‘Chaplaincy in the Covid crisis’ by Keith Anderson

I approached the pulpit; my notes were scribbled, the sermon felt rushed and underprepared. I had to write this quickly and with relevance to the new emerging threat, Corona. I took a sip of water, I felt the hit of nerves like I always do on Sundays.

“Good morning,” I began…

I began to read from the official looking piece of A4 paper I was handed just before the service. Even then I thought, or I could feel, something wasn't right. There was a dark cloud hanging over everything. I had put it down to the rush in which I had to compose my message for the service, but looking back on it now I’m not so sure. As I worked my way through the official announcement as to why we would be shutting the church. Some of this was news to me. I read through the statistics that lead us to this point; they were harrowing. What made it worse is that the congregation, as many church congregations are, was older and many do have underlying health problems. I scanned the floor and the faces looking back at me, some in shock, some look worried, and I wondered if we would all be back here when the church did re-open.

The rest of the service that seems so long ago now and was somewhat of a blur. I did my best to deliver a message of hope and love – of integrity and of compassion. As I delivered the words with power and conviction, the truth was I felt the sting of realisation we were heading for lockdown and there was nothing I could do about that. We wrapped up the service with a hymn and I shared the grace.

Even the end of the service was unusual… As we had already begun to socially distance ourselves there was no soup, no cake, and no coffee – none of the tales of those moments in life where the holy moves or those tales of life in general; no handshake, no hugs, it was somewhat impoverished. I got on my bike, waved goodbye to the congregation and as I rode back home, everything felt decidedly grey to me. I worried for the health of the church members and indeed the health of the church in general.

Unsurprisingly a few days later there was the official lockdown announcement. I prayed and I trusted in God through the uncertainty but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t deeply concerned, wondering how all this would play out…

I wiped the sleep from my eyes, the sunlight piercing the gap in the curtains ever so slightly. I felt the familiar and reassuring warmth of the girl I love, her arm draped across my chest (who I can't thank enough for her support in all this) sleepily. I pulled her closer and waited until the alarm went off.  I was still on call. I had for the last six months been a relief care assistant working in different nursing homes wherever I was needed.  Demand had skyrocketed since the outbreak; staff were off sick, either shielding from the virus or showing symptoms. Either way, demand had increased massively and today was no different. Skelmersdale was the destination I punched into my satnav. I took one last sip of my coffee, gave my girl a loving embrace then I pulled my leathers on over my powder blue tunic, my zip got caught on the pewter badge that hung over my pen pocket on my chest; "Chaplain" it read. I figured if there was no church for people to go to, then at least people would know I was there as a representative of the church as much as a carer.

I kissed my girl made the symbol of a heart with my hands and pushed the button start on my motorcycle. I headed down the motorway enjoying the freedom a little more than usual my bike glided through the gears and accelerated quickly the roads were absolutely empty it was eerie as the scenery whizzed by. My mind steadied, the bike is a perfect sanctuary and as I often do I prayed a little prayer to myself: “Please God make me a channel of your peace, let me be where I'm needed, use me mightily today, in Jesus, precious name, amen.”

In no time at all I was there face masks in a large pile to the right of the entrance. I headed for the ward I was assigned and was stopped by the nurse in charge. Anyone who knows me knows I’m always on the last minute so I was rather hasty. “Stop,” she said again. She pulled out a thermometer and took my temperature. At the time this seemed odd, but as we all know it's the new normality.

“36.3,” she said, “on you go.” I made my way up the staircase and through the key-padded door.

As I began to pull off my leathers, someone burst in.

“Thank God you’re here,” the senior carer said, looking concerned, “can you give the last rites?” I made my way into the dimly lit room put on my PPE and bowed my head in silence to collect my thoughts. The short rasping breaths of a man who hadn't got long to live, breaking the serenity. I began to pray...

He passed away less than an hour later, and this was a story played out again and again over the coming weeks. It was exhausting and what made it worse was there was no church to go to, to recharge, so to speak.

Day after day, waiting for people to get sick or die and it didn't matter where I went – Widnes, Runcorn, Manchester, it was the same story. You were greeted at the door with a kind of situation report.

24 staff off sick. 11 dead this week. 6 confirmed active cases. Let me take your temperature. 36.3. It was the routine. It was brutal.

Every day a variation on the same story. Cleaners, carers, nurses, chefs exhausted emotionally due to the crisis being played out in front of their eyes and physically, as we were all doing more hours and more work due to the staff shortage. One nurse worked 36 hours! On top of that we were all worried about friends, family or loved ones; there was little respite. Residents isolating in their rooms with little stimulation and no family to visit them. Week after week, it was relentless.

Until one night. It was a Friday afternoon, the atmosphere changed I was sat at the traffic lights after finishing my shift the sun was going down and the golden shimmer of the fading sunlight was all around there was a pleasant early summer warmth. The car next to me had its hood down and there was some upbeat music playing. People were walking around there was a sense of normality and I was so very grateful to see it. In the coming days and weeks it would take an awful lot more to return to normality.

It was a Sunday afternoon. I wish I had the nerves of a freshly prepared sermon I thought, but today was going to be a good day, I could feel it.

I arrived on site, took my temperature, 36.3, picked up my mask and asked the question: “How many cases?” “We have no active cases,” came the response. I smiled. I was overjoyed - this was good news indeed.

There were a few Christian residents in this nursing home and I asked the nurse if I could give communion to the ones that desired it he had no problem with it at all. I went down into the kitchen and got some bread and some grape juice. “Every time you eat this bread and drink from the cup, you are proclaiming the Lord's death – until He returns.”

I finished with the last lady on my round I asked her if she wished to have communion her response wasn't what I expected. She was Catholic, she said, but would love communion even though we do it a bit funny. I sat with her and prayed a little. “Thank you,” she said, “I've been so scared on my own and stuck in bed you've helped me so much.”

I can't help but think Sheila helped me more that day and I definitely needed that meal more than her.