

Ash Wednesday (17th February) & Lent 1 2021 21st February

9.30 Holy Communion Cuxton	Joel 2 vv 12-17 p912 Matthew 6 vv 16-21 p970 Ash Wednesday
9.30 Holy Communion Cuxton 11.00 Holy Communion Halling	Genesis 9 vv 8-17 p10 I Peter 3 vv 18-22 Mark 1 vv 9-15 p1002 Lent 1

OLORD, who for our sake didst fast forty days and forty nights; Give us grace to use such abstinence, that, our flesh being subdued to the Spirit, we may ever obey thy godly motions in righteousness, and true holiness, to thy honour and glory, who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. *Amen.*

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, who hatest nothing that thou hast made and dost forgive the sins of all them that are penitent; Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins, and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Wherefore should they say among the people, where is their God? (Joel 2¹⁷).

A good question, where is our God? This pandemic gives rise to all sorts of good questions. There are questions for scientists about where the virus came from, what exactly it is in terms of its RNA and protein coat, how it is changing, and how to deal with it, by means, for example, of quarantine, isolation, medication and immunisation. There are questions for politicians about how to manage the pandemic and its consequences. There are questions for clinicians about how to treat those infected and there are questions for everybody involved in both health and social care about how to look after the sick and all those who need care in hospital, in homes or at home. There are questions about how we care for the carers. There are questions for business people and economists and there are questions for ordinary people about how to make ends meet if they lose their livelihoods. There are questions about education. There are questions about the effect of lockdown and isolation, especially on people who are lonely, have special needs or are confined to their homes with especially vulnerable or abusive people. There is the question of what is to be done about the homeless.

These are all good questions and everyone of them is a subject for prayer. All these people we have been thinking about with all the heavy responsibilities that they bear need our prayers. So, of course, do those who are sick and those who have been bereaved – those who are suffering because of COVID and those who suffer from other diseases or who face problems other than those of ill health – or perhaps as well as ill health.

We commend to thy fatherly goodness all those who are any ways afflicted, or distressed, in mind, body or estate; that it may please thee to comfort and relieve them, according to their several necessities, giving them patience under their sufferings, and a happy issue out of all their afflictions. And this we beg for Jesus Christ his sake. Amen.

To some extent, we might be part of the answer to our prayers. We can cooperate with the measures government introduces. We can practise social distancing and report for vaccination when we are invited. We can be nice to doctors and nurses and carers – and

shop assistants and postmen and bus drivers - and all the people who serve us. We can make allowances for other people (including those we live with) who are under stress. We can seek to be an oasis of calm in our own homes. We can keep in touch with other people – by phone, email, social media or letter – even if we can't meet up with them. People often give up something for Lent. If by doing so, we save some money, we can give it to charity. In fact, some of us whose income has remained steady in the pandemic are saving quite a bit because there's so much less to spend our money on. If so, we might give some of it away to charities or missions which are helping those who are much less fortunate than ourselves.

Where is God in all this? He is wherever there is love. God is with us as we do our best to live our lives unselfishly and for the benefit of others. He is with us in our sufferings. Christ takes on Himself the sufferings and sins of the world. He takes them to the Cross. Sin dies with Him. Redeemed in Christ, we rise with Him, to eternal life, where ultimately there will be no more suffering. Mysteriously, the Bible and the Creed speak about Him descending to Hell. There is nowhere where He is not present with His redemptive love.

Psalm 139⁶: *Whither shall I go then from thy Spirit : or whither shall I go then from thy presence?*7. *If I climb up into heaven, thou art there : if I go down to hell, thou art there also.*8. *If I take the wings of the morning : and remain in the uttermost parts of the sea;*9. *Even there also shall thy hand lead me : and thy right hand shall hold me.*10. *If I say, Peradventure the darkness shall cover me : then shall my night be turned to day.*11. *Yea, the darkness is no darkness with thee, but the night is as clear as the day : the darkness and light to thee are both alike.*12. *For my reins are thine : thou hast covered me in my mother's womb.*13. *I will give thanks unto thee, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made : marvellous are thy works, and that my soul knoweth right well.*

The Great Flood came because of human wickedness. It says, *The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence.* God's Law was violated to the extent that Creation unravelled and the waters out of which God had made the dry land appear returned to cover the face of the earth. But God did not allow human wickedness to destroy the world which He had made, the world which, when He had made it, He declared to be very good. God saved Noah and his family and all the animals and the earth was given a fresh start, a new beginning. God made a covenant with all living things and gave us the rainbow as a sign of His promise to save us, even to save us from ourselves. In the days of the prophet Joel, the Israelites were confronted with a terrible plague of locusts. What should they do? They should return to God. They should repent of their sins. They should cast themselves on God's mercy. *Wherefore should they say among the people, where is their God?*

Where is our God? He came down to earth from heaven in the person of Jesus Christ. He was born as one of us. He was baptized as we should be baptized. He confronted and overcame all the temptations of the devil. In the Providence of God, He was cared for by wild beasts and by angels and He began His ministry by declaring: *The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye and believe the gospel.* Lent especially is a time in which we review our lives, what our priorities are, what we live for, a time especially in which we repent of those ways in which we fall short of being the people God wants us to be. The ultimate answer to the questions arising from the pandemic is to turn to God.