

# **St. Mary's Sermons**

**Date of Sermon: 15<sup>th</sup> March 2020**

**2 Timothy 4:1-5**

The news this week has been totally dominated by the spread of the coronavirus. It is as though at this moment in time a great big black cloud is hanging over the whole of the world. The situation is rapidly evolving; normal life seems increasingly to be suspended, travel restricted, sporting events cancelled and in many places across the world cafes, bars, schools and universities closed. The situation in our country is no doubt going to get much worse before it gets better. So, I make no apologies for changing the reading.

So how should we as Christians respond? Industry talks about 'stress testing' a product: putting it under severe strain to see whether it works as it should. Suddenly, almost without warning, we are all facing a stress test. The unspoken question our friends, colleagues and family are asking is whether our faith makes us different. Do we walk our talk? In response I want to say five things.

1. **Do not be afraid.** As I am sure you are well aware this is the most frequently repeated command in the whole of scripture. There seems to be a lot of what I refer to as the corporal Jones syndrome around in our society at the moment. I'm sure you will remember in that TV classic Dad's army how at the slightest problem Jones always flapped and said don't panic, Mr Mannering! This sort of behaviour is always counterproductive. The current response does not seem proportionate with the fact that for the vast majority of people who get the virus the symptoms are very mild.

**In I John 4 we read:** Perfect love casts out all fear. But the opposite can also be true, perfect fear casts out love. We can definitely see some of that sort of behaviour at work in the panic buying we are currently seeing. Esther went to Asda last night and many of the shelves were empty, not a toilet roll, bar of soap or packet of pasta in sight!

Fear results in the loss of ability to make wise decisions. There is an awful lot of speculation and prophecies of doom around at the moment. Let's resist those who, in the name of God, offer us guaranteed protection or online virus exorcisms, or those who will confidently explain where *exactly* these events are to be placed on God's End Time Calendar of history. We should not be taken in by wacky websites and rumours from unreliable sources but instead only listen to and heed the advice of respected medical experts.

Although the situation we face over the coming months is bleak and unprecedented in our lifetime, previous generations have faced much worse and come out the other side as better people for the experience.

The opposite of fear is trust. **Proverbs 3** reminds us, trust in the lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding, in all your ways acknowledge him and he will direct your paths.

2. The second thing that I would encourage us all to do is to **turn to the Lord and cry out to him for mercy.**

During the WW2 when the situation was looking extremely bleak and we faced the prospect of the whole of our army being completely wiped out King George the 6<sup>th</sup> called for a National Day of Prayer. As a result, historians agree a great miracle occurred which resulted in a large number of troops being unexpectedly rescued and brought back safely

to this country. Had that miracle not taken place the outcome of the war would have been totally different. Prayer changes situations.

Many people even though they don't normally pray, do pray, almost as a last resort, when the chips are down, and they are encountering a crisis. My prayer is that at this time many people will recognise the futility of the way that they have been living and turn back to God and discover once again that he loves them and that true happiness, true peace, can only be found through a relationship with him.

I long to see a great wave of prayer rise up to God from our nation. Nothing is impossible for God so I believe that God can just as quickly as it appeared stop the spread of the virus and make it disappear again. If this happened as a result of our prayer it could prove to be a significant turning point in our nation's life.

3. I'm sure that some of you will remember the old war time slogan, keep calm and carry on, which in recent years has often been misquoted. We should not forget that that slogan grew out of over five hundred years of Christian heritage which was deeply embedding in the life of our nation. In **Ephesians 6** when he was writing about the spiritual battle Saint Paul encouraged us to **stand firm** and that is good advice for us to follow at the present time. As Christians we are standing to the immovable rock which is Jesus Christ. The question that we must all ask ourselves as the lovely old hymn which is sadly not in our hymnbooks puts it is will your anchor hold in the storms of life. Nothing, absolutely nothing that

happens in this world should shake our faith and trust in the mercy and love of God whose plans for us are always good.

More than that, we know that we do not have to face this crisis on our own. Remember the very last words of the Lord before he ascended back to heaven recorded in **Matthew 28** and low, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. That is genuinely good news for all of us but especially for those who in the coming weeks may have to isolate themselves.

4. Psalm 24 verses 3-4 reminds us, who may ascend the hill of the lord? Who can stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and a pure heart.

We have heard an awful lot recently about the importance of washing our hands properly in order to prevent the spread of infection. But at this time, it is equally important that we also have pure hearts. The purity of our lives should be evident for all to see and we should shine as a bright light in the darkness of the world. As a result, others should be drawn towards the light and want to discover for themselves why we are different. In the current situation it is easy to overlook the fact that Lent provides us with the ideal opportunity to ask God to continue his transforming work in our lives.

5. And finally, I want to remind you of **Ephesians 4:7** the peace of God which transcends all understanding will keep your heart and minds in the love of God. God's peace is not logical, totally unexplainable and impossible to describe. It is rooted deep within us so that when

everything and everyone all around you are descending into chaos you remain calm. It comes from the knowledge that God is in control, not only of our lives but also the world situation, that ultimately, we are safe in his keeping. It comes from knowing that Jesus won the victory over the powers of darkness when he rose again. Consequently, we can completely trust him. We have a sure and certain hope for a much better future not just beyond the virus but also beyond the grave.