

Dear Friends,

You may be surprised to read that I do plan Family Services beforehand! About four weeks ago, when I started to think about last Sunday's readings – Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at the well – the coronavirus threat wasn't anywhere as immediate as it is now. I thought I would be clever by illustrating just how close the Samaritan woman came to Jesus by thinking about how close people get when speaking with each other – and at the same time alerting people to the fact that we might have to start physically distancing ourselves in order to slow the spread of coronavirus. Well that plan didn't work! – not only did the spread of the virus catch up and overtake the Church of England lectionary, the most recent government advice means I have to stay away from people as much as possible for seven days – albeit the bit of a runny nose and sore throat I have probably isn't the real thing!.

All the advice about spreading viruses shows just how easy it is to pass on something from one person to another – by direct contact, by being in proximity, or by leaving something behind. It may be that over the next few months we have to share God's love with each other by telephone or e-mail than by talking face-to-face; by waving at a distance than through a handshake or a hug; or by leaving something – shopping, for example – at the doorstep, rather than going in for a chat. Hard though it may seem, this may be the right way of obeying Jesus's commandments to love God and love one another.

While I am not in any way advocating enforced isolation as a virtue – other than in emergencies such as this, the church has for centuries promoted the idea of being alone with God as an opportunity for individuals to enjoy spiritual reflection and refreshment, and for deepening their relationship with him – solitude as opposed to loneliness. If we are to stay at home rather than come to church each Sunday, might we not spend some of that time in reading our Bibles; in creative reflection (picture yourself as the Samaritan woman: just how close are you willing to sit to Jesus; what is he saying to you?); and in prayer? And instead of coffee afterwards, what about making yourself a drink then picking up the phone? Let's find unusual ways of being church in unusual times.

With love,

John