

Like many of you, I was looking forward to hearing Stan's faith journey and walk with God, but in light of everything that's going on, I thought it would be helpful if we paused for a moment.

It seems to me that there is a tension:

A tension between recognising the reality of Coronavirus, its virulence and how quick it is to spread,

But also balancing our measures, not exacerbating the fear, especially those who are most vulnerable.

But even more than that, what is the church's role in all of this, and even more significantly, where is Jesus in it all.

The question I've been reflecting a lot this week is the phrase 'Do not be afraid.'

How easy it is to say.

On Monday this week I did my first baby funeral. Speaking of the hope of the Resurrection to the young parents overwhelmed with grief was unbelievably hard. Suffice to say, I had a glass of wine that night.

On Thursday my friend Mary, who I reference in my sermon on Ash Wednesday, died. I missed her by five minutes. Just after I had anointed her, a nurse in the hospice asked if I could do the same for another gentleman who had died ten minutes previously.

And now to see the fear as a result of Coronavirus. Fear that is completely understandable, but fear that has also perhaps, been whipped up by certain strands of the media.

'Do not be afraid' is an easy thing to say, but perhaps a harder thing to live out. Certainly as a minister, speaking that into the deepest sorrow is hard.

And yet: I keep thinking back to Mary.

She was a lady of such deep faith, who in spite of the hardship and the pain she emotionally and physically felt, was able to face death with utter peace and utter conviction. In one of the last conversations I had with her, I asked her how she was doing, and she said 'a bit nervous about the pain, but not about dying. I know where I'm going. What's there to be afraid of?'

Mary knew what it was to 'not be afraid.'

At this time, we are called to live out the sure and certain message of what it means to not be afraid.

That doesn't mean we don't take precautions, or indeed doesn't mean we suddenly stop fearing,

But it does mean that we have the hope and assurance in a saviour whose love extends beyond the grave and whose love reaches deep into our lives now.

It means – perhaps especially now in the season of Lent – that whatever the 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune' that may be thrown at us are, we can stand in the certainty that God stands alongside us.

Rowan Williams once wrote: in the midst of the fire of suffering, God is there standing next to us.

As a church, we are called to bear witness to that God who stands alongside.

So how does the church live do that? How does it bear witness to the God who says 'do not be afraid'?

I think there are a few principles:

First: it means remembering Jesus command to love your neighbour. It means offering help and reassurance to those who are afraid.

Second, linked to that, it means being mindful of those who are in need and suffering. For my own personal sake, as a young healthy person, I am not worried, but I am mindful of those of you who more at risk (which includes my wife). It means identifying those in our community who may be feeling vulnerable, picking up the phone to those who choose to self-isolate and simply asking 'are you ok.'

Third: it means remembering that we are all part of the Body of Christ. It means resisting the temptation to individualise, to hoard or 'panic buy.' It means asking those who are self-isolating how we can support (with the caveat if course of protecting yourself and following hygiene measures). It means being willing to share with those who will struggle to get to the shops, or who wont be able to afford increased prices.

And fourthly, it means we need to pray. This is not the sermon or the time to ask why prayers for healing seemingly aren't answered. I do believe God heals and can heal, and perhaps at some point we need to explore that. But it seems to me that what this time is about is about prayer, because it is in prayer that we draw ever close to God. It is in prayer that we are enabled to do all the things I have mentioned. It is in prayer that we discover the God whom we are reaching out to is the God who has been there all along. It is in prayer that we are formed so that we can live out that message of 'do not be afraid.'

The need to 'not be afraid' in some form appears 365 times in the Bible: what would it be like if we prayed that every day for a year?

It was prayer that rooted my dear friend Mary's life and it was that regularity of prayer that enabled her to look forward to meeting Jesus face to face.

I know many of you are scared and uneasy. But know that God has got you. And God loves you and that whatever happens he will be with you and has prepared a place for each of us.

So do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid.