

You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace;

During our time in Lockdown we couldn't really imagine this, could we? And many of us probably still don't feel very peaceful about leaving our homes.

We've all been on a journey together and yet we have all been on a different journey.

A few of us have had to continue to work, with all the risks that that could possibly bring.

Others have had to adapt to working from home.

Some have been furloughed, some might not have jobs to return to.

Sadly some people have had operations and procedures delayed or have lost loved ones.

At the start of this outbreak none of us knew just how bad it would become in the Forest of Dean. Compared to other parts of the country, so far, things haven't been so bad, but I know it won't feel like that for anyone who has lost a loved one, or been seriously ill with the virus.

We know this isn't over and we still have the worry of whether it could come back, but, in an attempt to move forward, I want to look back at a few aspects of our journey.

In the early weeks, my family would meet for a family Skype session, usually playing games, but inevitably, the conversation would return to the virus.

I soon realised that this was worrying for our 8 and 9 year-old grandchildren.

Early in the Lockdown Charlotte, the nine-year-old, wrote the prayer that I will play for you in a moment. It wasn't a piece of homework, so she obviously felt the need to write it:

Dear God

Help us to stay smiley and positive while going through the tough times.

Thank you for creating the Earth itself – us as well.

Sorry for making mistakes and polluting the planet

Amen.

I think we could all have done with using the first line of her prayer: Help us to stay smiley and positive whilst going through the tough times.

Later on, she was set a piece of homework, to write an acrostic using the words Lockdown. The teacher in me was tempted to point out her spelling errors but, I haven't!



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Locked inside
Only lonely at home
Can't go out
Keep washing your hands
Don't come within 2 metres of your friends
Or visit the elderly
When will lockdown end?
Now thank you NHS

I don't know about you, but my mood or emotions have been on a real roller-coaster during this time. Sometimes I've really appreciated having that extra time to spend out in the garden or just enjoy the wonderful weather we were blessed with, other times I've really missed having a purpose: places that I was supposed to be, people I would see there; feeling I was being useful to people other than myself. I knew in my heart that I didn't have anything to complain about, but I felt a huge frustration that I couldn't help others who did have major struggles; and yes, I did pray, and it that *was* a comfort.

But, I had friends and relatives who needed hospital treatment, others we were shielding on their own, one daughter having to run her veterinary business with a greatly reduced staff, and one specific story I want to share.

My younger daughter and son-in-law have found this a very difficult time. Two weeks before we were 'locked down' they had been given the go ahead to begin their final stage of adopting two little children, then lockdown happened, and everything was put on hold.

Boy did I pray at that time: that ways might be found for it all to go ahead, and boy did I rant at God when it just kept being delayed and delayed. Heidi and Elliott were sitting at home unable to do anything, when that would have been an ideal time to be with their children.

However, they were allowed to have occasional video calls with their children, and, although I don't think Heidi will feel this will compensate for missing three months of their children's lives, including their 2nd and 3rd birthdays, some positives have come from it.

Before the visits to the foster home the children would have only met their new mum and dad on a few brief occasions. Using the videos, they spent much more time with them. Also, Heidi and Elliott were getting to know the foster carers – before suddenly finding themselves in the home of these strangers for two weeks.

And it was Barbara who pointed out to me that if the children had managed to come to them back in March they might have blamed their new mummy and daddy (rather than the virus) for not taking them to exciting places like the playground during lockdown.

I am very pleased to say that the introductions did eventually happen and last Monday the children were delivered to their new home. It's very early days for them all, but at least they have each other now.

I'm sure that, despite the misery that Heidi and Elliott went through waiting for it all to happen, these introductions did go more smoothly because of the extra video time, which I see as a blessing - And yesterday they were able to go on swings and slides for the first time since March – and they looked so happy.

In Charlotte's prayer she spoke about the tough times, but positive things have come out of these 'tough times'.

Yesterday I shared a Zoom prayer breakfast with people from 7 or 8 other churches around the Forest, plus I got to chat to Charlotte from English Bicknor, who moved to Cornwall to do children's work, in the middle of May. It was really lovely to see her and if it weren't for Lockdown and Zoom, I probably wouldn't have seen her for a long time.

All the people in our meeting had some really lovely stories to tell about positive things that have come about for their church families during lockdown, things that wouldn't have happened without it and sometimes being able to include people who wouldn't normally 'do church.'

Globally there have been lots of other good things going on:

- Communities have come together more, people have got to know their neighbours, some even singing or exercising together – or having coffee mornings if you live in or near Bracelands Drive.
- An amazing number of people put themselves forward to join volunteer groups.
- Many of us have developed our IT skills – what would this have been like 30 years ago – without Internet deliveries, Skype or Zoom calls or mobile phones?
- The Church of England launched a free Daily Hope prayer hotline, where people could telephone in for prayer. I know a couple of my friends made use of this and it, apparently, has been used a great deal. We are unlikely to find out just how much this has helped people but I'm sure it has.
- We've learned the importance of personal hygiene!
- Charlotte apologised to God for polluting the planet and we have seen reduced carbon emissions – evidence that it would be worth making changes to the way we live. For the first time in decades, the air is so clear that you can now see the Himalayan mountains in parts of India.
- Many people are now working from home. Many will continue to do so – or at least some of the time when this pandemic has come to an end – so less time spent travelling, less traffic on the roads and less pollution.
- Gardens are looking tidier.
- Wildlife have benefited from less people around.
- As a nation we've developed a greater appreciation for our NHS
Musicians are giving free virtual performances
 - Thanks Andy for Facebook recitals and the Drybrook and District male voice choir for songs on YouTube.
- Cycle lanes are being introduced in more towns. – better for health and reducing pollution.

And the list could go on.

We have a lot to be thankful for.

During this last week I've had a song in my head. It was a song that was in the charts in 1970. Moonshadow by Cat Stevens.

The artist has a really positive attitude: here's an example of some of the lyrics:

And if I ever lose my hands, lose my plough, lose my land

Oh if I ever lose my hands, I won't have to work no more.

And it goes on in this vein, but basically it is saying 'I'll make the most of what I have got and not moan about what I have lost.'

In Philippians 4:8 it says:

8 Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.

But we will be feeling nervous about going out and mixing with more people so let's remember that in

Romans 12:12 we are told:

Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer

And in Philippians 4:6 it says:

6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

And finally in Psalm 118:24

This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it

And in Charlotte's words: Stay smiley and positive whilst going through the tough times.

Amen.