



18th March 2020

Dear friends, my brothers and sisters in Christ

The Church is Changing

As the Archbishops wrote yesterday 'Being part of the Church of England is going to look very different in the days ahead. Our life is going to be less characterised by attendance at church on Sunday and more characterised by the prayer and service we offer each day'.

Bristol Cathedral tweeted a great summary 'The Church is not closed. The Church is changing' as it committed to keeping its nave open (with chairs at least 2 metres apart) and live streaming some services. Public worship has stopped, but a wave of prayer and service has begun.

Already our clergy and church communities are responding. You are offering pastoral support by phone (as the Mothers' Union has done for years). You are providing prayers and orders of service on line and printed (so all of us can pray at home). You are using Facebook for local coordination, YouTube for broadcasting and Zoom for meeting. What I have seen in a few hours is your ingenuity, skill and humour. Thank you. The Archdeacons will continue to update you with advice from the national advice. Do contact them with your questions about practicalities. And please also continue to find ways of working which fit the lives of your local communities and your people.

We have been given particular priorities by the Archbishops

Firstly, keep praying. If you can do that in church (following the strict protocols about hygiene) please do so. I will (as usual) be praying Morning Prayer each weekday at 0830, and praying for you, your parishes, for our diocese and our world using the Diocesan Prayer cycle. Today my prayers are particularly for those working in the NHS, those running businesses and those who are losing their jobs. Do email me with particular concerns as these emerge.

Secondly, support others praying, especially those who are self-isolating. Do pass on the links to resources, particularly this week for Mothering Sunday, with the request for everyone to place a lighted candle in their window at 7.00 pm as a sign of the light of Christ which will never be extinguished. Let's learn the importance of praying at home, or down the phone, or via email. Let's re-create the life of micro communities, our streets and our near neighbours.

Thirdly, plan practical support for those who are most in need. Local Foodbanks are low on supplies. How can you help replenish these? When schools do shut, what can you plan for those children who will go hungry? If your church offers shelter at night, thank you, and please do continue (following local advice). If you discover other urgent needs which need coordination at Deanery or Diocesan level, do let your Area Dean know.

And fourthly, do look after yourselves. You will have your own concerns for your families and friends, and your own fears about the future. My experience of ministering in difficult times is that each of us needs to attend to those concerns, talk them through with those you trust, and take time and find ways to work these through. The Area Deans, Archdeacons and I will continue to be in touch by phone, but please do ring my office if that would help. I was delighted that Bishop Lee was able to join our staff meeting yesterday via Zoom and he is well enough now to offer phone support.

The Church of God has depths of wisdom. We continue our journey through Lent following Jesus who isolated himself in the desert and emerging stronger from the demands of those 40 days. We know the stories of the earliest Christians living in acute political and economic uncertainty and through these times deepened their faith in the Christ who died, has risen and who will come again. Our own people have endured times of pandemic illness and have emerged from the shaking of social foundations with new life and with hope.

Throughout my ministry I have carried in my cassock pocket a hazelnut (I think I am now on my tenth) to remind me of Julian's vision of the tiny hazelnut in the palm of her hand, and of God's love for the world held which 'lasts and lasts for ever because God loves it'. Julian self-isolated herself during a time of pandemic and from that isolation wrote of the assurance she had been given that "God said not 'Thou shalt not be tempested, thou shalt not be travailed, thou shalt not be dis-eased', but he said, 'Thou shalt not be overcome.'" May we, too, notice tiny details of God's re-creative care for us and the world. May we journey together in these tempestuous and dis-eased times confident in Christ in whom all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.

Yours in Christ

