

## 20th March – Singing the Lord's song in a strange land

Hi everyone,

'But how can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?'

**Psalm 137:4**

Since my last email a few days ago, the realisation that life will be very different to anything we have known before has become yet more apparent. It's as though we have arrived 'in a strange land' with new ways of being, new ways of relating and even a new vocabulary. And the behaviour expected of us there seems to go against everything we believe to be essential to our humanity. Self-isolate? Keep your distance from others? Don't visit elderly relatives? Don't shake hands? Communicate only by screen or phone? Keep your children away from school? No bars, restaurants, cinemas or theatres? And, for Christians, no church?

Not a land we want to visit for long, let alone settle in.

Six hundred years before the birth of Jesus, the people of Israel faced a similar experience. Invaded by a conquering army, they found themselves exiled to a strange land. Now, far from their temple and the familiar patterns and structures that sustained their worship, they found themselves sitting by the rivers of Babylon mourning the life they had lost. And as they did so they found themselves asking the question: How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? Or, in other words, how do we sustain our faith, stay connected to one another and worship God in this new reality?

And it's the same for us.

How do we sing the Lord's song in our strange land? How do we sustain our faith, stay connected to one another and worship God when we can no longer meet together on Sunday mornings or even in home groups? Without our building, our musicians, our services, the ministries we serve in, coffee, prayer ministry, how do we do church and be the church when we no longer go to church?

For a long time now the religious landscape of our nation has been changing. And for a long time the church has been asking for how much longer it can continue its existing patterns and structures of worship, given the steady decline in church attendance. Yet, we have either stuck to our guns, refusing to compromise our 'true worship', or we've tinkered around the edges in an effort to make ourselves look and sound a little more attractive to the outside world.

But now something dramatic has taken place and we are in exile. And I think this means asking ourselves some radical questions.

Questions like: What do I really believe about God? What do I really believe about Jesus and his death and resurrection? What sustains my faith? What do I believe about prayer? What does it mean to part of God's family? What do I believe to be God's purpose for the church on earth? Why am I a Christian? *Am* I a Christian?

We may find these questions unsettling, which is why, under normal circumstances, we

set them to one side. But in the midst of this present crisis, I believe God may be giving us the opportunity to examine our hearts and, by the gentle grace of his Holy Spirit, face the truth about ourselves. And in doing so call us to renewed faith and new ways of being church. Because it may well be that we don't go back to 'business as usual' once this is all over and life returns to a semblance of normality.

I am reminded of the story of a congregation that turned up at church one Sunday to find a note pinned on the locked door. It read, *'You've been coming here long enough. You know what to do. Now go and do it!'* Might this present crisis be God's note pinned to our church door? If so, what will this mean for us over the coming weeks and months? I think several things:

### **1. Stay Connected**

In the New Testament, church is far more about relational bonds than it is about religious buildings. During this time when we can't meet face to face let's intentionally keep in touch by phone, email, facetime and texts. And beyond just those we know, why not look on the database and call church family members we don't know? Then there are apps like Zoom, which can easily be installed on laptop or phone means we can see and talk to several people at once. We have volunteers who would happily come and install these on your devices and we may find that several could come together for Rhythm of Prayer, for example, in this way.

### **2. Be understanding**

Although those infected by the virus are still relatively low in number, those in our church family are coping with all kinds of worries and pressures: loss of income and bills to be paid; loss of employment; caring for children whilst working from home; looking after children with additional needs; those anxious and in self-isolation; worry about vulnerable or elderly loved one; not being able to visit those we long to be with; fear of what the future may hold. Let's be aware of what others are dealing with, speak hope, surround with love, offer support and hold in prayer. It's Paracletus; journeying together, and we need each other at this time.

### **3. Form habits that will sustain your own faith and encourage others**

Now is the time to put into practise much of what we have been talking about over the past couple of months. What daily routines and weekly habits will you develop to stay connected to God, abide in Christ and feed your soul? Over the coming weeks we could post on social media and on our website online talks that have blessed us, books that have fed us, answered prayers that have encouraged us, questions that have engaged us, songs that have blessed us, testimonies that have inspired us. We have such wealth of living faith in our midst and the technology to share it. Let's intentionally use this time to nurture our faith and encourage others as we do so.

### **4. Be salt and light**

In times of crisis divisions dissipate, walls crumble and people come together. There are dozens of community and neighbourhood groups wanting to help others. Now is the time for us to be salt and light as we align ourselves with them. There maybe some things we do as a church due to our place in the community, but God is equally present in the efforts of all who are willing to help those in need and make a difference. Many of you already do this, but let's be open to serve alongside whoever God may call us to

serve with. Some amazing new friendships may grow!

Tomorrow we will send you information regarding our online worship on Sunday so that we can 'virtually' be together then. Til then I want to leave you with **one piece of sad news and two encouragements.**

The sad news is that we heard yesterday that Evan Space, our Time for God volunteer must return to the States immediately. Time for God is repatriating all their volunteers because of the crisis. Evan is heartbroken. We pray for him, thank him for all he has give us during his time here, and wish him God's blessing for the future.

And the encouragements? The first is an excellent letter from Bishop Andrew sent to all ministers a couple of days ago. I particularly liked his Lent reference to Jesus self-isolating in the wilderness. [a pastoral letter from the bishop of guildford 3.pdf](#)

The second are some thoughts Monica sent in response to my last email. Monica is from Italy and was reflecting on my hope that this crisis would lead many to reconnect with God. This is what she wrote about life there:

*So dear Patrick, yes, many in Italy have told me they reconnected with God, they discovered the pleasure of sharing time with family. They discovered this forced slow down in life has changed them inside.*

*What you write above is exactly what happened in many ways to each person I know in Italy.*

*My father started to pray again. My mum and my dad started to do things together again. My cousin's are calling my grandma every day. My friends have discovered the pleasure of being with own children. I cannot describe you the reconnection each person is telling me every day .*

*This is life changing era, through tragedy, people are appreciating each small but of life. In Italy people are discovery compassion . I feel God is very present even when unfortunately we have to look at the long list of dead people. I cannot explain the aura of hope that there is in Italy in spite of the numerous deaths and how people are helping each other in ways they never did.*

Lord, may this be so for our nation.

Every blessing,

Patrick