

Pastoral Letter #1

To everyone in the St Peter's Church family,

It seems inevitable that all of our lives are going to be very significantly affected by Covid-19 in the coming months. Some of this is happening already. There will be much more to come. Exactly what form the disruption will take is impossible to predict, though the government is giving us some idea. Easter 2020 is going to look very different from other Easters we have known.

So how do we respond to all this as Christians? And what will it mean to be Church? Over the page are some **practical steps** we are taking to respond as a Church family. But first as Vicar charged by the Bishop to be pastor for this community, I wanted to offer some reflections on what it means to be people of faith in a time of fear. This is Pastoral Letter #1 of what may be several as events unfold.

People of faith in a time of fear

Being a people who trust in God at a time of crisis is something addressed often in the bible.

**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 still**

says Psalm 23 which begins "The Lord is my shepherd". God the Shepherd, you and I the sheep. The shepherd leads us through life from pasture to pasture. Sometimes He takes us through 'green pastures' and by 'quiet waters' – days where there is much to celebrate and little to worry about. But for us in March 2020 the days seem anything but 'quiet waters'. There is disturbance and anxiety all around. And life is not all 'green pastures'. God never promises that. There are dark valleys too.

Dark valleys are likely to make us anxious. You can't see the way ahead. For us in 2020 there is no clear answer to the question, "What's going to happen?" We can't foresee. Yet in Psalm 23 David says, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley I will fear no evil." In the darkest of valleys why will he fear no evil? Because, says David, "Lord You are with me." The shepherd walks right beside the sheep. Right through the dark valley with them.

His Rod and Staff

In Old Testament times shepherds typically carried two tools of the trade. A staff (a stick with a hook at the end) for guiding the sheep along the right path and hooking them out of trouble. And a rod. A short club studded with nails – for defending the sheep against all attack. "Even though I walk through the darkest valley," he says, "I will fear no evil, for You Lord are with me. Your rod and Your staff they comfort me still." His staff to guide – His rod to defend from evil.

In these days of March 2020 we are entering what seems like a dark valley. It is natural to be anxious. We cannot know what the future holds. Yet the promise of Jesus the Good Shepherd to each and every one of us is this: He walks with us. Beside us. The invitation is 'to fear no evil' and to trust Him. Of course we will need to follow all the proper advice we're given. Of course we will need to act in ways that protect others and ourselves. But when we feel anxiety levels rise and we fear - we are invited to remember. That the Good Shepherd walks every step of the way with us.

Nothing can separate us from His love

This doesn't mean that there won't be very real challenges. It doesn't mean that we will be spared all heartache. But it does mean that, in some New Testament words from Paul's letter to the Romans, that 'nothing can separate us from the love of God.' Paul says, 'neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.' (*Romans 8:38*) The shepherd walks with us. And nothing. Nothing. Nothing we can fear or imagine - *nothing* - will have the power to separate us from the love of God. So may Jesus help you and me to be people not of fear but of love and hope as we put our trust for the future in Him.

Practical Action

When we become Christians God puts us into a family: the Church. As a Church we want to love and care for one another and the community around. Everyone of us can play our part. Praying, phoning, helping, caring. So...

Have you decided to self-isolate? Do you know of someone who has? Do you – or does someone you know – need shopping done and errands run? Medication collected? A regular friendly phone call?

We want to build a list of those in need – and of the variety of needs. For this reason we have set up a new email address:

pastoral@stpetersoundle.co.uk

This will be regularly monitored and the right responses organised. Please email us so we know who is in need.

Similarly are you able to offer help? Shopping for someone – or regularly phoning someone – or in other ways. Please email this new address too so that we can build a list of volunteers. And then we can start connecting the needs with those who can help. In all of this we will of course need to follow all the advice about not acting in ways that spread infection.

Gathering as a Church

We continue to monitor the situation and to follow advice. Our plans regarding worship on Sundays are under review as we wait national advice regarding gatherings.

Regardless of whether we meet in St Peter's building we will exploring ways in which acts of worship can be streamed – or services especially intended for following at home – filmed and made available. We will let people know of developments.

We will explore too how we can support one another - and worship and learn - in small groups (through existing and maybe new groups). All this is work in progress.

At the moment we are planning for Tuesday's prayer meeting to go ahead in Church. We will also circulate in advance some prayer points especially for those for whom gathering would be unwise.

This letter will be circulated by email and we will also make paper copies available for appropriate distribution to those we know of who need them in that form.

May you know that the Good Shepherd walks with you today and always. And nothing can separate us from His love.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Stephen". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.