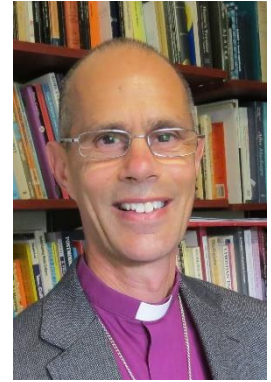




The Diocese of  
**Southwark**



## A homily looking to Holy Week and Easter

The Rt Revd Dr Richard Cheetham, Bishop of Kingston      3 April 2020

Greetings to you all. May you know the peace and strength of God in these very challenging times.

Firstly, I want to say a very warm thank you for the magnificent way in which so many people have responded to the coronavirus crisis at every level of life, and especially so in our medical and care services, and in many other aspects of life which have been so essential to keep things going. In the Church, our parishes and chaplaincies have responded magnificently in the central tasks of setting up mutual care systems, especially for those of the greatest need, and also enabling a pattern of worship and prayer to continue as best we can in very constrained circumstances. There have been countless examples of inspirational responses to the crisis. I am deeply grateful for all of those.

As we approach the central time in the Christian year, the celebration of Holy week and Easter, I want to offer a brief reflection on how we might approach this in such a challenging context.

The collect, or special prayer, for Passiontide, begins in this way:

***“Most merciful God, who by the death and resurrection of your son, Jesus Christ delivered and save the world. . .”***

These words express very succinctly the heart of the Christian faith – the idea that in the central events of Jesus death and resurrection, we have the key to our lives and our salvation, not just in our own time, but for all time. So the question which presses upon us at the moment is how to understand this in the midst of the global coronavirus crisis which has turned our lives upside down very quickly.

Our immediate response quite rightly has been a focus on mutual care and how we are to pray and worship. But as we go on we should also reflect more deeply about what we are learning through this experience and how it will change our lives and deepen our understanding of Christian faith.

Christians believe that in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus we see the mystery and the saving power of the sacrificial love, which lies at the heart of God, and so is central in finding true meaning and value in our lives. We have seen countless inspirational examples of sacrificial love in recent days - in our medical and care staff, through the large numbers of volunteers to support

those in particular need, in those who are working tirelessly to keep the essential services and food supplies running, and working hard to ensure that the financial impact of the crisis is minimised. These many examples of sacrificial love in so many lives and communities bring real hope and healing in these dark times. Christian faith sees these human examples of sacrificial love as reflections of the deep love of God, which embraces all things. They are not simply an accident of evolution, a survival mechanism for humankind. Rather, they tell us that the primary feature of what it means to be fully human is to live and grow in this way of self-giving love. The way we can truly grow in this love is to open our hearts and lives to the love of God which surrounds us at every moment, even in the depths of our suffering, and is expressed in the story of Jesus life, death and resurrection.

Holy Week and Easter give us an opportunity to engage with the self-giving love of God in the deepest way. This year we are having to be very creative in how we do this in our worship. Many parishes have developed online services from the homes of clergy, there are many resources available nationally online, and also from the Diocese of Southwark. Perhaps we should see this very different context not simply as a loss of much loved and familiar services, but as an opportunity to engage in a new way with the mystery of God's love.

One way of looking at the story of Holy Week and Easter is to think of it as a book with the story of Jesus on one side and a blank page on the other. The blank page is for us to write our own story and reflections on what is going on for us in the here and the now. The task of our prayer and worship, in whatever form it takes this year, is to create interweaving between our lives and the story Christ and see how that begins to shape how we understand things today, and how we live. We can see this as a kind of mini pilgrimage following Christ in his journey in Jerusalem. In the words of the Collect for the Third Sunday of Lent, we pray that "we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life in peace." I hope and pray that may be so for all of us as we move through these challenging times.

The Collect for the fifth Sunday in Lent, with which I began, ends by praying that God would:

***"grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross, we may triumph in the power of his victory"***

I hope, as we journey through Holy Week and Easter this year, in such a different way, that we may be able to glimpse more deeply and live out in our lives the transforming power of sacrificial love, which lies at the very heart of God and of what it means to be fully human, and that this may bring real hope and light in the midst of these challenging times.

May God bless you all, and may you know God's saving love in all things.

+ Richard

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