

## Love at a distance (Readings and meditations for Holy Week) By Bishop Peter Lee

Readings and meditations for Holy Week during the corona-virus pandemic of 2020, for individuals or families who might like to be in church but are housebound, self-isolating or confined by the lock-down in South Africa.

These notes are designed for Anglicans and use the Anglican Prayer Book as a resource; but they may be translated, distributed and used wherever they are helpful, at no charge.

### *Introduction*

*The young man watched and listened at Jesus' last meal; he saw Jesus washing people's feet, heard the conversations, and took note of the words of the Lord – "You are to do as I have done...love one another".*

*Years later, in his maturity, John wrote a powerful letter unpacking the meaning of what he had heard: "let us love one another, for love is of God".*

*John 13, I John 4*

*At this time of year, in Lent, on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday, many of us get to church more than usual. We celebrate because of what we believe and whom we believe – but our celebrations are enriched by sharing them with people we know and love, and with whom we may have worshipped for many years.*

*So it comes hard to find ourselves house-bound or locked down in the current COVID-19 crisis, and we may feel side-lined and lonely. My doctor has forbidden me to attend church at this time, even if I could, so I feel it too.*

*But remember two things.*

*We are part of a body and we cannot be detached; the union we experience when we pray is as deep if not deeper than that we often enjoy face-to-face. If we give ourselves to prayer at home, especially around the themes which others are reflecting on if they can gather in church, we are deeply bonded with these brothers and sisters.*

*Secondly we live in exceptionally dangerous times from a medical emergency perspective; we try to protect ourselves and others but we are not entirely clear what to do or how. If there is good reason for us to be asked to stay at home, or to choose to self-isolate, doing so is AN ACT OF LOVE towards others. We should not be sitting in a pool of self-pity but recognising the reality of our day, and standing back from social contact if that is what neighbour-love requires.*

*Having said so, the love of the Christian community towards you includes trying to make your Holy Week as meaningful as possible, even while you are confined at home, and perhaps on your own. These notes aim to help those of us who must spend the week like that, to remember, to worship, to pray – and to belong.*

## Preparation

This time will go best if you plan and prepare.

- Identify a place where you can pray quietly, and set it aside. This will help you to focus because when you go there, it will say to you, 'This is where we pray.' You may like to set up a candle, some flowers, a little cross, your Bible and prayer book, and a photo of your family or your church, to make that space 'special'.

If you share the house with others, explain what you are doing and negotiate their co-operation; if you are going to pray in the bedroom, ask them to turn down the TV next door for a while.

- Talk to whoever is shopping for you and get them to lay in things which make this time special for you – pickled fish for Good Friday or a chicken to roast for Easter and some chocolate; get them to bring a little thank-you gift for themselves without knowing it – like a bar of chocolate. Have a party even if you are on your own.
- Look for music that you can listen to in the times of reflection. Some people collect 'worship CDs'; pull them out in advance and see which days they would fit (different on Good Friday than Easter Sunday). Others live-stream worship music from the internet; there is lots of it there. Look at the TV schedules and see if they are broadcasting a service or a concert of sacred music which you could incorporate into your programme; not only will the music enrich your prayer, but seeing others singing will give you a sense of belonging to the wider community. You are not alone.
- Plan your time. You don't have to fit in with any suggestions in these notes; your family arrangements, load-shedding or your personal routine will dictate the programme. But it will help to try to have regular slots for prayer so there is a kind of rhythm to your weekend. Maybe look through the notes in advance so that you can get things ready for the sessions that need them – like music or a hand towel.  
These notes are a resource, so there is probably too much material for one person at home alone to use all of it; have a look in advance, and decide what you would like to use, and to skip.

## Thursday 9 April 2020 – MAUNDY THURSDAY

Churches normally gather in the evening, but you can start whenever it suits you.

Have a bowl of water, soap and a towel ready in your place of prayer.

*Settle down and unhurriedly read John's Gospel, chapter 13 verses 1-35. Imagine yourself as the guest on the end of the row, and watch Jesus coming round with the bowl and the towel. He loves you and wants to serve you, now and through this weekend.*

When you are ready, wash your hands as we have learned to do in the pandemic – slowly and thoroughly.

*Pray for yourself, that the Lord may draw close to you this weekend and reveal his love to you afresh; that any area of your life which needs to be cleaned up and forgiven may be; give thanks for your health and safety, the love of your family, your connectedness with others even when you are alone.*

When you are ready to move on, wash your hands a second time.

*Now pray for someone close to you -*

*-a family member whom you would normally meet at Easter, but will not be able to this year. Bring the pain of separation to God. Ask for healing if they are sick. Pray around the whole family, for wellbeing and safety in time of danger.*

*-someone you know locally, in your street or community, who is in need. Think of them sitting at the table at Jesus' last meal and being washed by him.*

*- your church, the place where you wish you could be at this time with your friends. Pray for the priests and ministers, especially in the risks they may be taking to minister to other people in this time of uncontrolled infection. See the Lord washing their feet as they go around in his name. Pray for the congregation but also for the others who, like you, cannot congregate but are stuck at home alone. Remember those on the fringes of the church who may 'get lost' while normal activities are suspended.*

*As we always pray on Ash Wednesday, pray for those who die at this time and for the difficulty of caring for bereaved families and arranging funerals in these strange days.*

When you are ready, wash your hands a third time.

*Now pray for a foreigner living in this country. You may feel cooped up at home, but they would give anything to be at home at Easter, in Malawi or the DRC. They may live among neighbours who are unfriendly, who do not speak their language, who insult them and resent their presence. Think of Jesus walking down their street with his towel to care for them.*

Close with the Lord's Prayer.

## Friday 10 April 2020 – GOOD FRIDAY

Traditionally, at least in our church, the high point of this day is the Three Hour Service at noon, often incorporating the Seven Words from the Cross. Trying to sustain that on your own is not for everyone, though there may be some who would just like to be quiet for that time and enter in spirit into what would be done in church, if we could.

Our suggestion here, is that you may like a short time of prayer in the morning, just to 'tune in' to what this day is; then a longer time around when the 'Three Hours' would usually take place; then perhaps a reflective time later in the day.

We have put the readings and some reflections on them together in one batch in the 'Three Hour' space but you can use them however you like – maybe look at one or two in the morning, the central events of the crucifixion at midday, and the last one or two in the evening. Do what works for you.

### ***Morning prayers***

*This could be a good time to play some of the music you have found, or to tune in to a broadcast service.*

*You can pick and choose elements from these below, or if you prefer, use the first two meditations from the 'Seven Words' series below*

*The Good Friday collect*

Almighty Father, hear our prayer and look with mercy on this your family

For which our Lord Jesus Christ was ready to be betrayed into the hands of sinners

And to suffer death on the cross;

Who is alive, and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit

One God, now and for ever.

*Old Testament: Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12*

*How do the words of Isaiah speak to you in the current crisis?*

*Gospel: Matthew 27 or John 19*

*Prayer*

Today we might ask how this day appears through the lens of the global COVID -19 pandemic, and offer prayer especially for the sick and those who care for them.

*Close with the Lord's Prayer*

### ***Midday reflections on the 'Words from the Cross'***

*In many churches the 'Seven Words' are an unalterable tradition, as we reflect on our Lord Jesus Christ serving and cleansing the world by his own sacrifice.*

*These meditations can be taken together, or you could use 1 & 2 in the morning, 3-5 now, and 6 & 7 in the evening.*

### **1: ‘Father, forgive them’** (Luke 23:32-34)

At the Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops in 2008, the Chief Rabbi of England was invited to speak and to answer questions. Someone sent in the question, ‘Tell us about Jesus’. Referring to this incident, he answered, ‘that prayer was in Jewish prayer books before the time of Jesus – but no man ever prayed it like that man.’

-We know that Jesus asks us daily to pray, ‘forgive our sins as we forgive others’. Today is a special opportunity to reflect on our failures and bring them to God to be washed away.

-It is also a day to think of those who have wronged us and release them in our hearts – so that we are not locked into ongoing bitterness.

-But what of the big picture? Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote a book called “No Future without Forgiveness”, applying the principle of forgiveness to the dynamics of public life and politics. Is it true that embittered societies cannot find peace without the release of forgiveness between warring parties? Did our TRC achieve that?

-If someone in China unleashed the COVID -19 virus, resulting in worldwide disease and social disruption, what are our hearts saying today about them? Did they ‘know not what they did’? What could be the consequences of referring to it as ‘the Chinese virus’, as President Trump does?

*-Pray not only for the sick today but for all those who are anxious and aggressive as a result of what is happening, or what is being expected of them, or of shortages of goods that they want.*

### **2: “Today you will be with me in paradise”** (Luke 23: 39-43)

It is astonishing – and humbling – that Jesus is still paying attention to other people while in horrible anguish himself. Traditionally this moment is taken as a picture of the human race, some turning towards Jesus and some away. In any event Jesus is busy serving this man who is anxious and fearful as well as physically agonised.

These words also open a window: however we understand it, the conversation is about a life beyond this one, beyond physical death. Part of Jesus’ service to us is to open that door and as the Prayer Book puts it, prepare us ‘for death and for the life to come’.

