

St James' by the Park



13 March 2020

Dear sisters and brothers,

In light of the ongoing and developing situation with Covid-19, I want to share some thoughts on how we, as individual Christians, and as a church community together, can best respond. And not just to (in the words of my Bible app verse for yesterday) “Wash your hands” (James 4.8)!

Let's be people of **prayer, not panic**.

Everybody is talking about coronavirus. Lots of our jobs are being affected by contingency planning. We're all thinking about what we could or should do in our homes. Headlines are sometimes exacerbating a sense of panic.

Yes, this is clearly going to be a major situation for some time yet, and it's right to think and plan carefully. But as disciples of Jesus, let's not slip into panic. As Jesus said, “Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?” (Matthew 6.27). Instead, let's make sure we're giving our concerns to the Lord in prayer. We're encouraged to “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).

I'm not trying to be simplistic or trite here; I know that for some of our congregation, coronavirus will be a very real threat. But giving our concerns to God, and finding things to be thankful for in every situation (even in self-isolation) is the path to receiving God's peace.

As well as praying about our own concerns, let's be praying:

- For others we know (neighbours, friends, colleagues etc) who are fearful
- For healthcare workers, especially those in our congregation
- For those in authority to make wise decisions

In fact, rather than singing Happy Birthday twice whilst washing your hands, why not pray the Lord's Prayer and for the Lord's perspective on our situation?

Let's be people of **faith, not fear**.

For many, catching the coronavirus would be an inconvenience – but nothing worse than catching the flu. For some, especially for older people and those with pre-existing health conditions, the stakes are considerably raised.

As disciples of Jesus, let's respond in faith, not fear. He who created the world with a word, who healed the sick with a touch and who calmed a storm with a 'shh', is still Lord of our world. Coronavirus has not taken our loving Father by surprise.

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I'm not suggesting disregarding sensible precautions and following advice from health professionals as if Christians are immune to catching the virus. (After all, the doctor in Wuhan who first tried to alert the world to the existence of a new virus was a Christian – and he died of it).

Disciples of Jesus react differently compared to those without faith in God – and such faith shows. *“Viruses are contagious. Panic is contagious. Fear and hysteria can spread through a crowd at an alarming rate. But so is hope. If you have ever been at a sporting event at the beginning of a comeback or been in a crowd when good news bursts through, you will know the power of hope to transform a situation and spread rapidly through a group of people. As Christians, we have in our heart and in our hands the most contagious message of hope the world has ever known.”*¹

So let's be people of faith ... that God would work for good (Romans 8.28) even in this situation. Let's pray that God would open our eyes to see what he's doing. Let's pray that He would open up conversations with people who aren't Christians. I was really encouraged this week reading about a church in Hong Kong which has had to stop meeting because of semi-quarantine situation there: they've started broadcasting a service online instead, and have been reaching many more children and adults as a result. Their pastor said, *“There is much fear in the city, and understandably so when a person has no God to trust in. But the outbreak actually created a perfect opportunity to share hope and peace to those who are living in fear.”*²

And for those of us who become seriously unwell due to this virus, let's be people of faith that death isn't the end for us. Jesus has conquered death for us. None of us want the pain of parting with our loved ones. But the gospel truth is this: the worst this virus can do is kill us – and take us into the presence of the one we love. “I am the resurrection and the life,” said Jesus. “The one who believes in me will live, even though they die” (John 11.25).

Let's be people of **service not selfishness**.

It's easy to see selfish behaviour going on around us. People stockpiling goods; others being too casual with their personal hygiene and potentially becoming unwitting transmitters of the virus.

