

So where is God in all this? Where do we find God in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic? We know God is there, is here, is with us. But I have to admit that I have found it hard to pray these past couple of weeks as the reality and magnitude of this began to hit. We have just had a week like no other. Our world is completely changed, and the fact that I am sitting here, and not in the parish church of St Margaret of Antioch in Leiston, is one small example of the change – and apart from a walk in Christ Church Park yesterday I've not been out the house for a week.

So praying has been hard. Not intercessory prayer, but the prayer when you are just being in God's presence. That has been hard. So much is going on in our minds and our feelings – certainly in mine – the dramatic and traumatic surge of the disease across the world, the sense of loss we are feeling of so much that has just been familiar and routine, and for all the things we were expecting to do in these months. And the lack of contact, of physical contact. And our realisation that people we know, ourselves even, will get sick.

Where are you Lord when we need you? This seems so big, why are you not making your presence felt among us?

“If you had been here, Lord, my brother would not have died”. Martha’s rebuke to our Lord is surely ours. Where are you, Lord?

This morning’s Gospel reading has been an immense help to me as I ask that question. It is not only right in the middle, the pivotal story, in John’s Gospel, but for me it seems to contain the whole of the good news – if we only had this one story we would have enough, even for times such as these.

Lazarus has died, and Mary and Martha are sitting at home waiting. They cannot believe this has happened. It has come so quickly, so suddenly, and turned their lives inside out. Just a couple of weeks ago, all was just fine. They sent word to Jesus to get him to come when Lazarus got really sick. But he didn’t come. And they are waiting, just as we find ourselves waiting and wondering now. Waiting in grief at who and what is lost; waiting in fear for the future.

What they don’t know yet is that Jesus has actually decided to delay coming – delays by two days. Now this was not some unkind act on Jesus’ part to ensure Lazarus was dead – we just have to do the maths to realise that – when Jesus did arrive eventually, we learn that Lazarus has already been in the tomb four days – so if Jesus had set out right away he would still have been dead two days.

But he did delay, he did make them wait, just as we may feel ourselves waiting now for his presence.

My own experience is that God seems pretty much always to make me wait, certainly. Somehow my sense of urgency and what needs to be sorted right away, does not correspond with God's sense of when things need to happen.

So we wait, and we wait with Martha and Mary. We are waiting for a word, a sign. Where are you Lord? And then the word comes; he has not arrived, but he has drawn close to the edge of the village. We have to make a step too. He is calling – and Martha is the first to respond.

She goes quickly goes to meet him. Martha, we have learned from Luke's Gospel in that story of Jesus visiting the family and Mary sitting at his feet and Martha doing all the cooking and the housework and she being – I think we might say – rather unfairly rebuked by Jesus for fussing about what was not important right then. John's account of the sisters is more balanced, but Martha is definitely the active one – she has heard the Lord is nearby, she has heard the call, and she is off.

And who is Martha, this active, hard-working, first responder? The one who first hears Jesus' call? She is the first to sign up to be an NHS volunteer, she's the supermarket checkout clerk, the shelf stacker, the delivery van driver, the volunteer delivering food to those who have self-isolated, the

teacher learning remote teaching, she's the nurse on the front line, she's the doctor in the thick of it, she is indeed the priest who is reaching out over the phone to give comfort to the sick, and the bereaved; she is in fact right now those political and medical leaders taking the tough decisions to help us; she is all those people who have heard in the cry of the sick the call of Jesus to compassionate and decisive action. It doesn't matter whether they name him or not, what matters is they like Martha have acted.

Where is God? God is in all those people who are helping the sick and helping all of us to make our way through these difficult days.

Then Martha gets word to Mary that the Lord is calling her. Who is Mary in this? She is the devout, the reflective, the thoughtful one. She who sat at Jesus' feet, who now is called by him, through her sister, and she falls again at his feet and utters the same cry as her sister, "If you had been here my brother would not have died." And she is crying as she speaks, and Jesus himself is moved to tears. Why does Jesus weep with her? What has he heard in her crying? Has he heard the pain of losing a brother and the regrets Mary has, regrets we all have, when a loved one dies – I only wish, if only.

But she is crying because in her loss she is seeing what is really important. Perhaps she, not only her sister, has been too distracted at times, by her inner reflective life that has, she realises now, turned at times into self-

preoccupation. She sees now just how deeply important her family are to her. She is seeing what is most important for life.

And what are we noticing? That despite this disease's effect of keeping us apart, we are finding new ways to connect, we matter to each other, and we matter to each other across the globe. We are noticing that people are indeed paying more attention to their families, to their friends, reaching out. People are realising they can cope with a lot less. And they are asking questions – what really matters for our lives, and our lives together?

Jesus' call to Mary has brought this to the fore – and in her crying, and in Jesus' crying for her, is the dawning recognition of what life is really about. Jesus has come very close to Mary, and as we ask these same questions, Jesus is very close to us. Jesus is in our responses of active compassion. Jesus is in our questions about what really matters for our lives.

And then to the tomb, and to calling Lazarus. Lazarus is well and truly dead, bound in strips of cloth. And Jesus calls him, calls him out, releasing him from death and the bonds of death. And in the midst of all we are facing, I can now hear him calling, calling us out of the crushing and deadening bonds that have dragged us away from what really matters, that drag us and our world into unkindness and injustice, to greed and manipulation, to ignoring the plight of the poor and the plight of creation. These are the

deadly forces, and in the midst of this crisis I can now hear our Lord calling us out of them.

Where is God, where is the Lord in this?

I know him now in the call and the responses of all those active on the front line combatting this disease and its effects on us.

I know him now in the questions he is leading us to ask about what life is really about, what really matters.

And I know him now in that feinter call, through the depths of the tomb and the cloths that bind us, to turn away from all that deadens ours and humanity's life.

In the centre of this gospel reading, which itself is the centre of John's Gospel, Jesus declares to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life." This is

all we need to believe. All we need to know in our hearts. And gently and persistently, through all we face now and will increasingly face in the weeks ahead, Jesus is saying to us "I am the resurrection and the life, and I am with you always."