

Homily. Loving God, Loving Others, Loving your town.
March 22nd 2020. Morning Prayer Service. First Sunday after
CoronaVirus Lockdown. Fourth Sunday of Lent.

Psalm 23 & 1 Sam 16:1-13 & John 9

We are in a time of shaking. Things that we took as secure and significant, are now uncertain: Working with others. Jobs. Coffees and beers in bars. Church services. School. People are anxious about social contact, concerned if they have enough food supplies. People carry on their hearts concerns about older loved ones. For others, things or events they had looked forward to are threatened or even have to be cancelled. Weddings. Holidays. For some of us now, we feel pressed, even less time, kids are at home, we are juggling so much, making sure they do their set online classwork, and as well as our own work or chores.

We remain Christians in this time of shaking and uncertainty and strain, how can we be loving God, loving one other as believers and loving others outside the church in Amersfoort or wherever we live.

The wider church inspire us. The persecuted part of the Christian church we pray for each week. They are under pressure, they cannot meet in large groups or even small ones at times, yet we learn from them, what vibrant faith they have despite the restrictions they are under. Draw upon their example and inspiration.

Looking at the scriptures. Psalm 23 is a psalm is a psalm of confidence in the Lord. It is about loving God – God the carer, God the reviver, God the rescuer, God the comforter, God the extravagant host, God the pursuer. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want, he makes me lie down in green pastures. It is

expressing trust in the Lord despite the crisis that David the writer is facing. When I grew up with this psalm, in Ireland, UK there are green pastures everywhere. So I saw this as a psalm about rest, 'he makes me lie down.' But last year when I went to Israel. We were in the south of the country in dry brown areas, where occasionally you would see Sheep being led places by a shepherd. And occasionally you may see an area of green. The sheep often would only see brown land. They would not see green. So I realized. David says, even if I cannot see it yet, he – the Lord – will lead me there. We can confident in the Lord when we see not a reason to be confident. To believe I shall not be in want despite what I can see. When I feel so far from green pastures. When all is being shaken. I say to myself I shall not be in lack. I trust in the Lord.

In the uncertainty, David's prayer speaks further. 'I shall fear no evil, **for you are with me.**' God is not simply a provider, reviver, he is with him. He is with us too, by his Spirit, in all we face. With us at all times and in all places. And what are God's ultimate intentions: Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life. The word follow is a weak translation of the Hebrew word. That word means pursue. The same word is used to describe how Pharoah pursued the Israelites to the Red Sea. In all circumstances, David said, the Lord's heart, is to pursue us with goodness and love. He always seek to work for good. Like a bloodhound chases a prey down, he will pursue us.

Loving God takes that to heart. Loving others – we imitate our God, showing goodness and love to other believers. We reveal that caring God to those outside our church community helping them place their confidence too in Him.

But for some of us, we may already feel we are in green pastures. We are beside quiet waters. We have all this time now. What to do? Press in. Take the opportunity to spend more time with the

Lord, this gift of time, than binge watching yet another series on Netflix. That thing you have been wanting to pray through – this is your time. That Christian book you started months or years ago – you can complete it. That pattern of prayer you have wanted to restart – now is the day. See this – for those who can – as a time to grow in your love of the Lord. Press in. There was the story of an excellent Irish chef. He was working in Dublin, had been in one of the top restaurants in Denmark. He was getting reviews in newspapers. Corona. He and many others were released by the restaurant as it cannot open. One thing he said – he would now look at new things to enhance his ability as a chef, things, he had not been able to do because of his busy work life. This could be for some of you a time to slow down. Lent remembers Jesus 40 days in the desert – self isolated – yet he pressed into God, knowing his spiritual provision, knowing the shape of his calling, being prepared for what came later. How can this time be one of preparation for what will come when Coronavirus has left. When you look back, you will see that this was a time of spiritual growth for you?

Why did this suffering come? A question in John 9. Jesus is asked, Is this suffering God's judgement. A question some may ask you. I do believe that God sent coronavirus. He is in control. He is sovereign. He has permitted it. Why? Perhaps Holy Week helps. We look at Good Friday – death, suffering, pain – and yet Easter comes, God working in what was dark and sad, to bring good. Romans 8:28 – God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his good purpose. Jesus says, this happened, 'so the work of God might be displayed.' We bring the suffering – ours, others – to the Lord. God's work may be displayed by healing, deliverance, protection – like here in the blind man. Or we discover God's strength and power and love in our weakness, like Paul who suffered and the Lord said to him: 'my grace is sufficient for you – for my power is made perfect in weakness.' In the midst of our questions, why or what is God doing, someone

said. 'We can only 'make sense' of a dark world only believing in the One who came to be the light of the world.'

We want to love one another in All Saints and love those outside the church community. Suffering is happening. Will continue in the weeks ahead. There is a call for us to work, to get our hands dirty, not only to reflect. 'We must do the works of him who sent me' – how the Lord seeks to be at work through his people, to relieve suffering, to help those who are spiritually blind to see that the idols in which people have trusted, have fallen and invite them to look up and see the one in whom they can place their confidence. Healing has many forms. There is spiritual healing – being restored to that relationship with the Lord, there is emotional or psychology healing, freedom and healing from spiritual bondage, there is physical healing – as the man experienced, there is healing between people – reconciliation; and finally healing as death approaches, healing in dying. How can you be part of God's work of healing – in one or more of its forms – in the days ahead, among those inside and outside the All Saints community.

But in these times, the temptation is to lock down and isolate and get through it. Samuel was like that. He is grieving that Saul was made King and he was part of it. He cannot see beyond the situation he is in. There can be no improvement. This is how it is. God speaks to Samuel – to move him on. Samuel is afraid of Saul. In fact not only he but when he turns up, so are the people of Bethlehem. Fear fills the pages and the air. You may be afraid at what is being shaken, how your life is. You may be anxious. But you know the most popular command from the Lord in the Bible – yes, Do not be afraid. Yes Saul is a threat. Coronavirus is a threat. But Samuel is asked to step out for the Lord into action, into the plans and purposes he has. Remember godliness – it is about seeking God's will, to discover it, and when we do, to do it!

Samuel hears the voice of the Lord, he goes. He arrives and things are not as expected at all. The one he serves, the one whose life God will touch through Samuel, is totally not who he expected. Loving Amersfoort, loving one another. We invite the Lord to speak. How can we do his works? To whom will he send us – physically, verbally, digitally? We may prefer to isolate, keep our head down, see out the coming months. But the Lord invites us, in fact you can hear the Spirit ‘whom shall I send? Lord send me.’ To do the works of God. It may be to someone totally unexpected or to do something totally unexpected. I heard a beautiful example. Two teenage boys in north England, made up shopping bags of basic goods and needs and went round each of the elderly and housebound in their town to deliver them. Whom shall I send to do my works?

Surely goodness and love will pursue. In these days, let us pursue God, members of All Saints and those outside of the church community with love and acts of goodness in those days. If you have to self isolate due to Corona, let members of the church know or our pastoral care team, Jolanda or Marianne. Perhaps place a card through your neighbours door – saying if they need any practical help they can count on you. Godparents this is your time, can you help with your godchildren who are now at home from school, to help their families. The Lord is my shepherd. For you are with me. Surely your goodness and love will pursue me each day. Amen.

Prayer: Lord simply we place our trust in you. In all the challenges, concerns and opportunities of this time. We say you are our shepherd. Through you we will lack nothing. Help us to grow in loving you, loving one another at All Saints and loving those who do not have confidence in you. Send us, may we be part of your works at this time. Amen.