earth, the assurance that you are with us in every challenge, in every trouble as you promised to your people when you said: do not be afraid , for I am with you, I am your God.

We give you thanks for your son Jesus Christ, through whom you, our God came to us, into the suffering and challenges of this world. We offer our thanks that Jesus has come to walk with us, to be with us, to comfort us and in the end redeem us from our sin through his own sacrifice on the cross of Golgotha.

We give you thanks for your holy spirit that guides us and encourages us each day of our lives, through which we are inspired to follow you and to cling to you in every difficult circumstance, because we know, that you, Lord are with us through your word and in our souls.

Gracious God,

We know, it is not always easy to keep our faith in you and trust in your promises. As our life is to change, as we hear about people dying, as we feel helpless in the midst of a global catastrophe, it is hard not to wonder where you are, not to wonder why you hide your face. Help us to look for you, help us to find you in these difficult times.

We know it is difficult in these times to love our neighbour, as we love ourselves, empty shops, shortages and the prospect of self-isolation prompt many to look to themselves and to their family first, fear and anxiety prompts many to buy more than they need. Help us to trust in a God who provides for His children and help us to remember those in need.

Forgiving Father,

We know that we have failed you and failed each other in word and in deed and in what we have failed to do, but we also know that you have forgiven us through your son's sacrifice before we were born and so we entrust ourselves into your everlasting grace.

## Lord's Prayer

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 today our daily bread

and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors

and lead us not into temptation

but deliver us from evil

for Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. AMEN

(PLEASE SCROLL DOWN)

## *Lesson 1: Psalm 23*

*A psalm of David.*

<sup>1</sup>The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing. <sup>2</sup>He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, <sup>3</sup>he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. <sup>4</sup>Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

<sup>5</sup>You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows. <sup>6</sup>Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

## *Lesson 2: John 9,1-11*

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. <sup>2</sup>His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

<sup>3</sup>"Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. <sup>4</sup>As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. <sup>5</sup>While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

<sup>6</sup>After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. <sup>7</sup>"Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam" (this word means "Sent"). So, the man went and washed, and came home seeing.

<sup>8</sup>His neighbours and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, "Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg?" <sup>9</sup>Some claimed that he was.

Others said, "No, he only looks like him."

But he himself insisted, "I am the man."

<sup>10</sup>"How then were your eyes opened?" they asked.

<sup>11</sup>He replied, "The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So, I went and washed, and then I could see."

## *Reflection*

### A new life

As I am writing this it strikes me how normal it is what I am doing just now. I am sitting at the table preparing for Sunday as I would usually do, as if nothing had happened, as if nothing had changed at all. And yet, everything is different. This sermon – or rather: this reflection – will never be preached from the pulpit. The doors of our church – and those of every other church in the country -have closed for the foreseeable future, our normal outreach activities, church clubs and youth organisations are cancelled and we all have to find different ways, more imaginative ways of spreading the gospel, of telling the good news of Jesus, different ways of engaging with each other and showing Christian love to our neighbours. Some of the new ways seem to work already, our facebook page has never been so busy and this is great. The cooperation with Newton School to keep the foodbank open and to feed the most vulnerable children and families in our neighbourhood promises to be fruitful and our new webpage service was set up quickly and efficiently. I sincerely hope that all this will be a success, but that does not take away from the pain and the loss that we are now experiencing as a church community here at St James and beyond. It does not take away from the fact that our life will change dramatically in our church and in our society, that this new life will bring challenges we did not even imagine a few weeks – or maybe a few days - ago.

### Healing

So, what does all this, our new situation, our new life, have to do with our scripture reading today? Quite a lot, actually, I think. Our story is a story of healing, and healing is what we need just now. Not just physical healing, a vaccine or a treatment for this horrible virus, that brings such devastation across the world – that, too of course and I am sure we are all hoping and praying for this. We need healing in many different ways, though, I think and this pandemic outbreak highlights this need. We need healing for our society, where it is okay to bulk buy baby milk, that new mothers desperately need and hand sanitiser that leaves gatherings of vulnerable people, leaves clubs and churches without. We need healing for a society that forgets about the poor and vulnerable in times of need and leaves foodbanks struggling for essentials like pasta and tinned fruit and veg. And we need healing for our souls, healing from the loneliness and sense of loss that so many of us are now experiencing, healing from our anxieties and fears as we go into the unknown, as we read in newspapers and watch on the telly, how quickly this virus brings devastation and misery to countries like China or Spain or Italy.

