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We're now into the second week of virtual lockdown across the UK, and we have all begun to adjust to a very different way of living, working, worshipping and gathering as community.

Each of our weekly emails contains a Bible passage, a short reflection and a prayer, plus practical suggestions of ways you might like to respond locally. We'll also highlight information and resources available on our website and signpost to our partners. This week's reflection comes from Revd Simon Mattholie, CEO of Rural Ministries and a long-standing friend of the Arthur Rank Centre.

Be assured of our continued love and prayers during this really challenging time.

He *is* here

Bible reading: Daniel 3:14-20, 24-25, 28

King Nebuchadnezzar said, 'Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, is it true that you do not serve my gods, and that you refuse to worship the golden statue I have erected? When you hear the sound of horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, or any other instrument, are you prepared to prostrate yourselves and worship the statue I have made? If you refuse to worship it, you must be thrown straight away into the burning fiery furnace; and where is the god who could save you from my power?'

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to King Nebuchadnezzar, 'Your question hardly requires an answer: if our God, the one we serve, is able to save us from the burning fiery furnace and from your power, O king, he will save us; and even if he does not, then you must know, O king, that we will not serve your god or worship the statue you have erected.'

These words infuriated King Nebuchadnezzar; his expression was very different now as he looked at Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. He gave orders for the furnace to be made seven times hotter than usual, and commanded certain stalwarts from his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the burning fiery furnace.

Then King Nebuchadnezzar sprang to his feet in amazement. He said to his advisers, 'Did we not have these three men thrown bound into the fire?' They replied, 'Certainly, O king.' 'But,' he went on 'I can see four men walking about freely in the heart of the fire without coming to any harm. And the fourth looks like a son of the gods.'

Nebuchadnezzar exclaimed, 'Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego: he has sent his angel to rescue the servants who, putting their trust in him, defied the order of the king, and preferred to forfeit their bodies rather than serve or worship any god but their own.'

Reflection

I wonder how many of us woke this morning, and on listening to the news, questioned if it was not all some elaborate April fools' joke? We live in very different and changing times; it can seem as if we are watching some disaster movie unfold live on our televisions, and any moment now someone will wake us from this dream, or at the very least explain it as some form of world-wide hoax. Yet, each of us knows deep down this is not the case as we attempt to discover the 'new normal' for today. I wonder if Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego felt similarly, as the new world order they were part of brought with it the demands to worship a golden statue.

The Lent meditations of this week include the story of the furnace and the continued faith of the three followers of Yahweh who refused to compromise. As I read this, I was struck by the picture in my mind of the scene, which included a pre-incarnate Christ in the midst of furnace with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. I found this image both comforting and encouraging, with close parallels for our situation today. My sense as I read the passage was God speaking into our context, saying, 'through the trials of this time, I am still present – miraculously, supernaturally, but none the less present.'

As I look around my rural community and see the care extended to one another, I see The Christ in my sisters and brothers as they serve. As I read of the over half a million volunteers who have signed up to help the NHS, I see something of The Christ through their generosity. As I learned of the act of self-sacrifice of Fr. Don Giuseppe Berardelli, who gave up his ventilator to help a younger patient, I see parallels with Jesus, laying down his life for each of us.

Friends, we live in challenging and anxious times, where many are facing the trials of the furnace daily, and yet in the midst is the promise of the presence of God, standing alongside each of us, in the form of The Christ. He may look like a delivery driver who is bringing us food, or a medic who manages to help yet another patient after a 48-hour shift. It might resemble the love in the eyes of a child, who squeezes our hand reassuringly, that we see The Christ, but know this: He is here, standing with us.

Prayer

God of compassionate presence, build in us, we pray, the capacity to cope, in illness, in pain, in heartbreak, in uncertainty.

Help us to become aware of The Christ in our midst. Be in the heart of each to whom we speak, and in the mouth of each who speaks to us.

May your Spirit teach us patience, grant us courage, dare us to dream, of future filled with healing and hope, where all would look to you.

Amen

Ways to respond

Easter in a box

Many have over the years been familiar with sending gifts in a shoebox for children overseas around Christmas time, but how about developing the idea for your community and creating your own 'Easter in a box' (or bag, if you cannot find a box)? By the time Easter is upon us, many will have hosted a few digital services or events and possibly become proficient in doing so. 'Easter in a box' links the digital with the physical, delivering something to neighbours on one of your permitted daily exercise slots.

You could include...

- A chocolate egg (in its wrapping!)
- A decorative stone onto which a Bible verse is written with a marker pen
- A printed-out scripture reading and prayer
- A handmade card
- A craft activity for children
- If you are fortunate enough to have some daffodils or other flowers in your garden, you could include a small cut bunch in the box too.

The idea is to link some of these physical items, such as scripture reading, stone, egg, with your digital service around Holy Week and Easter. You will need to chat together (online) with others in your church to plan ideas and items that could be easily accessible and included in an 'Easter in a box.' You will then need to shape and design your digital service around these items so that they become part of the linking of the physical with the digital.

Thought will also need to be given as to who might be available to deliver as part of their one daily form of exercise, and to which homes. Ideally, it would be good to cover the whole of your community, but you will need to be realistic as to what can be achieved and also ensure that all relevant Government health guidelines are followed.

Revd Simon Mattholie, CEO, Rural Ministries

