

A Sermon for a Cancelled Service.

St George's Berlin | 3rd Sunday of Lent | 15 March 2020

By Martin George.

First Reading | Exodus 17. 1 – 7 | Second Reading | Romans 5. 1 – 11 Gospel Reading |

John 4. 5 - 42

Dear people of God at St George's Church,

are you sick of the daily news about the rapid spread of the corona virus Covid-19? Borders closed, places of work and learning from offices to kindergarten closed, theatres, concert halls, fitness studios, shops, brothels, churches – all aspects of life closed, brought to a halt. Eucharist at St George's cancelled, your next flight cancelled, your next holiday cancelled, birthday parties, weddings cancelled, meeting your loved ones cancelled. I understand everyone who already at this beginning phase of the corona virus pandemic, which has hit us, would “harden his or her heart” (Psalm 95,8) and “test the LORD, saying ‘Is the LORD among us or not?’” (Exodus 17, 7) Not yet, but sooner or later, when people known to you and loved by you will have died of the corona virus lethal attack, you may turn to God in the posture and words of indignation which we learned from Greta Thunberg, when she addressed World politicians: “God, how dare you infect the world and my dear ones in particular with Covid-19? You who you should be a loving God?” Let's face it: We are afraid. We are starting to panic-buy toilet paper and toothpaste at 8 in the morning before it is sold out some minutes after the shop opens. That makes us smile. But our humour freezes into fear, when we think of the predicted peak of the pandemic in some months' time, with some 250.000-300.000 predicted corona virus casualties within the next two years in Germany. With this grim perspective in mind, we read anew the words of Jesus: “Do you not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest’? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life” (John 4, 35-36). Harvest time for eternal life, in other words, time to die, is near. The younger ones among you may rejoice in their strength, as so-called “superspreaders” they may spread the virus to 70 - 80% of our population in Germany without showing any symptoms of disease themselves. Not so those people, who from the medical point of view are old, who live in their old and weak bodies, that is, all people age 65 and older, having little natural resilience to fight the virus successfully. I belong to this endangered age cohort. We as old people may have a better sense of the fact that we are mortal and that no one of us, to use a saying of Jesus, “by worrying can add a single hour to our life” (Lk 12, 25). And I will not be tired to tell others that we do not have health, life, death, or God at OUR disposal. But at the outcome of this beginning pandemic in a year or two, no one of us, young or old, optimistic or wise, will be so perfect in his or her love for God and obedience to his will that he or she could join the words of the servant of God Job, who after countless catastrophes, when all of his children and servants had been killed, was able to say: “The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised.” (Job 1, 21). Fearing the forecast of the corona virus disease's spread, we experience already now, that human life in general, and our own life and the life of our loved ones in particular, is fragile, easily shaken and maybe – only God knows - rapidly

ending. What then supports us? Our common worship at St. George's is cancelled. It has been a weekly consolation and a source of hope and joy for many, but common worship is gone and will be gone for quite some time, maybe for longer than we would fear, and no form of virtual common worship by video streaming will make up for it. So common worship will not support us much. Instead, we will have to live individually, in our homes, by the living water, of which Jesus speaks in the Gospel of the 3rd Sunday of Lent to the woman at Jacob's well in Samaria: „Everyone who drinks of this water (of the well) will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” (John 4, 13-14) What then is this living water in us, given by the word of Jesus' mouth, becoming in us the source of our eternal life? It is “God's love ... poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” (Romans 5,5) It is God's love in our hearts which makes us “worship God the Father in spirit and truth” (John 4, 23). What supports us then in times of the corona virus is this individual prayer in spirit and truth, said with every breath which we receive and give back to our creator gratefully, when we sit quietly in our room. It is our thank you to our heavenly father for everything in life, the good days and the bad days. Praying in spirit and truth is like drinking a glass of water in the heat of the day, offered by Jesus freely to each of us, when he taught his disciples and us the Lord's Prayer. And prayer in spirit and truth is our refusal to be wayward children of God who harden their hearts against God and against their destiny on earth, as were the people of Israel in the desert for incredibly long forty years (Psalm 95, 8-10). As we enter imminent quarantine, which literally means a period of forty days and which the Berlin authorities may impose on us for a yet undetermined period of time, may we not harden our hearts, confined in the weeks ahead to our homes as the people of Israel were confined to the desert. We all may suffer from being enclosed in our home, in our cell, as it were. May we stay calm first of all. “All the misery of humankind comes from one single cause, which is not to know how to keep calm staying in a room”, once wrote the French Roman Catholic theologian Blaise Pascal. He learned how to do it, and you can learn to stay calm in a room too. The coming weeks, with all public venues closed and churches without common services, will offer us the opportunity to discover the monk or the nun in us, to breathe calmly, to pray in touch with God's spirit in us, to pray simply and gratefully, to pray as the Lord Jesus Christ taught us. May we all learn the lesson of the corona virus pandemic: Life is short, and every hour and day is a gift of God our creator. May we become convinced in solitude even more so than in the community of believers that God is with us and in us. May we be consoled to accept the will of God for each of us. And may we be enlightened to discern the will of God for each of our lives, to give up our anxiety to add hours and days to the span of our life (Matthew 6, 27), and to seek instead God's love for us and our love for him and for our fellow human beings from whom we may be separated. Let us join in the collect prayer of the 3rd Sunday in Lent: *Eternal God, give us insight to discern your will for us, to give up what harms us, and to seek the perfection we are promised in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.* And let us also join in a prayer of Bishop Gregory of St. Asaph, The Church in Wales, for this period of the corona virus disease: *Dear Father, who created us, and redeemed us, and who has promised us your love, be with us in a time of danger and of worry. May those who suffer, or who are ill, know the blessing of your grace, while we who are well be inspired by your Spirit to be wise and to be servants, working for the healing and wholeness of all, each in our own way. Keep us calm and cautious, strong and open to service, so that we take care of those around us, and also ourselves. We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.*