And I believe, Jesus can help us out here. The stories of healing that we read about in the gospel are never stories of physical healing alone – Jesus is not just an exceptionally talented doctor – they are healings of body, mind and soul and in many ways they are stories of healing for a whole society, stories that show us new possibilities, make us think in new ways.

Jesus heals the blind man physically; he can see again. Of course, he does. But he does more, he heals this man, this stranger from the stigma that society, that even Jesus' disciples attach to blindness and indeed to any disability. He heals him from the social isolation that comes with it. "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (verse 2), Jesus disciples ask, because it is clear to them, it is ingrained in their thinking that this blind man must have done something wrong, that his blindness is a punishment from God, that this man must therefore be shunned. This isolation was as hard to bear for many of Jesus' contemporaries, as their illness itself, as even their families would distance themselves from them. And Jesus challenges this thought, this preconception:

"Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him" (verse 3). In other words: This man has done nothing wrong; his blindness is not his fault and he is not a sinner. Therefore, he does not need to be shunned, does not need to be isolated. Jesus knows, I think, how hard it is to be alone and lonely and he wants to be alongside those who feel secluded and maybe deserted, wants us to be alongside the lonely and isolated, as well. Now the latter will become more and more challenging over the time, and it is of course paramount that we all keep each other safe in these challenging times, that physically we need to keep our distance. But that does not mean that we need to break up all social contact. Social media, facebook, WhatsApp, email are a real blessing just now and where that is not possible there is still the good old telephone and letter. So please don't give up on each other, stay in touch, and remember that God will not give up on you, that you can stay in touch with him through prayer and reflection. As long as you have God, as long as you have Jesus you will never be truly alone.

### Comfort

God promises us this in our second reading, today, the well-loved Psalm 23, written in times of war and devastation: Even though I walk through the darkest valley. I will fear no evil, for you are with me" (verse 4). This is God's assurance to us and I firmly believe that our God is not a vengeful, terrible God, who sends locusts and earthquakes and viruses to punish us – there is a lot of this about on the internet and among people just now, based on the last chapters of the book of revelation. Most of these sources misquote and misinterpret the Bible. I think there is much more evidence that our God is a God who walks alongside us in times of trouble and danger, that our God is a God who cares for each of us as our good shepherd, that our God refreshes our soul (verse 3) and his rod and staff comfort us (v 4). For me These are incredibly reassuring and comforting thoughts in these difficult times.

### A new life revisited

And so, a new life in God does not focus on restrictions and isolation, a new life in God focuses on the reassurance God gives to us and has always given to all living things since his covenant with Noah and with us, since he promised not to destroy the earth again. Our new life in God is a life of hope and of confidence, the confidence that God will walk with us every step of the

way, on every difficult path, through every dark valley. And so we can walk with each other through this time and together with each other, together with God I believe we will get through these challenges. AMEN

### *Prayer of Intercession*

Loving God

In these difficult times we come to you giving thanks for your unfailing presence, for your promise that you will be our fortress and our rock in times of difficulty and threat, we thank you for the gift of prayer that allows us to bring our fears and anxieties to you. In gratitude for this most precious gift we remember in our prayers all who are suffering today.

In these difficult times we resist the temptation of looking only to ourselves and we continue to hold in prayer those afflicted by war and terror, whose pain and suffering continues, we remember those who live in refugee camps where disease is rife and hunger a constant companion. May they find hope and strength in you and may they not be forgotten by us.

Lord, have mercy

We remember in prayer those countries who are most affected by the coronavirus outbreak, China, Italy, Spain. We think of everybody who is fighting the disease in hospital or at home in isolation, of all who have already lost a loved one or fear for their lives and we pray for the doctors and nurses, overwhelmed and at breaking point. May they all find in you a rock and a fortress and may they know they are in our thoughts.

Lord, have mercy

We pray for all who are vulnerable and isolated in our towns and cities, in our villages and communities, for those who are most at risk, who are already battling the virus as well as for those who are now anxious and afraid, restricted in their lives, we think especially of the poor in our society as foodbanks struggle and shop shelves are empty. May they find hope in you and may we remember God's justice and righteousness.

Lord, have mercy

We will never cease to pray for everyone in our community and in our congregation, for all who are now anxious and fearful, for all who are ill and frail, at home or in hospital, whatever they are suffering from, for all who have lost someone they love. May they find in you a God of peace and may we be channels of your peace.

In Jesus name - AMEN

### Benediction

And the God who is higher than all our understanding guard you and guide you in this coming week. And the almighty God, Father son and Holy Spirit be with us all, now and forevermore.  
AMEN