I've been inspired these last few days by how Christians have responded in past epidemics. Between the years 250 and 261 AD a plague ravaged the Empire. It is reported that at the time, 5,000 people per day were dying in the city of Rome alone. One eye-witness said, *“Most of our brother [and sister, surely!] Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves, and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbours and cheerfully accepting their pains.”*³

Similarly, in the bubonic plague of 1665, the vicar of Eyam in Derbyshire persuaded his village to quarantine themselves to stop the spread of the plague. It is estimated that up to half the village died as a result, including the vicar's wife – but many more were saved.⁴

Now, I'm not suggesting Coronavirus is anywhere near as bad as either of those plagues! But the principle is sacrificial service. As disciples of Jesus, we should be praying about what we can do to help others – even if it comes at a cost to ourselves. What could you do to help those

¹ <https://www.eauk.org/news-and-views/the-contagiousness-of-hope>

² <https://outreachmagazine.com/ideas/megachurch-world/52996-how-a-hong-kong-church-is-responding-to-the-coronavirus-outbreak.html>

³ St Cyprian of Carthage

⁴ <https://gracetruth.blog/2020/03/10/faith-and-courage-in-response-to-a-deadly-virus>

who are self-isolating (either to safeguard against catching the virus, or because they have some symptoms, or because we're all instructed to as the situation develops) – for instance, delivering food or medicines (and leaving on the doorstep, if necessary). Let's work hard at building community despite such quarantines – for example, by regular phone calls to check up on those who are vulnerable.

As one writer put it this week, *“Throughout history, Christians have often stood out because they were willing to help the sick even during plagues, pandemics, and persecutions. They loved people and weren't afraid of death because they understood that “to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). By stepping into the mess of sickness and disease, they were able to demonstrate their faith to a watching world. So, rather than just asking “How do I stay healthy?” perhaps we should be also ask, “How can I help the sick?” Let's be quick to help and slow to hide in basements.”*⁵

What is St James' by the Park doing?

There are two ways to answer that question. As a church leadership, we are following directives from the Church of England and health authorities.

For the time being, we will still be operating our full range of activities on Sundays and mid-week. The Bible urges us, “Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit for some, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Hebrews 10.24-25). Having said that, it is inevitable that some activities over the coming weeks may be cancelled at short notice because of lack of volunteers – but we will give as much warning as possible if events are cancelled.

Following advice, we have already taken some steps to minimise the risk of transmission, such as:

- not serving wine at communion out of a communal cup
- not laying hands on people in prayer ministry
- asking everyone to refrain from shaking hands (or other physical contact) in church
- requiring those who serve bread at communion to use alcoholic hand gel first
- changing the way we serve drinks to minimise the risk of transmission

We will continue to heed further advice as it gets passed on to us.

For those who are self-isolating, we will see if we can livestream our services in the near future, so that those with internet access can join in from home. If we can't, we'll happily point you in the direction of other churches who are able to livestream. (Is it God's timing that I've recently mentioned the advantages of such digital discipleship in a sermon?!) If you can't access the internet, let us know, so we can try to provide you with appropriate CDs etc. I would encourage cell groups and other small groups to be imaginative about how to keep supporting one another – if some are self-isolating, could they join in the meeting remotely via Skype, Zoom or WhatsApp video call?

More importantly, I'm working with my colleagues and with the Elderberries group to make sure that between us, we check in with everyone we know of in our congregation who is over 70 or has pre-existing health conditions, to see what additional support they may need.

But *St James' by the Park* isn't just me and some of my colleagues. You are *St James' by the Park* as well! Indeed, pastoral care is everyone's responsibility, not just mine. So part of the answer to what *St James' by the Park* is doing is to ask you to consider what *you* can do to help – especially the most vulnerable and isolated? If you become aware of people who are self-

⁵ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/christians-anxious-coronavirus/>

isolating, please can I encourage you to look out for them – and if they are members of our church community, let the Church Office know as well?

This letter has turned out to be rather longer than I expected – thank you if you've read it all the way through!

Through the challenging times that lie ahead of us, let's be people of

- **prayer**, not panic
- **faith**, not fear
- **service**, not selfishness

Your brother in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Dan." with a horizontal line underneath.

Rev'd Dan Clark,
Vicar