



**Address  
by President of Iceland  
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson  
on Easter Day  
12 April 2020**

Dear people of Iceland:

I greet you on the evening of Easter Day, and convey to you the sincere good wishes of my wife and myself. All of us are now passing through challenging times and having to deal with circumstances like nothing we have seen before. The greatest sorrow is felt by those who have lost loved ones to this virulent disease, and I express to them my wholehearted sympathy. Let us also send our warm thoughts to those who have been infected, and the many who have been, and still are, in quarantine or in isolation. And to those who are at higher risk than others of falling gravely ill, I express my support and solidarity.

Finally, my special greetings to residents of nursing homes and old people's homes, and all the senior citizens of our country. You are of the generations that built up Iceland's society of general welfare, the benefits of which we should all be able to enjoy together. Due to safety precautions against the new pestilence, you have had little or no contact with your loved ones in recent weeks. But you accept it with a stoicism that long life has taught. We all have something to learn from your strength of mind.

Virus, quarantine, a ban on public gatherings! Who would have thought, at the start of this year, that we would soon be faced with a problem of this kind? Yet here we are. And we must take what comes. "A day at a time, moment by moment," are the opening words of a popular hymn by the late Bishop of Iceland Sigurbjörn Einarsson: a song of praise to God, who in his loving kindness portions out happiness and trials. And when better to recall that philosophy than at Easter, the oldest and most important festival of the Christian calendar?

"The Easter gospel is the gospel of hope," said Bishop of Iceland Agnes Sigurðardóttir in her sermon on this day last year. Yes, it is good to have hope in our hearts. The religious faith of so many tells us so – and good sense also. In

the quest for medications and cures for this new pestilence we look to science for answers. Our foundation is the knowledge that humankind has accumulated over time, and especially in recent centuries. But at the same time, we are reminded how helpless we are, how small, despite all the progress that has been made. In addition, scientific knowledge is not worth much, and can even be dangerous, without empathy and sympathy, without Christian love, and love of all kinds – just as religion on its own cannot overcome immutable facts and laws of nature.

It must be said that we Icelanders do not have the reputation of being particularly devout, or regular churchgoers. It is sometimes said that we turn to religion only as a last resort. There is a well-known story of the skipper of a fishing boat who found himself in stormy seas with his crew: in their darkest hour, in his prayers for their salvation, he promised a votive gift to Strönd Church on the south coast, which has benefited by many such votive gifts from grateful seafarers over the centuries. After the boat made it safely into port, the crew reminded the skipper of his promise. “What! Can’t a man make a joke?” he retorted without a blush.

But the heritage of faith is still there. It doesn’t go away. It is present, for those who find it a source of solace and strength. And the skipper’s mockery is surely the exception that proves the rule – even for a nation that has taken as its watchword the offhand phrase *Petta reddast*: “It will work out all right in the end.”

Yet we must be wary of generalising about whole nations – we are all individuals, after all. But it is also commonly remarked that we Icelanders are unusually argumentative. And absolutely not submissive to authority. At first glance, one might expect these character traits to be a disadvantage, when the pandemic assailed our shores. But no! The people of this country have overwhelmingly complied with directives and guidance, and I urge my fellow Icelanders to continue to do so. At the same time, we have been able to exchange ideas about the correct response, and a range of different views have certainly been heard. In parliament the opposition parties have been vigilant, but fair. The government of Iceland has shouldered its responsibilities, but put its faith in the leadership and advice of experts.

Experts – yes, that is a point. Icelanders have long tended towards scepticism about experts. And it is certainly true that specialists, like anyone else, can make mistakes. But we are in safe hands with our leadership team in civil protection and combating the virus. They have become our familiar friends: Director of Health Alma Möller, Chief Epidemiologist Þórólfur Guðnason and

Chief of Police Víðir Reynisson. *Hlýðum Víði* (Do as Víðir says) is the catchphrase of the day. They do not put on airs; they freely admit that they do

not have answers to every question, and they speak to us frankly about the situation they and we are dealing with.

My dear fellow-Icelanders:

The virus has had a severe financial impact. Tourism, that vital sector of the economy, has suffered a blow, as has the economy as a whole. Our way of life has gone awry, and so it will be for some time to come. It is admirable to see how the people of our country have adapted to new ways of living – working from home and taking care of their health, despite the lack of swimming pools and gyms. But anxiety, naturally, may affect us. Many have lost their jobs, while others have difficulty with any disruption of their daily routine. Residents of Iceland whose roots are in other countries may not be able to understand all the information we receive about the situation; and they may be fearful for their relatives and friends abroad. Tensions exist in some homes, and the risk has increased that people do not enjoy a safe shelter there but are rather subjected to violence, with tragic consequences, as we have seen. Let us be on our guard. Let us help those who need our help.

It should also be mentioned that for the time being much is different from usual at all educational levels. Once again, it is admirable to see how well people have responded to the difficult situation, for instance by introducing extensive distance learning, and other innovative approaches. And I say to our students: Don't lose heart! We need you, now and in the future, with your educational qualifications, and passion in heart and soul. The future is yours. You will build upon a good foundation, but you will do even better, create an even stronger society. From among you will come the scientists of the new era, teachers and healthcare staff, captains of industry, entrepreneurs, and leaders in every walk of life.

Our solidarity will continue to be tested. Our tenacity will continue to be tested – especially that of those who are in the front line. No doubt greater difficulties lie in store, before we are able to celebrate victory. But we shall be victorious. We have the good fortune to be a society whose infrastructure and economy are stronger than those of many other countries. The people who live here are hard-working, and well-educated, living in a beautiful country; an independent nation with its own resources at sea and on land; not to forget the capital assets of mind and hand.

We have a demanding task on our hands, and we stand together. And although much remains to be done, there are so many people who deserve our thanks. I cannot mention them all here, but I refer especially to the staff of healthcare centres, the Landspítali national hospital and other hospitals, the screening team at DeCode Genetics, and the excellent “reserve team” of qualified health and social service professionals who have responded to the call

for volunteers at this time of need. I also want to mention teachers, school assistants and others in the educational system, commercial and service staff, the police, the Iceland Coast Guard and search and rescue teams, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' service for Icelanders aboard, the brilliant technicians who have designed in record time the most useful programs and apps; and not least the many, many volunteers whose contribution has been noticed, and the others who have quietly been doing their good deeds.

Let us give thanks to them all – and be thankful for life. We have lost people to the virus, and I reiterate my sympathy to those who are now mourning loved ones. “A day at a time,” said Bishop Sigurbjörn so beautifully. In a heartfelt poem, *Viðhorf* (Perspective), Vilborg Dagbjartsdóttir wrote of our life on Earth, and the end which is ultimately inescapable. She wrote:

You say:  
Every day  
the time grows shorter  
that we have left.  
Step by step  
we draw nearer  
to death  
– but I thread the days  
like shining pearls  
onto an unbroken  
silver thread.  
Each evening  
I whisper happily  
out into the darkness:  
Once again my life  
has grown longer by one whole day.

My fellow-Icelanders: now we have reached the evening of the day, of Easter Day. And soon spring will come, out of the south across the wide ocean. Yes, let us whisper happily out into the darkness, and remember that the sun always rises. We have been seen worse times – and we will see better times.

On behalf of Eliza and myself I reiterate our good wishes and greetings to you all. Happy Easter. Good fortune to our nation in these trying times – and good fortune in the future.