**Posted By :**Edward Probert Monday 16th March 2020

A sermon preached in Salisbury Cathedral on Sunday 15th March 2020 by Canon Edward Probert, Chancellor

(Exodus 17.1-7; John 4.5-42)

There is one dominant story at the moment, and naturally when I came to read today’s Bible readings I did so with that focus in my mind. If ever you needed evidence of how easy it is to find what you are looking for in scripture, here are some of the resonances that sprang off the page:

In Exodus the incident at Rephidim is provoked by essential supplies running out (tick) - though in this case a supply even more essential than toilet paper.

Jesus and his disciples were travelling through Samaritan territory:

travel (tick)

discussion about not socialising (tick)

and should drinking vessels be shared? (tick).

It’s only realistic to acknowledge up front that the coronavirus pandemic is dominating not just news reporting but the life of our wider society and this cathedral. All planning is provisional, everything is uncertain. Adjustments to our daily behaviour have to be considered and made, and almost all of our routine and special activity (not just the changes you’ll experience in this service, but affecting other fields such as travel and tourism, performances, and catering): all these and more are under question in some way or other. And who knows what the advice and the circumstances will be from month to month, week to week, day to day?

I personally had an unexpected start to Lent, having returned on Shrove Tuesday from a very enjoyable late post-Christmas holiday in the Dolomites to spend the next two weeks in self-isolation. In an idle moment I noticed two of the words which can be created from the letters of my title (Canon Chancellor): besides the rather obvious ‘chance’ there is also ‘corona’. I should add that I was in perfect health throughout, but of course we wish to behave responsibly and look to the needs of others and the common good.

This matter goes far beyond practical uncertainties and personal complications; some fundamental things are in play here. It is absolutely core business for every kind of church to draw people together, both for worship and to socialise. We do this because we believe that we will know and serve God better if we meet in Christ’s name, and if we share what Paul describes as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. We are called to look to the needs of others, and it’s hard to do that if you have, for example, to maintain a metre’s distance, or can’t even meet at all.

There are I’m sure ingenious ways around such problems, and there have been epidemics before, including much more threatening ones like the 14th century Black Death, which came a hundred years into the life of this building. Three centuries later our predecessors of the 17th century, facing an outbreak of the plague, locked the gates of the Close and kept out all comers. I would not wish to behave like them. They kept themselves well, but damaged our witness to the embracing and inviting love of God. We are called to be together, and we must find responsible ways in which to continue that ministry: isolation may be medically necessary, but it can be depressing and disheartening to be alone. We must find ways to continue to be one in Christ, and ways to grow and rejoice when apparently cut off, isolated. In John Donne’s phrase, ‘no man is an island’. Where are now the islands offshore from us and you? How can you and we best help to keep them a part of the whole continent, the body of Christ?

Coming with the prevailing uncertainty, there is a lot of anxiety and fear, of which the panic-buying is one symptom. And yet a piece of core business for us which goes even deeper than bringing people together, is to call people to faith - to believe, to trust when they don’t know what is to come. We do not believe in a God only of good times, but in the lord of eternity, the same yesterday, today and forever, whose son was alone, suffered, and died, and yet lives. There is nothing, as St Paul says, nothing in all creation which can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ - for perfect love casts out fear. Part of our witness in this institution and as individuals must be not to let fear prevail; love will prevail.