*-Take time here to recognise your own mortality: you will one day die. Feel the fear and uncertainty but also rest in the assurance that Jesus will be with you on that day, easing your passage and greeting you on the other side. Rest in the peace of that truth and give thanks for it.*

*-Pray too for the many who are facing death today, especially those who are sick with the virus and may be battling to breathe.*

### **3: “Mother, there is your son.”** (John 19: 25-27)

Amidst the drama and the ugly scenes of crucifixion, families are torn apart in the most visible way and the trauma of separation rends the heart. Stories from the Nazi concentration

camps repeat that trauma again and again: torturers down the ages have used the fear of it to extort confessions. No ties are so precious or so painful.

In Italy, many who have died of the virus have been carted off for cremation without families saying farewell or holding their own funerals. In the diocese where I live, students who were called home early from university have had horror crashes on the road. Part of the oddity of sitting in isolation is the breaking of normal patterns of family life – visits, Sunday lunch, hugging the grandchildren. Our own children have been saying, ‘I wish we could just be together as we face this’.

Many will feel this separation acutely this Easter.

But Jesus steps in, providing care for his mother and a mother for his friend. He serves our families by patching the gaps and healing the lonely.

*-Now is the time to pray for family life in South Africa, starting with our own: and to pray for the many migrants, refugees and foreigners who may have been forcibly parted from husbands, wives or children by circumstance or violence.*

*-Make a note to call family over the weekend and particularly to include someone you might not normally contact: you can be the Jesus who cares for family members and heals their separations.*

#### **4: “I thirst.”** (John 19: 28-29)

Here is the One who just recently offered ‘living water’ to the thirsty! No cry captures the humanity of Jesus more than this. Here he is sharing the physical helplessness of the weak, the sick and the tortured down the ages.

-Today there are thousands in that state, too many to contemplate: and the politics of water supply make thirst a blunt reality for literally millions of adults and children, no distance from where we sit. It stirs our pity and our anger: Jesus has been there and we dare to think it makes him angry too.

-One bishop in Ethiopia has appointed ‘water ambassadors’ who go around with a filter, helping people to access clean and usable water. Given how our Department of Water and Sanitation has been ‘captured’ so that 20 million South Africans have no access to clean and drinkable water, could the Lord be calling us to get involved – either to speak out or just to pick up some 5-litre bottles and find a way of getting them to people for whom the words ‘wash your hands often’ are just an impossible ask?

#### **5: “My God, why have you forsaken me?”** (Matthew 27: 45-49)

Another harrowing cry – this time not from the body but the heart and mind of the tortured Jesus. There is endless debate about what it means –

- Was Jesus soaking his mind in Psalm 22 as he suffered?
- Was he, from all eternity close to the Father, entering the abyss of human desolation?
- Was this the moment when the sin of the world came between God and the Lamb who carries it away?

However we take it, we cannot be unmoved.

*-As you sit in prayer, reach out one hand to Jesus in love and worship, and the other to someone who is suffering, alone and afraid. Make yourself the bridge between them for a while.*

**6: “It is accomplished.”** (John 19: 30)

Some say this is Jesus’ swansong, the moment of defeat when he can endure no more. But it is a LOUD cry and translates more as ‘achieved’ than as ‘done in’; hence interpreters usually take this as a cry of triumph – the Son of God has taken away the sin of the world, the cosmic power of evil has been broken, the mystery of redemption has somehow been achieved.

-One priest we know says he always drinks a glass of wine on the evening of Good Friday because by now, ‘the resurrection is in the bag’. That is the Christian understanding of Good Friday – ‘the strife is o’er, the battle done’, as an old Easter hymn puts it.

*-Traumatic as it is to enter into Christ’s sufferings on this day, now is the time to rest and rejoice: ‘the strife is o’er’. Indeed there are centuries of battles to come between good and evil, but the war is won. Give thanks for all that God has accomplished in your life, your family, your church and our society though the death and resurrection of Jesus.*

**7: ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.’** (Luke 23: 44-48)

Apparently these are the words of an ancient Jewish prayer for children; indeed, not a bad thing to teach children to pray as they fall asleep. It speaks of peace, security, tranquillity: after the trauma of feeling forsaken, Jesus looks again into the Father’s face.

*-As you commend your own spirit to God at the end of this day, pray for those who are anxious and fearful, in pain or grief. We cannot solve all the challenges that face us but we can surrender them to God and listen for God to lead us to play our part, small as it may seem to us.*

## **Evening**

This may be a good time to find a broadcast service, or a concert of sacred music; the highbrow types can pull out a CD of Handel’s *Messiah* or one of Bach’s *Passions*.

But whatever your taste, in the tiredness of having entered into the pain of the crucifixion, just to ‘be’ and to soak in the story; not to think too much but to re-live the sounds, the smells, and the sights of the crucifixion.

If you chose to spread the above meditations through the day, this is the time to look at 6 & 7 – the ending and peaceful part.

