

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN A THOUSAND YEARS...

For the first time in a thousand years, there were no services in our village church today. No ringing of the bells, no joyful chatter before the service began, no singing of well-loved hymns, no words from Scripture, no deep silence at the time of Communion.

It would have been Mothering Sunday. Dozens of children would have come to join in a family service, and been given flowers for their mothers and other carers. The sun was shining on the old magnolia tree by the south porch, now in full bloom. No worshippers gazed in wonder at it as they came to sing praises to their Creator.

Our church has witnessed world wars, the upheavals of the Reformation and the English Civil War, but I doubt if there has ever been a Sunday quite like this.

Church members listened at home to services on the radio, or watched the service streamed from our church by the Vicar. Some gathered round screens to pray together by Skype. We had all been asked to read the Sunday readings at ten o'clock, the time of our church service, and some lit candles in their windows at seven o'clock in the evening. Our pastoral team was in touch with the elderly and at-risk folk who live alone.

But our dear old church was empty – except for a few who may have wandered in alone to sit quietly or to light candles.

It is a strange and painful time that we are trying to make sense of. Is God trying to tell us something? Is it a judgement mankind is bringing on himself? Are we being asked to consider where we as a human race are going? Is this a rebuke for our careless relationship with the world around us?

If this had to happen, Lent is an appropriate time. Jesus self-isolated for forty days in the wilderness. He withdrew from the busy world in order to be alone with his heavenly Father. Normal life stopped for him. He was thrown back on his own resources. He had important decisions to make about the future, and he didn't want any distractions.

Our village church will not be holding services for quite a few Sundays yet, but this was the first, and it felt strange and sad. Like Jesus in the wilderness, we must listen and wait – and consider our future.

David Trustram, 22nd March 2020