

Father God, you did not stay distant in our troubles but came close through your Son. By his Spirit, may we discover that anew today as we read the words of scripture. Amen.

- Touch is such an important sense. From a gentle caress, to a pat on the back. From a hug to a handshake.
When was the last time you touched someone outside your bubble? Probably nearly 9 months ago. For many this has been the hardest and most destructive thing about the Corona virus.
 - Lack of physical contact leads to isolation; to suspicion as you wonder who is clean, who is safe; and sometimes to intense emotional anguish as the person you love is kept behind secure glass screens and you cannot get close to them.
- What has been the most difficult result for you of the strange life we have been leading in 2020?
 - If it's not the result of not being able to touch people, it's might be anxiety about the future. Will your family be safe? I'm a bit vulnerable, dare I go out? Will I still have a job in 3 months? How can we pay the mortgage if I can't work?
 - Or perhaps it's the loneliness of days without your usual activities. The four walls of your sitting room starting to close in on you? Depression tapping ominously on the door? Trying to stand up against it, but only being able to do so much. Lethargy beginning. You've done less, so you do less? Even things you used to enjoy begin to lose their appeal. Suddenly you really can't be bothered!
 - Or you know someone who is clearly bereft because of bereavement? Or possibly someone you love has been seriously ill, or died? And you're alone and exhausted and can't sleep and don't want to eat?
 - Maybe you're just cross because your plans for 2020 have been disrupted. It was going to be the year of the grand holiday and it's all fizzled out?
 - Perhaps you're aware of the precarious state of families dear to you where enforced seclusion in the same house has led to arguments ..., violence..., worse? ... Perhaps you've seen the lack of physical fitness of 7 year olds who have set a summer when they should have been outside and running around, inside, and on screens.
 - Or maybe you are responsible for the safety and wellbeing of others? And many days have been taken up with thinking through risk assessments, responding to Government requirements, coping with human beings who never quite seem to behave in the way you expect them to?
- The Corona virus has a lot to answer for. Where is God in all this? Has he stayed distant? Does he care?
- The Christian Gospel does have some clear answers to this question. And it's resoundingly Good News. Indeed the very word 'gospel' is Old English for 'Good News'. And that's where our Gospel reading today comes in, with its first sentence which is almost like a title for the whole book, '*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*'
- Ah yes, we know about this good news. Jesus Christ died on a cross to pay the price for our sin, so that we could be forgiven and one day escape this tired and suffering world and go to heaven with all its spiritual delights where all is peace and joy and we can have as much Coca Cola as we want.
- As in so many spiritual statements there is some truth in this, but actually if Christian faith is going to be of any help today, rather than just an insurance policy for the future, then I suggest that the emphasis on heaven in the future is all wrong and that actually we need to be looking at the presence of God today when so much else in the world is noticeably absent.
 - Because in a time of loneliness and powerlessness, that would be extremely Good News.
- So look again at that first sentence, the title and theme of St Mark's Good News, his Gospel.
- '*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*'
- Perhaps isolation and loneliness have always been a problem for human beings. After all God created us to be social creatures. He created Adam and Eve to be together, they need each other. He did not make them to go

through a trial separation and then divorce. It was human failings and weakness that has done that. It is the cataclysmic problem of death that causes separation, isolation and loneliness.

- God knew that we were isolated. That's why he came to live by our sides. Jesus Christ, not just another poverty stricken, homeless urchin but the incarnate Son God, come close, come to share life in all its grit and poverty, its loneliness, powerlessness and shame as a poverty stricken, homeless urchin laid in a cattle trough.
 - And that means God is not distant and uninterested. He is sitting next to the house bound pensioner who has not spoken to another human being for 24 hours. He is sharing in receiving the aggression of warring couples while their children look helplessly on.
- '*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*'
- The Son of God was named Jesus, which means Saviour. He was born to be Christ, the Messiah, God's anointed one. A human with a mission. A mission to save the world. In years to come as he faces the cross, it's all too clear that he understands rejection and sometimes is ground down by it. It's apparent that the cross is a constant anxiety ever-present in his mind and difficult to forget about as he moves remorselessly closer to Jerusalem. It's apparent that he feels deeply, ever so deeply, so deeply that he weeps about the pain and grief of others, and indeed himself.
 - God has come close. And it hurts. He hurts. With us.
- '*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*'
- The Good News is that our suffering loving Son of God, Jesus Christ has conquered sin with love, loneliness with sharing, and separation with meaning, as he rose from the dead after his separation from his Father on the cross. And that is just the beginning.
- '*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*' The best is yet to come!
- Because our world is still fallen. Those who grieve might find meaning, but they still grieve. And many of us are still more occupied with the petty frustrations of daily life rather than the huge overwhelming inequalities that loom ever larger in modern society if we stop to think about them. I get just as frustrated about my glasses steaming up when I don a mask as I do about the rising temperatures causing the melting of permafrost in Siberia. More so probably. Which is quite a shocking situation to be in when you stop to think about it.
- What has the Good News got to say about this? I think two things!
- The first is to look at a few verses further on in Mark's Gospel which details how we prepare for acknowledging that Jesus Christ is God come close, sitting by our side and holding our hand – imagine that – someone outside your bubble holding your hand, as we feel so deeply the effects of lockdown. Mark writes, '*Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.*' He reports John the Baptist as calling us to '*repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*'
- When you find yourself getting frustrated, or angry about trivialities; when you notice your fitness being affected by the amount of time you are spending indoors but you really can't make yourself go for a brisk walk; when you find yourself thinking God really should do something about it and start writing him off as a distant waste of space, catch yourself and repent and prepare for him to be by your side, holding your hand. That's the traditional meaning of Advent as we wait for the coming of our Saviour.
- The second thing the Good News has to say about life today is more subtle. And actually more far reaching and potentially more dangerous if we ignore it.
- Because if the final solution to sin and suffering in the world is to whisk us out of it when Christ finally does come again, whisk us out to some ethereal paradise, then there seems little point in worrying unduly about caring for the world today, and fighting to reverse climate change, because it's all going to disappear anyway at the second coming of Jesus.
- However if the final solution isn't to destroy the earth but rather to renew it, it matters rather more how we care for the world we live in, because God cares too. God has come close. God loves his creation and has not left us lonely on our own. Neither is he going to abandon what he is so desperately in love with, and proud of.
- That's the Good News. What preparation do you need to do?
- When next you feel the effect of 9 months of pandemic, how does this Good News speak to you?