

To all in the Church community and wider community

On a Thursday morning I am often to be found cycling through Glapthorn village at ten to nine on my way to the Primary School. And on these occasions – as always when I'm in Glapthorn – I'm encouraged to see the sign outside the Church: "Church open".

We love having our Church open. It's open 365 days a year – 366 in a leap year. But sadly not this leap year. For the first time in many years the door is closed; the 'Church open' sign gone -replaced with an official sign. Worship is suspended. The building is closed.

Any Church meeting can be dominated by two agenda items: Sunday services and buildings. So what does it mean to be a Christian when it can't mean *going to Church*? What is 'Church' when it's not a building? What is 'Church' when it's not an act of worship? We are in very unusual and disconcerting times.

I've been reminded recently of *Jeremiah 29*. In the days of Jeremiah the prophet the people of Judah – are overwhelmed and deafened by a foreign superpower. In 587BC the Babylonians invade Judah, raise Jerusalem to the ground and destroy the temple. Many Jewish people are taken off into exile to Babylon.

There they find themselves in utterly alien surroundings, a thousand miles from home; exiled from their fellow Jews, unable to gather in the temple. Bewildered.

Well none of us is thousand miles from home. Rather - too confined to home. But we find ourselves in an alien world. Exiled from so much that is familiar. Unable to gather with friends and family. Surrounded by much to make us anxious and afraid.

In the benefice we've been live-streaming midday prayer. If you are a Facebook user 'like' St Peter's Church Oundle and watch at midday and you can take part in a live service – as you can on Sundays at 10:30. It's also available to watch any time afterwards. If you're not a Facebook user the services can be accessed here: <https://m.youtube.com/channel/UCFdSXhZecPBoGHBQLKf0gJA> and are uploaded after the service. We're aiming to get the videos uploaded to St Peter's church website <https://www.oundlestpeters.org.uk/> and to the Glapthorn Church Facebook page. The Church website <http://www.glapthornchurch.org.uk/> has useful information on its homepage. At a time when face-to-face communication is so difficult the website is an invaluable source of information.

The Jewish exiles in 587BC received their own 'livestream' in Babylon. A 'livestream' by means of a letter from home; a letter from Jeremiah. A pastoral letter in which he shares with them a message from God. What does God have to say to a bewildered exiled people cut off from gathering in their place of worship – cut off from friends and fellow countrymen?

"This is what the LORD says," writes Jeremiah, "to all those in exile. Settle down, plant gardens and eat their produce. Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers you too will prosper."

'Settle down for the long haul,' God seems to say. Advice perhaps for us too. For the Jewish exiles the long haul was 70 years. For us we pray that we are talking weeks and months not years and decades. Nevertheless we face a long haul and for all of us planning is on hold.

What does it mean to be a Christian? What does it mean to be the Church? What would God have us do?

Settle in to a new way of living. Find new ways of **connecting with God, connecting with one another and caring for our communities.**

The challenge facing the exiles was significant. And in many ways it is for us too. The Prime Minister has given stark warnings about what COVID19 will mean for all our communities. There will be heartache to come.

In these hard days the encouragement is to **connect afresh with God**. We are working on resources which will be made available via the Church websites and Facebook pages to assist in deepening our prayer life. Apps for your phone which help with daily prayer and bible reading (try <https://pray-as-you-go.org/> or a Church of England app called simply "Daily Prayer"). The Church of England website has lots of ideas for worship in the home during this time: <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/coronavirus-covid-19-liturgy-and-prayer-resources> You may not be someone who finds these technological resources helpful. That's fine. The older tried and tested technology of the book is still available! We'll be looking to make recommendations in our 'Spiritual Survival Pack' on which we're working.

They are days when we it will be good to find new ways to **connect with one another**. There are livestream services happening every weekday and Sundays as indicated. On Facebook these are not just events to watch – people interact. We are exploring whether we might be able to livestream some especially services for Glaphorn from a new Glaphorn Church Facebook page. These may offer new ways for Church to connect with one another. Again an older tried and tested technology exists. The phone. Glaphorn is a caring community and people look out for one another. Let's continue to do this. Making a point of phoning regularly those who might otherwise struggle to be in contact with others.

The exiles in Babylon were encouraged to **care** for and pray for their new city. Let's be a people who pray for and care for our community. Christians are called to be ambassadors of Jesus Christ to those around. We may not be able to meet neighbours, but we can continue to be people who shop for others, run errands for the isolated and regularly pick up the phone to those who need a friendly chat. The benefice has a pastoral system in place. If you know of a need as well as letting Charles and Brigitte the wardens know – you can email [pastoral@stpetersoundle.co.uk](mailto:pastoral@stpetersoundle.co.uk) or phone 07904 929279. We will match up those offering help with the needs expressed. If you want to offer help then send an email in.

Our Christian hope is not that God will prevent us experiencing all hardship and heartache. It is rather that whatever we go through – He is with us. "Even though I walk the darkest valley, I will fear no evil; for You are with me, Your rod and Your staff they comfort me still." (*Psalms* 23). The Christian hope is that nothing – nothing – nothing – not even death itself - at all can ever separate us from His love. (*Romans* 8:38)

Dark valleys and hard days will come. However, as people of faith we can be people of hope in a time of fear. "I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD' in the letter to the Jewish exiles. "Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a future and a hope."

Those two frequently dominant agenda items for Church meetings: Sunday Services and Church Buildings. Jesus never mentions either. In this hard time we are invited to reimagine what it means to be a Christian and what it means to *be* the Church: deepening our relationship with God – loving one another and caring for others. Or as Jesus put it : loving the Lord our God with our whole being and loving our neighbours as ourselves. The point isn't *going to* Church. It is *being* the Church.

May you know that God walks right beside you on days that seem dark and difficult. May you know afresh that nothing can separate you from His love. May you be blessed afresh in Your relationship with Him and may we as the Church be a blessing to others.

With love

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Stephen". The script is cursive and fluid, with the 'S' being particularly large and stylized.