

Tues 23rd March, 2021 – On-line Covid Service of Remembrance – Lamentations 3:17-26 / 1 Peter 1:3-9

It is almost impossible to express in a few short minutes the enormity of the emotion which one year of Lockdown means for all of us. But something of that emotion is captured by the number of candles shining in this cathedral.

Today we mark one year since the announcement was made that this country would enter a period of Lockdown: the lockdown of schools, businesses, shops, churches and lives. And we all believed that by the summer life would have returned to normal. Yet, as we know full well, one year on, life is still not normal.

But the reason for such a curtailment of our liberties, to meet one another, to earn a living, to celebrate together, has been to achieve a greater good which we largely understand, and to avoid a greater darkness which we also understand.

Today we not only mark a year of restrictions, but in this Service of Reflection we also hold in our memories each person who has died in our land, as across the world, in the face of this pandemic. Today in our province we count 2,107 people whose lives have been lost to the Covid 19 virus. Each of these individuals from across our Province is represented by the candles which light the open space of this cathedral. These are mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, grandparents, parents, family and friends who have been lost to all of us over the past twelve months of this pandemic.

But today we also remember every person across our land whose death has been impacted by Covid. In our communities we have a way of remembering and celebrating every life at their time of death. We gather together. We hug and hold one another. We share stories and memories, tears and laughter. We pray, we find faith and meaning to that person's life. And in all these ways we find healing and walk a path through our grief that allows us to find a new way of living, even if apart or more alone.

This is a journey familiar to the carers and counsellors of Marie Curie and the Hospice movement, as much as to all the churches. But across this past year, all these ways of remembering and paths of grieving have been denied to us.

In nursing homes and ICU units, the hands of our loved ones have been held, not by family members, but by carers and cleaners. Prayers have been said by nurses and consultants. Funerals have been held at a social distance, with restricted numbers, in empty churches or windswept graveyards.

Time and again, family members have cried out and said "This was not the way they would have wanted it to be."

And our grieving has been done alone, in Lockdown isolation: no hugs, no cups of tea or pints on the bar. Just our Facebook postings and through this cathedral's Lives Reflected initiative, a precious picture and a word portrait in 250 characters – And yet it is amazing how a whole life can be captured in so few words.

But you see, in our grieving, through this pandemic, we have not only experienced a bleak loss, but we have also experienced a bitter anger. In this service, as we remember and recall those we have loved but lost to Covid within the year of this pandemic, we must allow ourselves to express the anger and the pain, every bit as much as the loss and the loneliness.

It is why scripture is honest enough in Lamentations to cry out "My soul is bereft of peace, I have forgotten what happiness is." and "The thought of my affliction is woodworm and gall."

Yet this cannot and must not be the place where we pitch our tent and stay. Although the pandemic has shown us the darkness of a disease we did not understand one year ago. Still through this pandemic we

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have seen the very BEST of humanity on display. Yes, we did “Clap for Carers” and frontline workers and we painted rainbows in our windows. Yes, scientists have co-operated as never before to produce a range of vaccines which can turn the tide. And an unprecedented effort by politicians, health professionals and communities has seen the amazing roll out of the vaccination programme across our province.

And today, one year on, in this virtual new world we have all had to embrace, we gather together, although apart, not just to remember those we have lost, but to REMEMBER them WELL, and to celebrate their lives.

Christianity, above all else, is a faith which declares HOPE, not just for when life is going well (in fact this is when we are most likely to forget our faith), but Hope in our darkest days. It is in the darkness, lit by the candles of our faith, that Hope triumphs. As it was on the brutal, splintered cross of Good Friday that Jesus forged his pathway to the Victory of Easter Day.

Tonight, in this Service of Reflection we are called not just to remember, but to Remember Well, and not those we have lost of a while, but those we have loved for a lifetime.

Peter, who knew all about the darkest places of despair and denial, wrote these words: “In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith, being more precious than gold .. may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed”

One year on, let us with a Time of Silence, now remember each life recalled by these candles, representing every life lost in this past year of pandemic. But let us remember them well. Let us remember them in hope – even in faith