*-This may be a good moment for thanksgiving – taking a good chunk of time to thank your heavenly Father for this day, and for all the other good things that the God of love has given you.*

Archbishop Thabo's prayer for this time:

*Lord God, in this time of fear and uncertainty,*

*As we face the threat of the coronavirus,*

*Grant us the wisdom and determination to walk in one another's shoes,*

*The confidence and the humility to draw closer to you and those affected,*

*Empower us to pastor those who are ill, to weep for the dead, to support the healers and to care for and love one another.*

*And the blessing of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be with us all, now and always. Amen*

## Saturday 11 April 2020 - HOLY SATURDAY

*Apart from organising eggs for the grandchildren, the Church traditionally has 4 thoughts on this day.*

**Mourning:** if you visit a monastery or convent on this day, you may encounter deep silence as the monks and nuns identify with Jesus in his death, keeping silent and 'staying with' the sense of deep tragedy from Friday, in awe of the cost which Christ was ready to pay to serve the world and bring redemption. *For some of us, this reverent quiet will be our natural response, and our mood for the day.*

**Cleansing:** many congregations meet to spring-clean the church and surrounds in readiness for Easter. The spiritual 'vibe' is that of bringing Lent to an end with another dimension of cleaning-up, and perhaps a sense of 'putting out the red carpet' for the risen Lord.

*-If you are housebound at this time, you could still enter into the spirit of spring-cleaning, either by cleaning part of the house or making an 'Easter garden' somewhere in the yard as a celebration for tomorrow. Or you could just spend an hour turfing out your inbox or the old messages in your cell-phone, getting rid of old stuff before the Lord comes!*

**Victory:** In 1 Peter 3: 18-20 we read this:

*'For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah...'*

The passage is not wholly clear nor corroborated elsewhere in the New Testament except by Peter himself when he says: *'They will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead...'* (4: 5-6)

Yet for centuries the Church has believed that between his death and resurrection, Jesus travelled to the place of the dead and made known the victory of the Cross.

Whatever the case, it is entirely sensible to believe that the victory of Cross and Resurrection has been in some way declared in every dimension of reality, for the dead as well as the living, and that this is part of what we celebrate at this time. *It can surely be part of our prayer on this day.*

**Preparation:** There is a tone of excitement on this day, looking forward to the great celebration of Easter Sunday. *Even if all we do is prepare the food and send some greetings, it is fine to peep into tomorrow and be ready.*

*These thoughts are general and can be taken up into times of prayer as you wish – maybe selecting one or two of these themes to use, or the passages below.*

*Passages you might find helpful are:*

*Job 19:23-27*

*Psalms 103, 136*

*Colossians 3: 1-4*

*Matthew 27: 57-66*

Today's collect:

God our Father, we have been baptised into the death of your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ;

Grant that, by continually putting to death our sinful nature

We may be buried with him and through the grave and gate of death

May pass to our joyful resurrection;

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

*Those who might attend the Easter Vigil on Saturday night in normal times and are familiar with it, could follow it in prayer at home from page 201 in An Anglican Prayer Book.*

## Sunday 12 April 2020 – EASTER SUNDAY

A happy and blessed Easter to you – Christ is Risen!

We have planned the prayer time for today around the Eucharist in An Anglican Prayer Book, so that you feel as connected as possible to the congregation you would normally join on this day. Some people would be familiar with the Prayer Book as a tool box for resources, others maybe not, so we have given page numbers and detailed ideas. As before, look through it and decide which parts to use and which not – especially if you are able to add resources such as music, of your own. This is not a marathon!

At the time of writing, there have been all sorts of innovative ideas about ways we can connect to worship at Easter if we are banned from meeting; look out for information on that – there may be something broadcast or streamed in your parish or diocese which is not known at this point.

This is a great time to find a broadcast service or to get some joyful music going as you start. You could Google ‘Easter music’ or ‘Christ the Lord is risen today’ or ‘Mormon Tabernacle Choir’; or look under Easter hymns in your hymn book, get into the shower and sing it yourself.

### EASTER SERVICE

*Take a moment to recall the presence of the risen Christ with you, and to think of times you were able to celebrate Easter with others – either in church or at a dawn vigil, or some other moment which was special in your experience.*

Turn to page 104 of An Anglican Prayer Book and start at section 2: *Alleluia! Christ is risen!*

Move through pages 104, 105 and 106; after the confession of sins at section 13, hear the voice of God speaking section 14 to you.

Pray the collect from page 231.

Readings:

Acts 10: 34-43

Psalms 118:14-24 (page 755)

Colossians 3: 1-4

Pray the Easter anthems from page 349

Gospel: Matthew 28: 1-10

*In the absence of a sermon, you may like to read the Gospel a second time, slowly and thoughtfully, imagining yourself as one of Mary’s helpers –*

*-Carrying some of her equipment to the tomb*

*-Hearing the earthquake*

*-Seeing the guards panicking*

