The peace of the Lord be with you in this Lenten season as we focus on the passion of our Lord, and the sacrifice of his life for the life of the whole world.

I’m John Henderson, bishop of the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand.

Romans 8 asks the question: ‘Who will separate us from the love of God?’ Just lately you might have been asking the same thing. I pray that the answer, which I will come back to shortly, has comforted and encouraged you.

These are unusual times. Recently we have been learning new phrases such as ‘social-distancing’ and ‘self-isolation’. We are hearing of panic buying in supermarkets around the world, and it’s true, there are no toilet rolls on the shelves of my local supermarket.

Governments are ramping up their responses to the COVID-19 virus, trying to slow down the rate at which it spreads. I recommend you go directly to these institutions, rather than relying on information from social media or other, less reliable, sources.

Many of you are health care workers, or caring for those in high risk categories, or are in a high risk category yourself. You understand that the attempt is to ‘flatten the curve’, and reduce peak pressure on medical services, so that everyone gets the care they need. So, the rest of us, who might not be at the front-line, should also follow the directives diligently. That helps in caring for those who are most vulnerable, as we are always called do.

This is going to test us – our society, families, businesses, workplaces and institutions. It will also test us as Christians, and as a church. People of faith will be strongly represented among those who step up to help.

At times like these, faith encourages us to be people of care, patience and compassion. It teaches us to support government and community efforts to meet the needs of those who are economically vulnerable or less likely to cope.

We regularly pray, as Jesus taught us to, ‘give us this day our daily bread’. Therefore, we can accept inconvenience and disruption for the greater good. We can give up some of our usual freedoms to serve others whose lives are at greatest risk.

Since we know God cares for us, we are also able to rise above any sense of panic or hysteria. We can thoughtfully and sensibly take actions that help others and support the professionals and volunteers who are handling the emergency. We will set a good example to others who might not carry the same hope that we have in our hearts.

And, as we are constantly encouraged, we should pray:

- For the authorities who have the difficult task of leading us
- For society, that people will follow instructions and stay calm
- For health care workers, who face incredible demands
- For isolated people, and those feeling lonely, separated from family, friends and community
For people at risk of losing their livelihoods, under financial stress, or unable to pay their bills
For ourselves, and our fellow-citizens, that our actions will be guided by genuine care and concern

At the churchwide level, we have cancelled visits to congregations and districts for the time being, as well as larger gatherings and ministry conferences. We have curtailed non-essential travel for staff and volunteers, and we are testing systems for staff to work from home. We ask for your patience as we make these adjustments, which we hope will not affect our service to you more than is necessary.

God willing, and for as long as it is helpful, we are also planning to provide regular updates on our church’s response.

I end with the answer Romans 8 gives us to the question I asked as I began: 

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

May the same Christ be with you all, now and forever.