

Faith like Gold

Dear fellow believers, we've celebrated a most unusual Easter. I wonder how you celebrated. I wonder what these restrictions mean for you. I wonder what's been the hardest part of this crisis and I wonder how you're coping.

I'm missing the regular contact with you and that's most obvious on Sunday when we can't gather for worship. I know we haven't stopped worshipping and I'm really encouraged by the feedback you've given me and others about how you're worshipping as individuals and families with the resources we've provided. Let us know if there's any other help we could provide.

It looks like these restrictions could last for quite some time. I'm praying for the quickest safe solution of this crisis. In fact why don't we pray now?

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we're gathered together, even in our isolation, by our common faith in you and your amazing love for us.

God our Saviour, we can never thank you enough for the great good news of Easter.

God our Healer, as the coronavirus continues to spread globally, show compassion for the whole human family in turmoil, burdened with illness and fear. Heal the sick, support and protect their families and friends. Grant your world a spirit of love and compassion to work together to quickly control and deal this virus. Amen.

On this second Sunday of Easter I've often preached about Thomas and his journey to believing Jesus was raised from death. This year we could compare the self-isolation of the disciples with ours. It was different, for the disciples it was a fear of Jewish authorities not of a virus isolating them. I wonder whether Thomas thought he was safer alone and that's why he wasn't with the others. Whatever the case Jesus comes to them in their isolation and Jesus comes to us in ours. Jesus is with us wherever we are.

I wonder if you feel our faith is being tested by this time of isolation. Our churches are shut, and we can't get together with our Christian family. For many of us not worshipping together means our week seems to be missing a vital ingredient. This is a tough time.

Peter wrote his first letter to people who were doing it tough. They were being persecuted. The details of why are debatable but the fact they were persecuted is clear. Peter writes to fill them with hope, to encourage them, and to point them to Jesus during their tough time.

The people Peter was writing to were possibly considered 'outsiders' by their community. Right at this moment we could say just about everyone is an 'insider', we're staying inside our homes and yards. Maybe this experience we're having of being 'insiders' is giving us a taste of the isolation many 'outsiders' feel most of the time. We might better appreciate how they feel because of this experience.

One of the readings set for this Sunday is from 1 Peter because of its clear Easter theme.

1 Peter 1:3-9 (CEV) A Real Reason for Hope

Praise God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is so good, and by raising Jesus from death, he's given us new life and a hope that lives on. God has something stored up for you in heaven, where it'll never decay or be ruined or disappear.

You have faith in God, whose power will protect you until the last day. Then he'll save you, just as he's always planned to do. On that day you'll be glad, **even if you have to go through many hard trials for a while.** Your faith will be like gold that's been tested in a fire. And these trials will prove your faith is worth much more than gold that can be destroyed. They'll show that you'll be given praise and honour and glory when Jesus Christ returns.

You've never seen Jesus, and you don't see him now. But still you love him and have faith in him, and no words can tell how glad and happy you are to be saved. That's why you have faith.

Our Easter faith is like gold.

Like gold for two reasons. First it's valuable and second it's tested for purity. Our faith is more valuable than gold. All the gold in the world can't buy what God gives to those who have faith and in particular at Easter time we remember the promise of eternal life.

But our golden faith isn't just valuable at the end of our earthly lives. We have the presence and blessing of God right here and right now. We might have to go through trials and testing times but we're never alone. Peter puts it this way, "You have faith in God, whose power will protect you until the last day". That means now. God's power is protecting us right now. Peterson's Message translation has "God is keeping careful watch over us and the future." That's good news.

Peter makes it clear our golden faith can be tested, tried, put under pressure. Having faith doesn't mean life is all wine and roses or even a big box of chocolates. We know that and this current crisis is a reminder.

I'd like to remind you of Martin Rinkart, a pastor in Eilenburg, Saxony during the Thirty Years' War. Because Eilenburg was a walled city, refugees poured in for safety. The overcrowding, and the consequences of war, led to serious food shortages. In 1637, plague followed and wreaked havoc on the weakened bodies. The four pastors held ten or more funerals a day. Overwhelmed, one of the pastors simply ran away. When the remaining two pastors died from plague, Martin buried them and continued to provide pastoral care to the entire town and the refugees it held. In that year, more than 8000 people died and Martin Rinkart often buried as many as fifty people a day, including his own wife.

Martin survived the entire ordeal maintaining incredible health despite spending his days among the sick and dying. When it finally appeared there'd be relief and, perhaps, the beginnings of peace, Martin wrote a hymn of praise for his children to sing at the dinner table, and he also taught it the congregation. We know it as "Now Thank We All Our God:"

This isn't likely to be a thirty year event but like a plague it's taking its toll. Just as Martin Rinkart was never abandoned by his faithful God we too have God with us. Our faith like gold may be tested but it won't lose its value and we won't lose our assurance that God is with us, now and forever.

Thanks be to God who gives us victory through our risen Lord Jesus Christ.

Pray or sing

Now thank we all our God, with hearts and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things has done, in whom this world rejoices;
Who from our mothers' arms has blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

O, may this bounteous God through all our life be near us,
With ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us;
And keep us in His grace, and guide us when perplexed;
And free us from all ills in this world and the next!

All praise and thanks to God the Father now be given,
The Son, and him who reigns with them in highest heaven—
The one eternal God, whom earth and heav'n adore;
For thus it was, is now, and shall be evermore. Amen.