

Good morning.

That must have been the weirdest week of my life. For the past eight days I have not been **with** a single human being – or at least not in the full meaning of the phrase. Yes, I have talked to people non-stop. My eyes are watering with looking at the screen during online conferences, my left arm is sore from having a phone clamped constantly to my ear. But I live on my own and so have not once been in the same physical space as another person.

That physical aspect of relationship is critical. Disembodied people, brought to us by clever technologies, are fine for a bit, but something massive is missing. It's not just the handshakes and the hugs. It's the endless nuances of communication that arise from being in the same place, it's the joy of eating together, of seeing the other laugh. For a while we have had to lay all of that aside. And let's be honest, it hurts.

It is oddly fitting that all of this should be happening as Christians begin the season of Passiontide, their minds focussed ever more on the crucifixion of Jesus. In the events leading up to the cross, the Bible records the slow collapse of the community that Jesus has so carefully built. One by one he has to lay aside all his relationships. The vast crowds who once shouted Hosanna now want his blood. The disciples betray and deny and then flee altogether. Jesus is left increasingly alone until finally there is only the utter solitude of the tomb.

But for Christians there is purpose in this loss of relationship. A few days after the cross, when he has risen again, Jesus will build his community anew, but this time with bonds of love that death has no power to touch. Jesus sacrificed precious relationships in order that even richer relationships could abound.

In this strange time of lockdown and social isolation, we too have been asked to sacrifice relationships precisely so that relationship can flourish. We too are asked to pay the huge short-term cost of laying aside being with others for the long-term wellbeing of us all.

And maybe this can be about more than endurance or survival. Already across our nation we are seeing a welling-up of altruism, wonderful new patterns of volunteering and people thinking differently about the preciousness of time spent with the people they love. Maybe this is the beginning of a new age in which we learn afresh that human flourishing comes not from things but from relationships. Maybe, by sacrificing for a while the precious gift of fully being **with** another, something beautiful might blossom up as we discover each other afresh.