

Good morning – this must be the first time I’ve preached from my home in 23 years of ministry. It also feels very odd not being surrounded by faces of our congregation or the Saints in the beautiful West Window which I’d usually be looking at; I’d also be surrounded by the monuments and memorials which we and your church may have. They are a wonderful connection with people who have given their lives to church, country and commonwealth in the past - to fight against evil in war; whilst many visitors come to discover the cathedral’s heritage, our aim is for these memorial to be *living stones* – monuments with stories that can still speak messages of how and why people gave their lives to this country. During the Centenary years of World World 1, we had many school groups and visitors, who came to discover those messages and stories – but I can remember one however of a rather bored teenager, Luke who asked *Why did they bother to fight* and *Why for people they didn’t know?* – silence - and then Ben a fellow student, responded *Oi Luke – don’t you know what it means to think of others, they did for love and for us, perhaps you should start doing that... !*

Ben’s answer then and our response at this terrible time is that – we’re doing this because *love means helping and thinking about others rather than ourselves* – it’s the meaning of the Commandments which Jesus shows and inspires us to practise, as we enter the season of

Passiontide which begins today. We are witnessing the meaning of the word passion or *passio* today - through thousands of people across the country coming forward to mirror Christ's sacrificial love of thinking of others and being prepared to risk suffering, by giving their own lives to care for those who unknown to them, - even it means facing potential danger of catching the virus themselves in order to save and heal others. A risk being taken by both dedicated staff of the NHS who were joyfully applauded as part of *clap for carers* on Thursday night, but also for the police, armed forces and so many volunteers, who are working to save our nation from illness and isolation, but ultimately – despair and death.

Throughout his own life, Jesus took risks by coming into contact with those who were seriously ill around him; he touched lepers, he healed the sick and gave sight to the blind as we heard in the Gospel. Today however we hear of the ultimate challenge that he faced, in encountering his friend Lazarus, who was ill and then died – and in this story we witness in St John's Gospel, the last miracle Jesus demonstrates before he enters into Jerusalem to prepare for his *own* death and resurrection. And what a risk he took ! – to his own life by coming to a tomb and then reaching the body where we are told there has already a stench which has been in this state for 4 days. In being there, Jesus himself risks becoming unclean and yet he comes to both resurrect

Lazarus and gives us the sign as a prediction of what will happen to himself in the forthcoming days. But Jesus also comes to show and call us - to take that same risk of carrying out that self giving love of unbinding those who are isolated or ill. He calls us to mirror his example and take up our crosses and serve our community with the gifts and resources which are so needed at this time.

Throughout the last few days, our life and world has changed; in the midst of the dark clouds hanging over us, there are signs of hope and one of the greatest things has been how we as a nation, are rediscovering who and what our local community is. In our isolation, we are finding the need for people to pick up the phone and talk to each other in person, rather than by text, social media or email. We are also seeing the importance of who our neighbour really is and what each other needs. That sense of generosity and love shows a real difference than the otherwise life where many just live for themselves behind closed doors and in a spirit of greed thinking about their own needs as witnessed in the selfish scenes of panic buying or pushing in supermarkets.

In this season of Passiontide, the world is truly suffering and we hold in prayer before God those who have died as victims of the Coronavirus – life for those families will never be the same. Yet the Christian faith which

the story of Lazarus comes to reveal and one which we will probably in our own homes this Easter, is that death will not have the last word. Something good is coming out of all of this that starts to build a new future and whilst we are not in the glorious surroundings of the cathedral and its people, glass, monuments we are carrying on speaking and living the meaning of those messages in the memorials that will surround us when we return to worship there. In the words of the letter to Peter we are called to imitate and continue the spirit of love in those memorials by being *like living stones, being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 1Peter 2.5* – stones which are bringing the weight of God’s spirit of glory, to release vulnerable people from the tombs of their isolation and holding out Christ’s spiritual hand to raise the sick back to health.

As we look forward to Palm Sunday and Holy Week leading up to Good Friday and Easter, we may not fully experience the joy and celebration we’ve usually marked at our Easter Vigil. The country may physically and spiritually still be in the dark shadows as the Coronavirus Pandemic continues; the additional time though this year can however help all of us whether Luke and Ben, you and me to focus on Christ’s love and sacrifice and the opportunity to remember how he suffered and why others have and are prepared to

follow him and do that yesterday, today and tomorrow. For in Passiontide, we see the true meaning of love to risk and give everything for someone, and in time and turn, for receiving that back for ourselves.

May Luke's arrogance and Ben's humility remind us of our need to face the truth and reality of who we are. May we be open to the Holy Spirit to unbind ourselves from all that prevents us from serving God and neighbour, and that once the death of the virus is hopefully past, we may come out and be free to be people who have changed for the better - thinking about others rather than solely ourselves.