

5th Sunday of Lent  
Quarantine (Then and Now!)

I have been fascinated by the parallel between the story of the Israelites' flight from Egypt into the Promised Land, and our current circumstances.

As you are aware, we started Lent with a description of the Night of the Passover, with the Israelites fleeing with little notice from Egypt into the desert, being saved by God when trapped by the Red Sea, provided with food and water, guided by a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. They were given the law at the foot of Mount Sinai and received instruction on the way to prepare for worship and managing their new nation away from the Egyptian influence.

During their time in the desert they organized themselves, the order in which they should travel, and the hierarchy of different tribes within the community. They transformed from a disorderly rabble into disciplined embryo nation, prepared for the battles ahead to reclaim the land promised by God to Abraham, Isaac and their successors.

The key person in all of this was Moses, born to an enslaved Israelite family, who was adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter, who then grew into the leader of the nation. Moses was not a natural leader or speaker but God gave him the strength and fortitude to stand up to Pharaoh and succeed in leading the Israelites out of Egypt.

The hardships faced by the fleeing Israelites led them to obedience and faithfulness to God, to whom they owed their freedom and wellbeing.

The other day, I was having a conversation with Simon and Andrew using Zoom – a web-based method of communication where we can see each other and speak as well. I mentioned that I was talking about the Flight, and Simon reminded me that the word quarantine came from the Venetian *Quarentena* when a ship was held in quarantine for 40 days to prevent the introduction of infectious diseases.

The idea of quarantine is mentioned in Leviticus, for controlling the spread of infectious diseases, notably leprosy, within the gathered tribes of Israel as they trekked around the Desert of Sinai.

And the Tribes of Israel were effectively quarantined for 40 years in the sterile environment of the desert until any infection, in the form of dissenting voices; any longing for a return to Egypt; any disobedience; had been erased or had died out.

A whole generation of the people who left Egypt would never see the Promised Land. That land is described in our reading from Deuteronomy (CH 34: 1-12). Even Moses, described in such glowing terms in the reading would not enter the Promised Land.

Although he had great vigour and undiminished eyesight in spite of his age, he had disobeyed God and was one of those who would not live beyond the quarantine period.

Today we find ourselves facing unprecedented peacetime restrictions on our freedom to work, socialize and be part of our communities.

And yet, in spite of all that, there is a greater sense of unity and combined purpose than I have seen for a long time. Covid 19, or Coronavirus, has forced this upon us.

3 weeks of shut-down is a much less than 40 days, but there is always the possibility of the

shut-down being increased, so a quarantine is what we are facing – thank goodness the weather has been kind so far.

It is possible to see that we are also in a quarantine period where some may not survive, but adherence to the restrictions increases our chances of doing so. There is a stark awareness that carelessness might lead to someone vulnerable catching and dying from Covid19.

Tremendous efforts are being made to find vaccines and to manufacture testing kits for a completely new virus that was only officially recognized in December by the originating country. Enormous efforts are being made in this country to fight the disease and treat sufferers. And we are all asked to do our part by remaining isolated.

I find that being forced to stay socially isolated difficult to cope with, but that is nothing in comparison to the consequences of failing to observe the quarantine. Covid19 is proving to be a particularly infectious disease that can easily have fatal consequences for anyone severely infected.

But so far, I have spoken only about the physical events, without reference to the spiritual.

We are separated for our own good, and it makes us realise how much we need each other.

It also makes us aware of how much we need God. Unable to get to church, we have a void in our lives. That physical absence need not be made worse by a spiritual absence and this is why I emailed everyone I could to suggest that we read Matins at 9.30am on Sunday, the same time as we would if we were in church. For the same reason, I have written this sermon for people to read at home.

Still on the theme of quarantines, take a moment to think of Jesus, being led out into the desert by the Holy Spirit (Matthew 4 1-11). His was a physical separation from the world, when he was better able to fight off the spiritual contagions of temptations to take the easy way out in his ministry. This was a quarantine of sorts, after which Jesus was cleansed of temptation and had a clear vision of his mission and ministry – its costs, physical, mental and spiritual; and the way everything would happen.

On Sunday, we enter Passiontide, when we follow ever more closely the last journey Jesus made up to Jerusalem to celebrate for the last time the Festival of the Passover.

This Last Supper becomes for us a central part of our faith as we take bread and wine and remember Christ's sacrifice for us.

*Though we are many, we are one body,  
Because we share in the one bread.*

The Israelites endured 40 years of quarantine in the desert and emerged a strong united and purposeful nation with a goal.

Christ endured 40 days of quarantine in the desert and emerged with a clear focus and mission.

We can endure this current quarantine, supported by our faith, fortified by the renewed sense of community, and purposeful in overcoming the physical challenges of Covid19.

May you know God's calming presence and support during these difficult times. Amen