

17th March 2020

An Open Letter from the Archbishops of Canterbury and York

We are good in this country at holding our nerve and steadying one another.

But a pandemic is something else; you can't touch the virus, see it or even know where it is. It may be spread by those who don't even know they are infected. It is very serious for some, very mild for many. Nevertheless, the effect of the virus could drive us apart. To some extent it must do. When someone we care for has it they must be isolated. That is particularly so for older people and the most vulnerable, the ones by whose bed we want to sit, and hold their hand, express our love with touch. As in epidemics throughout history the effects of this fear disturb us very deeply, and dread comes upon us.

The answer to conquering this fear is love that we receive. The tears of the child wakened by a bad dream are stilled by the embrace of someone who loves them. The uncertainty of someone of great age is often quietened with a familiar voice. The words of a friend can enable us to challenge the fears of illness to reduce our sense of threat. The UK has a culture of caring, expressed through the NHS, in Social Care, and in many other ways.

All of us, now, face a common threat, COVID-19. The question is, how do we find hope in these difficult circumstances? Hope comes both from what we can do and who we are.

We know that everything possible is being done to ensure that we can meet the challenge, in the NHS and across society. The struggle will bring with it many practical difficulties, from the closing of sports grounds to meeting the needs of those in isolation. It may mean some very hard decisions have to be taken about who is treated, as in Italy where they have had to decide not to treat some patients. We must not be suspicious or indulge in conspiracy theories. Those who are leading our country are seeking the best advice and can be trusted to do all they can. NHS staff and scientists our Government can call upon are amongst the best anywhere in the world. They have no agenda other than the wellbeing of all.

We are capable of bearing the truth. Honesty strengthens our hopes. We need to listen to the science. Through listening we already know how to reduce the risk: washing our hands meticulously; self-isolating even if we are not ill but have come into contact with the virus; resisting the temptation to go to a doctor's surgery where we might infect others; resisting the temptation, too, to panic buy. Above all we must look after one another, knowing that in an uncertain world with a new virus we are best protected with honesty, compassion and care.

Remember the example of the Good Samaritan, the story in the Bible, which speaks about the need to care for the other and ensure we notice those who are in distress even if they are those who are often invisible to us.

We can find hope and courage in the goodly and wholesome spirit that is in so many ways common to all human beings, whether they are people of Faith or None. We must distinguish between a healthy fear - the beginning of wisdom, which prompts us to follow advice, and to care for those at risk - and unhealthy fear which is driven by pride, leading us to act selfishly, doing harm to ourselves and others. With the gift of truth and hope, we can care for one another lovingly, using words if not touch because of self-isolation. We can accept advice without grumbling, out of concerns for others, even if we do not see ourselves as being at risk. We can go out of our way to be attentive to neighbours and to those who are vulnerable. We can shop for one another. We can help at a food

bank. We can volunteer in community service. We can support those who struggle to feed their children when there are no free school lunches.

Finally, there is one more thing that everyone can do. Something we would expect from two Archbishops. We make no apology for saying "Pray!". Even if you scarcely can imagine how, pray! Pray for yourself, for those you love, for friends and neighbours.

Three thousand years ago a young king, of shepherd background, called David, wrote a song. It was a hit at his time and has remained so ever since. That is quite a success, even the greatest of our stars of today would feel that three thousand years at the top was quite an achievement. It's the Shepherd song, "The Lord's my Shepherd".

We sing it in our common worship, at weddings and at funerals. It starts with hope but speaks of darkness as well as life. The singer begins with joy: God, the divine Shepherd-King, leads his people to nourishment and safety but in the song the scene quickly darkens. The path along which he goes becomes a valley of the shadow of death. But the shepherd's 'rod' and 'staff', implements that prod and guide the sheep, provides the comfort that comes from divine guidance. Find Psalm 23 and read it aloud. The Shepherd's song is about real life, not an idealised picture. It speaks of suffering and facing enemies.

Whether we are confident and brave, or doubt-filled and fearful, God is the source of love and hope. Why not say the Lord's prayer – "Our Father who art in heaven" when you wash your hands. It takes more than the recommended 20 seconds. So, we are inviting you to join us from today, for 7 days, in praying the Lord's prayer every time you wash your hands. Yes – for seven days! And then pray throughout the day for healing for those who are sick with COVID-19; and that God will heal us from the fear which will prevent us from working together.

May the wisdom of God lead the doctors, nurses and researchers, that they may know God's protection; and that God will guide the leaders of the nations into the ways of justice and peace. And that the love of Christ will surround us and take away our anxiety and give us His peace. May He hear us and heal us. With the hope that you will find, then act. Where someone is ill, encourage them. Where someone dies, remember that, as the foundation of our faith for over two thousand years, we have believed that God shared the pains and fears of our lives in Jesus Christ, that He faced death, but overcame it. And He is with the bereaved.

Where is our hope? It is in the end in the love and faithfulness of a God whom we may have forgotten, but whose action and character is expressed in millions of acts of love by every person in this country. This is the God who we see in Jesus Christ, who called himself the Good Shepherd. Acts of love are the normal reaction to those in need. They are a reflection of the God who is our Shepherd.

So today we, together with our fellow bishops and other church leaders, call for a National Day of Prayer and Action this coming Mothering Sunday (22nd March) - light a candle at 7pm and put it in your window, ring someone who is isolated and vulnerable; buy an extra item and place it in your local food bank, keep your night shelters open.

We have a stronghold and refuge, we do not depend on ourselves alone, for God keeps us so that as the Shepherd song ends: "surely goodness and mercy shall follow me, all the days of my life".