

Dear Friends,

'Nothing can separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

(Romans 8: 39)

As you read this magazine at the beginning of April, many of the planned Church services and Civic events we had planned for your enjoyment and spiritual edification this Spring will have been cancelled or put on hold as our Nation responds to the ravages of Coronavirus. My instinctive prayer is that you will not be affected by this virus, though the pragmatist in me also prays that you will catch it and recover swiftly so that you have immunity to it.

Not since WWII have Lent and Easter services been so disrupted. In 1943, a Whitman's Chocolate advert for Mothering Sunday in the USA (the equivalent of Terry's Chocolates in the UK at that time) carried the strapline '*A woman never forgets the man who remembers!*' In reality, a box of chocolates such as this was but an impossible dream. Lent was hard to observe: when rationing meant that people had so little to give up, *any* sacrifice really did make a difference. Celebratory meals required serious planning – many mothers went without food in order to make rations stretch for their families. Even fresh eggs, that special symbol of Easter, were unavailable: no egg painting, no Easter egg hunts. Worst of all, in 1943, Service personnel found themselves fighting through Easter ... if they remembered that it was Easter at all. Sadly, in 2020, Coronavirus takes us into uncharted territory as we battle a virus rather than a physical adversary.

In order to limit the spread of COVID-19 virus across our worshipping community, I have had to make the painful decision to cancel all Lay-led gatherings and Sacramental services - from our Lent Talks and beloved Mothering Sunday to Easter Day and beyond. Weddings and baptisms are in jeopardy and funerals must be cremations with immediate family only in attendance.

Brothers and Sisters, the Easter message has never been as important to our fragile world as it is now. We must dig deep into the reservoir of our faith and trust our Lord and Saviour, who is both our consolation and our hope. This a time of testing and trial at every level of society for individuals, commerce, schools, supermarkets, NHS, Armed Forces and Emergency Services and their Chaplains, and our Nursing Homes. Our prayers are needed more than ever. For all our society, we have the power of our faith to pray and share the love and hope of Christ. Even in self-isolation, we can yet sit in our homes and become a powerful and focussed centre of prayer there - for our communities, our country and our world.

Community action has already begun to spring forth – bringing people out into the light, offering to help their neighbours who are self-isolating, either to protect themselves from infection or to recover from the virus. Praise God for lifting the inertia of our self-serving age!

We must continue to be inventive in re-imagining church. Let's see this as an incarnational and inclusive opportunity to be Christ in our communities rather than dwelling on the sadness of our exclusive worshipping together being curtailed. I'm seeing this need to re-imagine church as a real opportunity for us all *equally* – Gentile, Jew, slave or free. The Holy Spirit is giving us all a real shake-up and what better time than Easter and Pentecost to have it!

Yours in the passion of Christ!

Jax

Revd Jax Machin, Rector of The Downs Benefice

A prayer for all those affected by Coronavirus

Keep us, Good Lord,
Under the shadow of your mercy.
Sustain and support the anxious,
Be with those who care for the sick,
And lift up those who are brought low;
That we may find comfort,
Knowing that nothing can separate us from your love,
In Christ Jesus our Lord.
Amen.