

May these words be pleasing. Amen.

Earlier in the week I noted to the family that today would be the first time since March that I would be in robes. A voice said quietly, 'I hope they fit'. It's been a long time.

A theme for this morning is separation.

Here are four examples of 'separation', as we go through them ask yourself which seems to hurt the most.

Number one: We have been separate from this building for some time. Some are still unable to come to this church building and all of us remain unable to fully physically meet as a church family here in this church building.

Number two: We are increasingly having to wear a mask or a visor as we go about in our daily lives and this acts as a barrier to how we see and hear people normally.

Number three: We are separate from God. He is perfect, I make mistakes. I don't think I fully understand just how important and how serious and how bad this is. But I get a glimpse not just with my mistakes (for they are many) but on the rarer occasions when I am *seen* by others to make a mistake. Last week I went into a shop where a couple were already being served, to be told that I had to leave as only two people were allowed in at any one time, as the sign says on the door. A friend was caught speeding and in this last week attended a Speed Awareness Course, ironically in these times held on Zoom.

Separation number four: Paul, the great missionary Paul, was separated from the Jewish faith, the faith of the Israelites in which he grew up, separated from his family and former friends, many whom now hated Paul. How he wished (he says_ that he could be cut off from Christ (x2) if they his kindred people could be saved instead. We can speculate that Paul was also separated from the earliest church in Jerusalem. This had in its number some of the apostles and disciples (such as Peter) and some of the family of Jesus. To belong to *this* group it was necessary to hold on to all the rules required to be a Jew – the Sabbath, circumcision, what you can and cannot eat and *then* make the final leap to become a Christian. Paul is an outcast both with the old and the new. Paul knows all about separation and isolation.

That's all four. And where there is separation we seek reconciliation. Come says Isaiah, to those in need, and delight yourselves in good food.

I discovered an invitation *this week* on a church website to our zoom service this morning. "Come and hear Bishop John Pritchard as he preaches at St Marys Church in Richmond." Well, if you have joined us this morning, welcome, he was on last week. You would have also heard a different verse from Romans in which Paul states *his* delight that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to *separate* us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Tune in the Café church this afternoon to hear that verse again.

Faced with separation our God offers healing and reconciliation. And with it an astonishing abundance of goodness. In our gospel reading Jesus is separated just for a short time from the crowd but when they are brought back together he feeds them with a miraculous abundance beyond explanation. Five loaves and two fish, that's all that was brought to Christ. With it he feeds five thousand men. Some of you will have noted the awkward fact that the women and children are not counted. They are *all* fed by Jesus with 12 baskets left over. Where there is separation God offers abundance.

What is God's response when faced with the four examples of separation? And where might be the abundance of God?

Let's start with Paul. In a blinding flash his life is given a completely new direction away from the rules of religion of his youth. He is understandably not inclined to exchange this simply for a different set of rules within the early church in Jerusalem. Instead Paul heads out alone and breaks down the barriers that separate Jews and Gentiles, Romans and Greeks, Male and Female. He makes known the abundance of God throughout the Roman world. Having found freedom in Christ he worked to bring the good news to others. He took no money and worked ceaselessly for the Kingdom of God.

What about visors and masks. Last week Andrew set himself a challenge. It was the start of the summer break. I want to cycle to Grandpa, I want to cycle to Glasgow. So we made a plan, a three day journey, a route that had a pleasing total of 200 miles. We cycled 199 miles. I stopped at the final set of traffic lights, Andrew didn't. We walked the final mile and we hope for the two bikes back from repair sometime soon. As we crossed the border into Scotland we found they were ahead of us in terms of wearing masks and visors, but behind us in terms of opening up shops and businesses. We

stayed at a B&B in Moffat which had only just reopened. Despite an obvious nervousness the welcome was warm as was the desire to serve and make us comfortable. The lady whose house it was wore a visor not to protect herself but to stop germs spreading to those she met, those she served, like us. This large space is relatively safe compared to smaller businesses and shops. If workers *there* can spend all day with faces covered to protect the people they serve then one can understand the advice of our church leaders, they strongly advise that face coverings are used in church. Time will tell whether this advice becomes an instruction.

How can this separation lead to a sign of the abundance of God? Time will also tell whether in this current crisis our world adds more and more rules as to how we are to live our lives, more judging, more finger pointing, more stress. Or perhaps we become more mindful of the needs of others, our service to them and their service to us, brought closer together by a greater focus on service and the welfare of those we serve, and this we all grow closer to God. I would confess that I am still struggling with face coverings but I am hoping that I can see this not as something that separates but something that unites us in service to each other.

What about the fact that we still face separation here at St Marys? Some of us come to church here, some come to church from home. Some can do neither. Our intention is, at least for now, to continue to offer what is called blended worship, accessible both here and at home. How wonderful will that time be when our church building is full again, how much better still if we are also worshipping with countless others in homes around Richmond and beyond? We have seen what our Christ can do with just 5 loaves and 2 fishes.....

Our hymn today will be Jesus wherever your people meet there we behold your mercy seat. Every place is hallowed ground for you no walls confine. We are few but by the power of prayer make a thousand hearts your own.

And I think we have reached the fourth example of separation and the one that should upset us the most, our separation from God. But we do so by thinking of our service to and with Christ and our expectation that where there is separation God offers abundance. When we face separation we return, as we will this afternoon to Pauls firm belief, his delight, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to *separate* us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.