The Easter stories are familiar with lockdown, of course: on that first Easter Sunday evening, we can read in John’s gospel how the disciples were meeting behind locked doors for fear of those who were threatening their lives, but Jesus was still able to come and stand among them with words of Peace. Today, we meet behind locked doors for fear of the virus which threatens our lives, socially distanced from one another for fear of passing or receiving deadly contamination. Yet Jesus comes and meets each one of us and speaks though scripture and sacrament those same words of affirmation and peace: I am with you. I will never leave you nor forsake you. I have the keys of death and hell: there is nowhere you can go where I cannot find you, and lead you to Life.

There are so many parallels with our empty streets and anxious faces as we dig into the stories of scripture, the traditions of the church, and the news which breaks on us from around the world each day. We know that Christ is with us in each step of this extraordinary and unexpected and unwanted path.

Our first reading from Colossians, read for us today by Andy Street, Mayor of the West Midlands, describes Christ’s people as those who have lost their bearings: for you are dead, St. Paul says, and your life is hid with Christ, in God. So this is a time of gift, for us to discover the truth of what it means to have died with Christ and to follow him into new and unexpected places.

On Thursday this week, Maundy Thursday, we were struggling to get our live streaming to work for our Maundy evening communion. We ended up starting the service rather late, which meant that we couldn’t quite finish it in time to applaud the National Health Service staff at eight o’clock: so we paused the service, after blessing the bread and wine of communion, and before stripping away the accoutrements of a streamed service from the front room of a house, and suddenly realised that the footwashing which usually marks this service was being offered in hospitals and care homes up and down the land in a way that exactly followed the example of Christ. We thank our medical staff and care workers for showing us Christ in the midst of our news broadcasts.

On Friday, Bishop Christopher shared a powerful image of Christ falling under the weight of a cross which symbolised not only the corona virus, but all the diseases and infections of the world: surely he has born our afflictions and carried our infirmities. I remember how years ago we became familiar with the line, “the Body of Christ has AIDS”. Today, “the Body of Christ has COVID-19”.

Yet today, Easter Sunday, is the Day of Resurrection! I often reflect on the sheer number of times that the Hebrew Scriptures tell and re-tell the story of the liberation of their ancestors from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea – it’s the history changing example of the way God works, which puts everything else in perspective and gives a fixed point, a cairn in the path to return to. In the same way in Coventry we return again and again to the stories of 1940, the destruction through enemy action of the City and Cathedral, and the revealing of God’s gracious hope and presence: it still guides us, transforms us, and points us to Christ’s presence in the midst of whatever destruction, loss or conflict we may be experiencing.

I was overwhelmed as I reflected on the words which Provost Howard used almost 80 years ago on Christmas Day, 1940 – words which we could echo almost word for word as we ourselves celebrate the other great Christian festival:

I’m looking now at the heaped up ruins and the long line of outer walls, scarred and windowless, yet even now the ruined cathedral keeps much of its former majesty and beauty unconquered by destruction…So is the spirit of Christ, unconquerable. He suffers alongside of us, just as this cathedral suffered the same fate as the city...
Early this Christmas morning, here under these ruins, in the lovely little stone chapel built six hundred years ago, we began the day with our Christmas communion, worshipping the Christ, believe me, as joyfully as ever before. What we want to tell the world is this: that with Christ born again in our hearts today, we are trying, hard as it may be, to banish all thoughts of revenge… We are going to try to make a kinder, simpler, a more Christ Child-like sort of world in the days beyond this strife.

This morning we join in the celebration of Easter around the world in front rooms and near empty churches, but worshipping the Christ as joyfully as ever before. What we want to tell the world is this: that with Christ risen in our hearts today, we are trying, hard as it may be, to banish all thoughts of hatred or fear of others … we are going to try to make a kinder, simpler, a more risen Christ like sort of world.

Our world has been changed for ever by this virus. But our world has been even more profoundly changed by the death and resurrection of Jesus, who reaches into the depths of our isolation and turns us back to him, and to one another. In the days beyond this virus it is our calling to live out the commitment we have discovered to one another, to continue to give thanks for those who care for us, to accept and receive the love and the hope which Jesus gives us to share.

In the ruins of the Cathedral is a statue. Originally called Reunion, it depicts the reuniting of two people who had been separated by war. Today there are many people separated by this virus: but we have a secure hope in Jesus of being together again, and we live as people who look forward to falling into each other’s arms again, with tears of joy and smiles of wonder, knowing that Jesus has never left us, nor forsaken us, but is travelling this journey with us.

We may be full of fear - this is all so unknown. Yet the words, ‘Do not be afraid’, which came twice in our Gospel reading – first on the lips of an angel, second from Jesus himself, are spoken again today, to us, in this place. We are, always, an Easter People, and this is our song:

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed – Alleluia!

Amen.