Today the Church begins its journey to Holy Week with Passiontide. And the Gospel today – the Raising of Lazarus – reminds of the humanity of Jesus, sharing in our grief and sorrow, and weeping with us as with Martha and Mary. And yet, although John’s Gospel tells us that Jesus was far off in the hour of greatest need for his friend, Lazarus – and for Martha and Mary too – Jesus nonetheless comes to us. As one of our Eucharistic Prayers puts it, “as a mother tenderly gathers her children, Jesus embraces his people as his own”.

I suspect that in the whole history of the church, we have not entered this most holy season in such a way. So let me begin by saying to you all who are reading this sermon or watching the service, that this Cathedral – the Mother Church of the Diocese of Oxford – continues to pray, remember and hope. We commit each and every one to the love, tender mercy and compassion of God.

At this, and at every Passiontide, we remember Jesus – flesh of our flesh, bone of our bone – bearing the abundant, overwhelming love of God to us all, no matter where we are, or what anxieties and trials we may be suffering. So this House of Christ continues to be part of that same ministry embodied in Jesus. We recall at this time although we are all asked to practice “social distancing”, the incarnation – God in Christ – is the very opposite of this. Jesus is the body language of God: he sees the unseen; hears the unheard; touches the untouchable; embraces the shunned; is company for the lonely and the neglected. Jesus is Emmanuel: God with us. God with you – wherever you are.

With God in Christ, and in the power of the Spirit, there is no “social distance” between us and God, and indeed in one another in communion with the church visible and invisible, the great cloud of witnesses and the angels who worship with us all today. In Christ, you are never alone. You are always part of his body. We are knit together, no matter where you find yourself today.

If you can cope with a little bit of humour at this time, I feel bound to tell you that the Church of England is a denomination that is in a league of its own. Perhaps none more so when it comes to the practise of “social distancing”, which the Church of England has been doing with effortless ease for almost four hundred years.
After all, what else is a Sunday Morning 8am *Book of Common Prayer* Eucharist if it is not that? Minimal eye contact with your neighbour; sit at the back of the church and apart from others, ideally in your own pew, despite there being plenty of room at the front. No exchange of the peace or any other awkward gestures or unnecessary physical proximity. A nod to the priest when you leave, perhaps. Ideally no handshake, lest one is corralled into a rota for the coffee or mowing the churchyard. We have been practicing social distancing since 1662. This is our English brilliance: cracking and consecrating social distancing.

Still with humour, but just a little more poignant, let me take you to that rather schmaltzy film with Hugh Grant, *Love Actually*. Here’s what he says at the start:

‘Whenever I get gloomy with the state of the world, I think about the arrivals gate at Heathrow Airport. General opinion is starting to make out that we live in a world of hatred and greed, but I don’t see that. It seems to me that love is everywhere. Often it’s not particularly dignified or newsworthy, but it’s always there - fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, husbands and wives, boyfriends, girlfriends, old friends. When the planes hit the Twin Towers, as far as I know, none of the phone calls from the people on board were messages of hate or revenge – they were all messages of love…’.

Passiontide reminds us of the supremacy of love. Sometimes this involves us in self-sacrifice. I think of the former plague village of Eyam, in Derbyshire, near where we used to live, and the extraordinary selfless self-isolation practised by the villagers in the seventeenth century to save others. Their lives became a parable.

With Jesus on the cross, an unjust death is absorbed by God, not returned. The alienation Jesus experiences is not something God revisits upon us. Rather, the God we follow is the very embodiment of kindness and tenderness. This is the Jesus who mourns with Martha and Mary, and weeps over Lazarus. In the same way, the passion and compassion with which Jesus loves us is what God asks us to re-turn to our neighbours, families and friends.

Emmanuel means that God is with us. God is with you. And today, at Passiontide, the church remembers that all those gaps in social distancing, and any chasm fixed that was between us and God, or even between life and death, is finished. In Christ, we are not alone. We are never apart. We are knit together through the love of God, the tenderness and kindness of Christ poured out in the cross and resurrection, and the comforting power of the Holy Spirit. So, may the kindness, mercy and tender love of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all today, at this our Passiontide. Amen.