

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Well, I have to confess to feeling somewhat anxious when I read these readings at the start of the week. Anxious firstly because I thought the gospel reading sounded so very much like the one Paul spoke about last Sunday – what was I going to add to his invitation for us to get “gardening together”. And then secondly, actually just what were the readings all about?

But then on Thursday I had another read through them and felt very drawn to the reading from Romans – and its message of hope... hope for the present and hope for the future. I couldn't go past this reading and how it speaks into our current situation!

Now I know I stand accused, particularly from my family, of preaching “fluffy love” sermons and “everything is lovely” stuff. And I suspect they are right. But here goes...

We are living through tricky times at the moment – times that we really didn't see coming (and if we did, we probably didn't expect it to have such a massive impact on the world). On a lighter note, who would have thought at one-point toilet rolls would be at a premium, and pasta a close second in demand! It's probably not best to go through the statistics right now, although it is very heartening that at the moment in the country things seem to have at least stabilized. But it must surely be true that creation is groaning under the pressure this virus places on it. Groaning under the pressure, and groaning in anticipation that all could be fixed and made better – but how?

It would be very easy in fact to utterly depress ourselves with the woes and worries of this world – we only need watch the news and listen to the radio and read the papers – coronavirus, economy, environment, politics, that long-forgotten (but coming back word) Brexit!

And then add onto that other issues that we all deal with in our own individual or family, friends and neighbours...poorly people, people in crisis, people falling out, people with private fears and worries that they don't feel able to share but we know something is up...

So we can certainly relate to the sense of the reading today of the world groaning, and in fact it has done throughout all creation – we've seen the woes and troubles ebb and flow in the Old Testament, and through the

New Testament too. So such groaning and messiness is not new. Far from it. Creation is not new to messiness in all its forms.

And whilst there may be some comfort in knowing that for centuries things have not been easy, it's still not the comfort that is utterly settling.

Many years ago, when we were explaining to our boys that a close relative had died and that it was very sad, but we were relieved that this person was no longer suffering, James turned round with impeccable logic...well, if that's what it's really like why don't you just kill yourself now and then you get to heaven and are with God. An interesting thought we said, however, perhaps God has plans for us here on the earth to make a difference and share his love where we can....

How amazing would it be if we could press a reset button, a bit like we do when our computers freeze, or our phones stop working – press reset or refresh, and more often than not, within a few minutes, all is well again. Right now, a reset button is just not possible...And so we have to find a way to live and thrive and flourish as best we can with what we have...

We are, Paul says in this passage, adopted as children of God, part of God's family – unique, individually known, loved and made. And as such, it must surely be God's greatest desire for us to know and feel and live our lives in such a way – known, loved, full of worth and hope, led by the Spirit of God, and responding with love by allowing ourselves to be encouraged and nurtured in our faith and hope and trust in the love of God. And doing so with others. And how amazing is that!

So, I think what Paul is trying to give us as individuals and as creation today in our passage is a sense of reassurance – a sense of hope...not just hope for this world, but hope for the next.... eternal hope. Hope for more than we can see at present. Hope from what we are being told and feel and trust, hope from the fact that our God's love and constant companionship and presence is eternal. And the assurance that as members of the body of Christ with his strong and eternal love, grace, forgiveness and presence with us always...

As many of you will know, during lockdown Scott and I have been recording Morning Prayer on a daily basis – we live a rather topsy turvy world at the moment – top-loaded with spirituality at the latter end of the day, as at 8pm we have Zoom compline, and then just before we go to

bed, we record Morning Prayer ready especially for the early birds (and when I say early birds – we do have one listener for whom 5.30am is not too early a start!). Every night at Morning Prayer 😊 we say the Benedictus (the song of Zechariah) as part of it – and there is a beautiful part which just sang through the other night giving hope for a new day, and knowledge and affirmation that In the tender compassion of our God the dawn from on high shall break upon us, 10 To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

There are many who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and we pray that we along with God can walk with them and pray with and for them and shine his love into those dark places.

But amidst the darkness or the shadows and groaning and straining, there are glimpses of light and love and joy – glimpses of God's love shining and gleaming.

Take for example the personal responses to this current crisis – both locally and across the world. There have been so many good responses – people working together to make scrubs and masks, people shopping for the shielding, and people finding creative ways of supporting our communities. People living in different ways, perhaps away from families whilst working for the NHS or in care homes. People coming out of retirement to work for the NHS. There has been such creativity too across the world in terms of worship – zoom, live stream, Facebook live, dial-in – so much more across very diverse places. What has birthed such actions is a desire to serve communities for the greater good giving a sense of hope and unity both now and in the future.

And closer to home, stories of love, stories of hope in new faces and signs of unity.

So, even in times of shadow and messiness, in times of uncertainty and unknown, God's love shines through the love and action of people.

Perhaps Ruth's window helps us – with the rainbow of hope and love, it calls for us to "hold on to that which is good", to hold fast to the love which God extends to us through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

We are people of hope and love and Paul's message is a timely reminder that there is a bigger picture to all of this – there is the eternal reality of

God's promise of unstoppable love both now in and all times. God promises that although we currently see things as in a mirror darkly, we will one day see things clearly and know God's love face to face. Now that is hope in all its fullness.

Amen