

Sermon preached at the Plague Commemoration Service at St Lawrence Eyam. Sunday 30th August 2026 at 2.30pm by the Very Rev'd Dr Peter Robinson, Dean of Derby.

Romans 12 verses 9 to 21

The seventeenth century was an age of anxiety. Bubonic plague, or the 'pestilence', brought social turbulence with it. Plague was no respecter of persons. All were equally vulnerable to infection, although whether you were a villager, a labourer, or landowner, an aristocrat – where you were in the social hierarchy – determined what resources you had to shield yourself.

In London, with the resources, then the advice was to flee from the horror of the medical realities into the countryside. There you would hide behind the walls of your estate and let the house staff take the risk of managing your family's relationship with the outside world.

But there was a deeper turmoil in the minds of the English people. Was this God's punishment on country that had executed its king and experimented with a Commonwealth? Or - was it God's punishment for restoring the monarchy and going back on the freedoms that many had enjoyed since the execution of the king in 1649? It didn't really matter where you stood on such matters the anxiety of the age was palpable and intense.

The story of Eyam is a story about sacrifice. A sacrifice made by one village for the common good. The story of the years 1665 and 1666 offers us an opportunity to respond to the challenges of our times and our anxieties.

Our thoughts go back to the COVID years of 2020 to 2022 with all its uncertainties and the debates over how to respond appropriately – a discussion that continues. Reports of the deadliest outbreak of the Ebola virus in the Democratic Republic

of Congo come with a record number of cases and deaths. We know that the catastrophic flash flooding in the Himalayan border regions of Nepal will have grave consequences for health as the disaster unfolds. What we can learn from Eyam three and a half centuries ago is by no means irrelevant to contemporary life.

The story Eyam begins with parcel of cloth, ordered by the master tailor Alex Hadfield, arriving in the village and opened by John Viccars his assistant. John was the first victim of the plague who died after just two days of receiving the parcel, on 7th September. Noticing the cloth was damp he hung it up to dry – a small, seemingly insignificant event determining the course of history.

Around 260 deaths later – as far as we know – it's the death of farm-worker Abraham Morton on the 1st November the following year that closes the episode of the plague. Viccars and Moreton and everyone who died between them – women, men, children, people of all ages and backgrounds. Up to a half of the community had died.

It's important not to gloss over or varnish the reality of events behind the suffering. There were personal differences between the two leading villagers Thomas Stanley and the Rev'd William Mompesson. It cannot have been easy for Stanley, a puritan by conviction, to continue to live in the village after he resigned his living, yet his humility and his ability to be pastorally alongside his parishioners to enable trust, and work with Mompesson the new incumbent from 1664 stands out.

The late John Clifford in his outstanding narrative of the plague reminds us that there were three decisions taken and agreed by the community as the plague gained a grip after the winter months in May 1666. Funerals and churchyard burials would be stopped; services would be held in the open and not in the church; and a quarantine-ring around the village would be

introduced to prevent the spreading of the disease beyond the village. Some of the boundary markers put in place at the time, with the scooped-out hollows in which coins would be left in water or vinegar to pay for supplies left by surrounding communities survive to tell the story.

There is much we don't know. We don't know how the village came to make its decisions. We don't know what the pressure was from the authorities including the landowners to adopt a quarantine model and isolate the community. We don't know anything about the push back from members of the village about the decisions – something we know might well have happened if our experience of COVID was anything to go by.

Nevertheless, this is undoubtedly a story of sacrifice and love of neighbour. And to illuminate this our reading from St Paul's letter to the Christians of Rome could not have been better chosen.

The framework for this part of Paul's argument is sacrifice. 'Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God which is your spiritual worship', he says. Even acknowledging what we do not know about the inner lives of those involved in living out the three decisions, the community here in Eyam was sacrificial in offering their very selves for the lives of others. We know that not a single person outside of the village contracted the plague and lost their lives as a result. This was practical love of neighbour, grasping onto the good, but the hard thing to do.

So far in Romans Paul has been talking about God's love, the love that is poured into our hearts and that not even death can separate us from. Now Paul explains that God's love is to overflow from our hearts into the life of God's people – those who gather to worship and those whom the church's life is to impact.

'Let love be genuine', says Paul. Let your love which is an outpouring of God's love influence the Christian community and

let the Christian community's love for the world make a serious impact beyond the church's own life.

Offer hospitality and help the poor within the community of God's love and in the larger world. Weep with those who weep; associate with the lowly and those who struggle; foster a forgiving spirit to those who treat you badly in the world; leave any thought of vengeance in the hands of God. Encounter the evil of this world with the practice and vision of the common good.

This is the practical sacrifice that Paul appeals to the new Christians of Rome to take up. It's all grounded in the overflowing love of God.

Without being over romantic and ignoring the challenging aspects of the event of 360 years ago what Paul says resonates deeply with all we know about what happened in this place.

And for us: what we will take away today?

We live in an age of anxiety and the continued fear of epidemics and climate change that we have already mentioned illustrate that anxiety. Our temptation is to flee from our deep anxieties about today and the future and not face up to them. But this not the way of practical love of neighbour that was acted out here at Eyam and which God through the words of St Paul would have us embrace in our time.

The story of the love demonstrated in sacrifice at Eyam three and a half centuries ago calls us to rediscover our neighbourliness. The story of Eyam is part of the story of God – that we are created to be neighbours to each other. In the words of St Paul – 'hold fast to what is good' he says - no matter how difficult and demanding that might be; 'love one another with mutual affection', he says – even if our love is seemingly not reciprocated.

In the middle years of the twenty-first century, I believe we must discover a more radical form of neighbourliness of which the story of Eyam points the way forward. This is a neighbourliness that is illustrated by the three key decisions that the community took even though they must have been contested by some and debated vigorously. This is neighbourliness that does not take the easy decision but discerns what is good and has the courage to act on it. This is neighbourliness build on sacrificial love. Sacrifice, love, the good – they overcome all that prevents us from flourishing.

A radical neighbourliness means that we only discover our true selves through our interaction with others; that our disconnection from each other is overcome by recognising that deep down we are created for connection; that the image of God within us is one of relationship, not only with God but with each other; that we are free to take decisions ourselves and not be coerced by others whether that is the social structure we live in, the financial markets that can dominate our lives or the anxieties that press in on us and seek to shape our lives oppressively.

This is the story of Eyam – non flight in the face of anxiety, but sacrifice, love and a holding fast to what is good.

The story of Thomas Stanley, Catherine and William Mompesson, George Vickers and Abraham Morton. It's the story of each and every villager, those who lost their lives and those who survived. It's a story that inspires us to think in a new way about being neighbours to each other – what that means in practice. May we know the love that poured out into the community and beyond at Eyam, and may we seek to follow the example of what it is to be a good neighbour in this our challenging world.