

(Acts 2:42-47; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10)

As Christians, we hold on to our experience that God's word is 'living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword'. We can read about that in the letter to the Hebrews; but we know about it in our lives. That's because when we take the trouble to engage with a particular passage of the Bible, by bringing our own situation into dialogue with it, then we find that God can 'speak to our condition'. In that way, a passage written in a context completely different from ours will speak to us: the truth of God 'cuts through' our confusion and is clearly seen to be living and active.

Today, we are confronted, locked-down as we are, with Jesus telling us, 'I came that [you] may have life, and have it abundantly'. Can we really reconcile that with the restrictions and the *suffering* of the present time? Well, let's see.

I know that many of us have learnt to stop listening out for 'breaking news': the last few weeks of rolling news on Coronavirus has made us weary. Naturally, we still need to tune in regularly, but for the good of our health we need also to tune out! In tuning out we are then able to re-focus on the bigger picture, and it is noticeable that in recent days we all seem to have taken on board the realisation that we are not going through a 'V-shaped dip' but a step-change in the way we lead our lives.

Bishop Nick puts it like this:

'If nothing else, we have been learning a little of how to live with uncertainty and deprivation of privilege – something that might bring us closer to the experience of most Christians in this world. We will be experiencing the reality of faith as we contemplate living in a changed world. So, we can either complain about what lies ahead or we can try to shape it for the sake of the kingdom of God.'

The sustainability of our economy, from world trade to the viability of individual businesses (and churches), is being challenged – as is our stewardship of natural resources and our care of the environment. (Our Lent Course was on that theme and its title 'Saying Yes to Life' might have added the word 'abundantly'.) We are being forced to face matters of justice, social as well as economic and climate, and to revisit our regard for common courtesy. We are re-discovering the human instinct to look out for (and after) our neighbours, near and far. And because this is a worldwide crisis we are seeing the gradual emergence of a new spirit of international collaboration. In short, there are some good things emerging from the confusion surrounding us: the truth is 'cutting through'. And part of God's truth is his will for *all* people to 'have life, and have it abundantly'. Remember, Jesus said, 'the truth will set you free'.

In normal times, next week would have been Christian Aid Week. It still will be. Christian Aid's belief in 'life before death' is as relevant as ever, as are their campaigns for climate justice and an equitable banking system. We can still support Christian Aid in the days, weeks and months ahead through our donations, and our prayers, but perhaps even more importantly through making intentional the 'Big Shift' in our values which the current crisis

is visiting upon us. We can be part of that emerging new spirit of international collaboration: through the sharing of our resources ‘with glad and generous hearts’ – alluded to in our first reading, from Acts.

And on Friday it will be VE Day. ‘Victory in Europe’ was declared 75 years ago. The irony of comparisons between our current situation and the war effort is lost on none of us. We depend on each other now just as much as we did then, and the need for wise and clear leadership is just as strong. 75 years ago, the second world war effort resulted in a freedom that the first world has enjoyed ever since. Perhaps it’s time for the third world – more accurately referred to as the ‘two-thirds world’ – to get a look-in. God’s will is for *all* people to ‘have life, and have it abundantly’.

Meanwhile, back to today, it is Vocations Sunday. The worldwide Church is keeping today as a reminder that we are *called* by God to ‘have life, and have it abundantly’. After all, the word ‘vocation’ literally means a calling by God. As St Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12, ‘there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone’. We are all called to use our God-given gifts in his service, and most of us are called to do so not in the Church but in the world. Look again at what Bishop Nick says: ‘...as we contemplate living in a changed world ...we can either complain about what lies ahead or we can try to shape it for the sake of the kingdom of God.’ The kingdom of God is very much ‘out there’. So, from the midst of this crisis, what is God calling you to do or to be in his service?

Living as we do in a town often referred to as the ‘Gateway to Swaledale’, I can’t let the reference to ‘gates’ in our gospel reading pass without looking for what God might be saying to us today.

Jesus describes himself as the ‘gate for the sheep’ (and he goes on to describe himself as the good shepherd). He explains that he wants his sheep to have life abundantly. That’s a lovely message for this Easter season – when we remember that Jesus destroyed death, opening to all who believe in him the gate of everlasting life, *new* life in its fullness, from now.

Now just think of a gate for a minute, and how it can protect us. Is it to stop us from venturing out into trouble, or to stop trouble from getting in? At this time of year, there are many new lambs in the fields, and I find it intriguing that in most fields the gap beneath the gate is large enough for them to squeeze through – and they do! But when they do, they certainly realise where they belong, where they are safe: it’s on the *inside*!

Jesus describes himself as the gate. He protects us in both directions: when he leads us out of our ‘comfort zone’, as long as we follow him, he will protect us from danger. And when we are inside our ‘comfort zone’ it is he who is keeping us safe.

So as you are thinking of that gate, I invite you to consider what it is that you need protection from, in order to enjoy the abundance of life Jesus offers. What do you fear? Is leaving your comfort zone, or is it a particular threat? And then remember that the most common phrase in the Bible is ‘do not fear’...

I close with these words of our reading from the first letter of Peter: '[let us not be led] astray like sheep, but... return to the shepherd and guardian of [our] souls'.

Thanks be to God. Amen.