

Reflection for Sunday 14 March 2021 (Mothering Sunday)

We've been living with the pandemic for a year. By 14 March last year, supermarkets were being stripped by those panic buying not just loo rolls and flour, but fresh goods too. On March 16 Boris Johnson told us that 'now is the time for everyone to stop non-essential contact and travel', anticipating the full stay at home order of 23 March. On 17 March we held an emergency Church Council meeting and decided to suspend all public worship. On Mothering Sunday, 22 March we made our first foray into online worship (you can still see it on our Facebook page) and the following day, the government closed all church buildings even for private prayer.

I acknowledged in my reflection for the day that the situation felt scary. People, I said, were worried about jobs, our health and all our futures. In a moment of unnecessary flippancy, I suggested we were in for a time that might feel like Christmas without the turkey, no presents and endless repeats on the telly.

A year on, and once again in lockdown, a deep weariness has replaced raw fear, though the future remains disturbingly unpredictable. A year ago, Sir Patrick Vallance considered that we would have done very well if UK deaths could be kept below 20,000. That seems now like the wildest optimism. 124,000 people have died in the UK alone, and over 2.5 million people have died worldwide – a shocking statistic that glosses over many more shattered lives.

The reality of the last year for many families has been far worse than we imagined a year ago. Businesses have been lost and education massively disrupted. We face a catastrophic toll of mental health issues, emotional and physical abuse and domestic violence. We have also, of course, witnessed huge generosity and selflessness. For example, a report last week said that nearly five million people volunteered for the first time in their lives last year. And if we used to pay lip service to the excellence of our health service, now we have taken it to our hearts. But as we look forward, we hope, to a summer in which we can truly begin to rebuild our lives, the task of rebuilding our communities seems daunting.

A year ago, on Mothering Sunday, I reflected on the passage from Pauls' letter to the Colossians that we've again chosen this year. I pointed out that it was written to a community that was far from perfect, but rather than providing them with a long list of do's and don'ts specific to their particular context and experience, he draws attention to some key values that should underpin our life together in any time or place, if we're to try to live Christianly.

They still hold true and we need to hold to them now as tenaciously as we have ever done. This last year has once again shown their worth. They hold the key not only to

surviving lockdown but to our emergence from it into a profoundly changed world. They must underpin how we re-imagine our communities and wider society.

None of these qualities are easy: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience and forgiveness – and above all else, love. They may sound like soft values, but they require extraordinary courage and strength as anyone who's tried to reach out and forgive someone who has seriously wronged them will know.

It's far, far easier to slip into doing the opposite of each of them. And as anyone who's lived with others through lockdown or in any other closed community will know, living together with real regard for peace, in the proper sense of reaching out to one another to seek harmony rather than retreating into selfish isolation, can be a massive challenge.

Despite the many very real problems that so many families have faced this year, these values have shown themselves once again to be trustworthy. They have proved capable of transforming situations from the deep blackness of despair to those in which a genuine sense of thankfulness for what we are and what we have can sustain and feed us.

They are the values that alone need to underpin all our efforts to rebuild our lives in this and the years to come - and help us find new and more sustainable ways of living and working together. They truly are the key to recovery. Not only that, they are the only true way of discovering what it can mean to be fully human, as created in God's own image.

If we're to rebuild our lives and communities in the way that will not just lead to recovery but to a new, sustainable and hopeful future, something far better than the situation we left behind year ago, we need to think imaginatively and positively and reach out to one another in whatever way we can. These values, embodied by Jesus Christ, are all about how we can best live together, not how we cope on our own. They remind us that our deepest fulfilment is always found in community, which is perhaps the biggest reason why this last year of unnatural isolation has proved so deeply damaging for so many people.

Paul was convinced that the church ought to lead the way in setting an example of what this new way of living together should be like. In this sense alone, the church has the potential to be called a family. If we take this challenge seriously it means that we shall have to do far more than simply plan for the resumption of public worship. We are called to listen to the word of Christ and respond by really trying to live in the light of its truth in love. And as we do that, because I'm sure that we will, we will discover, despite all the horrors of the past year and those yet to come, that we can also have genuine reason for gratitude. Life together is good.