



## A heroic quarantine

I imagine living in Wuhan, China, must be immensely stressful, and I wonder if it would ever be possible to put a city of 11 million people into quarantine in Europe. Wouldn't people break the ban on movement and just break away to save themselves?

It reminds me of the extraordinary story of the village of Eyam, in Derbyshire in 1665-6. Bubonic plague had struck, and village upon village was succumbing to the plague.

The local rector, William Mompesson, came up with an idea. He suggested that the village quarantine themselves. He would stay with them, but no one must be allowed to go in or out of the village. He expected that he himself would die, but he preferred to do that, and help alleviate suffering in Eyam, than see nearby communities desolated as Eyam already was. The Earl of Devonshire agreed to send food and supplies if the villagers agreed to be quarantined.

And so, on 24th June, 1666, at a specially convened meeting the villagers agreed to the plan, reluctantly but with commitment.

By August 1666, five or six people were dying a day. But hardly anyone broke the cordon. That month, a certain Elizabeth Hancock buried six of her children and her husband in the space of eight days, dragging their bodies out to a field next to the family farm to bury them. People from the next door village of Stony Middleton stood on the hill and watched her, too

scared to help.

Victims increased; Mompesson's own wife died on 22nd August, though Mompesson himself survived.

Finally, the deaths stopped. In just over a year, 260 of the village's inhabitants, out of perhaps 600 residents had died. But the parishioners knew that their own sacrifices had saved thousands more lives.

I wonder if their actions would be possible today. How would a decision like that ever get made? We live such individual lives, would we be able to follow through on it together? In China, clearly, they can, but they have a different cultural model, and a different type of government enforcing it.

The other intriguing thing about this story, though admittedly I view it from a clergyman's eyes, is that Mompesson wasn't even popular at the start. He'd only arrived in April of that year, sent in as a replacement for a hugely popular rector, Thomas Stanley, who had lost his job due to changes in church structures upon the return of Charles II and the re-establishment of the Church of England in 1662. And from a position of unpopularity, he still managed to carry the day, partly because he was right, and partly because he enlisted the help of the previous rector, Stanley, to back him up.

Both of them are heroes of mine. I hope I'd be as brave if it fell to me, but I don't know that I would.