

A God-given opportunity, not a prison sentence

Revd Cei Rees, Priest in Charge in Aberystwyth LMA, who is in self-isolation for the next few months, considers our present circumstances in the light of St Paul

‘Lockdown!’ Who of us, even a few weeks ago, could have imagined this phrase becoming part of our general vocabulary? We live in strange times indeed. The world, the news and the restrictions put upon us are moving at a rapid rate.

We don’t know how long the lockdown will last. We can, though, talk about what it feels like. Words like frustrating, annoying and isolating spring to mind. We know it is for our own good. We follow the rules as such. That however, does not mean that we don’t look forward to the day when it’s all over.

What the lockdown looks like does differ from person to person. Key workers still go out to work, albeit in a strange, social distancing, kind of way. Most people are still allowed out a couple of times a day, to a shop or for exercise. Some people are not allowed out at all. All they will see for the next 12-16 weeks is a house and garden, should they have one.

I am one of those people in the last group. I am a vulnerable person who has been told to stay in. I confess when I first heard the news my heart sank. It felt like I was being put under house arrest for a crime I hadn’t committed. For me, not being able to go out, go to church and visit people felt like a punishment.

I soon realised that I was not alone. In fact, that feeling of being trapped is pretty universal. At least I, as an adult, understand it. We have a young family, with 3 children of primary school age, and explaining to them what is happening is pretty hard. They, too, have lost what is normal in their lives: school, friends and the ability to just go out. We are all prisoners together, dreaming of the day when freedom comes.

Wallowing in self-pity about all these things, I soon realised I had to get a bit of perspective on everything. Yes, we all have to stay in. But what about people who don’t have a home – the refugees and homeless? Where can they self-isolate? Yes, our home has become a school room, with us adults as the unqualified teachers. But, thank God, we have amazing teachers who are guiding us in the work that is to be done. Yes, we are frustrated. But what about those people who are risking it all on the front line – our amazing NHS staff, charity workers, shop workers and so on.

It was then that my mind was taken to St Paul. For Christians, Paul is something of a hero figure. An apostle, missionary, church planter, encourager and writer, Paul, it could be argued, is second only to Jesus in his influence on the Christian faith.

What we forget so easily is that Paul spent much of his Christian life behind bars. Paul was imprisoned many times, including two years in Rome. Yet, when this happened he never stopped doing the work that God called him to do. He continued to write, authoring much of the New Testament. He continued to encourage, helping those in the newly planted churches. He continued to evangelise, even leading his jailers to faith. He was still doing the work of an apostle. He was still Paul!

In many ways Paul saw imprisonment as an opportunity. No doubt it was hard for him, something we see reflected in his later letters to the church. However, there is no doubt that God's Spirit was with him and God's kingdom was built as a result.

Perhaps the challenge to us is to see this lockdown as an opportunity as well. An opportunity to spend time with God in study and prayer. An opportunity to explore new ways of doing church online, seeking to draw more people to our worship because it is so accessible. An opportunity to call, email or speak online with our church family, catching up with, encouraging and praying for one another. An opportunity to cook those things that we have always wanted to cook. An opportunity to read those books that we have always wanted to read. An opportunity to spend time with that young family before they all grow up.

The lockdown is hard. In it, though, there are so many opportunities. May God strengthen us at this time. May He bless us in all that we do. May His kingdom grow.