

Sermon on Mental Health and Covid-19 July/August 2020

BALDOCK 020820

Matthew 14:13-21

May I speak in the name of ...

Today's gospel describes the very well-known miracle of the Feeding of the 5000. Jesus feeds people physically as a metaphor for his spiritual feeding of us with bread blessed and broken.

AND HERE WE RE-ENACT THIS IN OUR SERVICE OF HOLY COMMUNION

We often think of ourselves as physical, mental and spiritual beings. This miracle reminds us of God's care for our physical and spiritual well-being. I believe that God is concerned, too, with our mental health, our mental well-being and I want to say a few words about that this morning.

I expect many of you are familiar with the Derbyshire mining village of Eyam? During the bubonic plague outbreak of 1665-6 the people of Eyam quarantined themselves in a famous act of self-sacrifice to prevent the spread of the plague. Villagers used to place money in six holes drilled into the top of the boundary stone to pay for food and medicine left by their anxious neighbours. By the end of the outbreak more than a quarter of the village's population of almost 1,000 were dead. But the plague was contained.

The village priest, William Mompesson, in the face of more and more deaths managed to convince villagers that quarantining was the right thing to do, although the number of deaths in the village would soar.

And physical distancing meant not only isolation but also open air funeral services to reduce physical proximity and families burying their own dead in fields and gardens rather than the church graveyard. Church services too were held in the open air just outside the village so that families were able to stand far apart and the vicar preaching from an outcrop of limestone rocks. Mompesson realised, in June 1666 that things were going to get much worse before any improvement. He knew if he didn't prevent people leaving Eyam in panic, it would spread to nearby villages and towns. Once it reached Sheffield or Manchester, things would be back to London proportions.

Then as now diseases are transmitted via trade routes and centres; then as now successful isolation and distancing can contain outbreaks.

It can feel very frustrating when opportunities are suddenly and severely limited. Since the middle of March I'm sure we have all lamented our situations and those of others and prayed about them.

It's been a discouraging time - more than ever we need to be sustained by God's love

and grace. We need to focus on our faithfulness to God's calling as we adjust to new ways, different ways, of being, different ways of doing things, different ways of being church.

I spent some time earlier this week with an 11 year old who had just left her primary school. She was very disappointed that there'd been no school play, no Year 6 holiday, no church Leavers Service, a very scaled-down party etc.

Although she is looking forward to her new school in September, she was sad about what **hadn't** happened last week and it was difficult to get her to focus on some of the exciting things she HAD done that week. I am concerned for those who had some schooling after Easter (and for those who didn't) as they prepare in five weeks or so to return to or start at a new school.

In Scotland a comprehensive assessment of the impact of the pandemic on children's rights has already been carried out. Bruce Adamson, the children and young people's commissioner, writes: *'Even the most resilient children are going to need additional support as they navigate this transition back into whatever is the new normal. Take as a starting point that every child is going to need something extra and many will need a lot of extra support'*.

For those who've left school for good, most of them months ago, times are difficult too. Much has been written and I quote from 3 18-year olds:

It all feels so uncertain; it's not great for the mental health side of things.

It feels like all the rites of passage you go through when you're 18 haven't happened.

We've been hard done by, but our generation will make big changes in the world.

And it's not only the young who are low in spirits during this extended lockdown (or whatever it is called now).

There are so many worries for families, for those who are furloughed, some of whom must be anxious about the long-term future of their jobs, for parents who have been doing their best to home-school their children, parents managing without the normal child-care, elderly people in their own homes with less care than they need, those in residential homes who have had no visitors since March, the lonely, the uncertain, those trapped with abusers.

Cancelled weddings, funerals with many unable to attend.

Many of these things are causing mental health problems, some of them serious, to significant numbers of people.

What can we Christians do to lift our spirits?
and to encourage others?

How do we navigate the brave new world of face masks and physical distancing?

Later in this service we'll be saying as always:

The Lord is here

His spirit is with us

Lift up your hearts

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give thanks and praise.

We need to remind ourselves constantly that God's spirit is with us as we lift our hearts to God and give thanks and praise.

Sarah Mullally, the Bishop of London, previously Chief Nursing Officer in the NHS, has spoken recently of the importance of speaking about mental illness. She expresses the need to find a language to explore mental health in the same way as we would speak of physical well-being. She urges us to do this not only to reduce stigma, nor just to increase our understanding of mental health, but **to understand the full nature of what it is to be human.**

She challenges us to:

- 1) ensure that we all feel safe to share our struggles and are able to speak openly;
- 2) talk to **and more important to LISTEN** to one another;
- 3) include mental health as an integral part of public as well as private prayer.

So let's do our best to meet that challenge and let's make a start **this** week.

Amen.