

November 7th 2020.

When we look back to March earlier this year, I think most of us would not have imagined we would find ourselves in a second wave of the virus and back into lockdown again. We have been here before. I'm sure the Israelites felt very much like this with the building of the tabernacle – Exodus 27-27 reads very like Exodus 36-38. Similar measurements and materials. However, the second time around the people were more generous with their materials and gifts than they were the first time. In many ways repeating the exercise for them meant they were on familiar territory and were, through God's grace, able to give that little bit more, to offer more of themselves to love God and neighbour more.

The journey to complete the task was similar, it's just that they looked at what was needed in a different and more generous and faithful light. They gave more because perhaps God had provided for them in the past and they were responding thankfully. A familiar path was approached in a more generous way

Steph and I have been walking, with the dogs, a fair bit in the New Forest recently. We have done some of these walks many times before – the path is second nature to us. Much like the Israelites in rebuilding the tabernacle. However, what has also happened is that the leaves on the trees have fallen so heavily on the ground that the footpath can no longer be found. It's a carpet of leaves and we have to find a new way through the trees. We know the general direction we are headed and yet the path has altered. It's impossible to do the route in the same way as before. We had to trust our instincts in the parts of the forest that were very dense and dark.

I wonder then how you are reflecting on this second lockdown. We've been here before. Maybe you can look back as the psalmist does and see how the Lord has been with you since the pandemic started and praise and thank him that he will be with you in the future – in fact he will always walk with you no matter what you encounter. Will you tread the same path or walk a different route? We have been called by the national church to join in a month of prayer during this second lockdown, if you haven't already done so, perhaps you can tread a new path and join us in morning prayer in the next few weeks. Perhaps you can pick up the phone and talk to people you haven't talked to for a long time. We are allowed to walk with someone from a different household outside. Is this an opportunity to reach out to a neighbour, someone at church who you don't know well, someone who could do with a chat, take a new road and walk with them. Perhaps this time you could alter the course from last time and write postcards to people sharing the joys of advent, thanking them for who they are and what they bring. Perhaps you could write to our local businesses and shops and thank them for making themselves available. Perhaps you could write to our schools and thank them for the sacrifice they make and the work they do. Perhaps you could simply be generous, buy someone a gift for no particular reason other than to thank them for who they are.

Maybe you could spend some time in quiet reflection. Think perhaps about the journey many have taken in the past few months, perhaps even you. An alarming future of ever-increasing isolation, where many lives have shrunk within the bounds of four walls. Where our inner nature and identity is self-determined and defined. Where we become locked down, anxious, fearful and our world gets smaller. Where people turn away from life outside themselves into secluded bubbles of personal autonomy. There

we find an opportunity to rediscover a way of life that is far more satisfying and fulfilling. The opportunity to reach out in whatever way we can to others. After all, the command to make a priority and focus of loving God and neighbours was never intended as a demand to be begrudgingly obeyed, but a description of the way in which we can flourish as human beings. This requires more than a short term burst of public spiritedness. We can't do this ourselves.

We can't easily turn our concave inward looking nature outwards just like that. We can though become convex and turn outwards by something more compelling than the anxieties and fears that constrain us. It can be conveyed and sustained by a knowledge that this world emerged out of and was forged by something great and powerful, out of love. This allows us to avoid turning in on ourselves and enables us to look outwards to God and through God to the love of our neighbours. To find a lasting sense of connection, our true selves by letting go of our old selves as Jesus taught. This is the choice, to find a new path not focused on ourselves but on God and those we share life with, those who live next door, the person in the supermarket queue whoever they are and to find joy and fulfilment in the process. So which path are you going to tread and who are you going to reach out to....?

14th October 2020

At our recent APCM we reviewed the church year and the impact of Covid on church life. When the year started back in January, I'm sure none of us were able to imagine how the year would play out, even as news of the pandemic began to kick in. It feels we have been on the backfoot for so much of the year, reacting to guidance from both government and church and more latterly to new acts of law.

As autumn unfolds, it clear that restrictions are tightening up again, though mercifully they are less prevalent in the area in which we live. As a nation we are heading into uncharted waters, with a struggling economy, job uncertainty and the fear of how much the second wave will affect us in the coming months. When this all started back in March, I'm sure many of us had hoped the worst would be behind us and that Christmas would be something approaching normal. We are now well aware that church life as we have known it will be unlikely to return to 'normal' for some time.

Facing more of the same when we had hoped otherwise is not easy to live with. Now more than ever it is essential that we establish habits that enable us to drink deeply from the wells of our faith. The God who made us and made the world, and who has come to us in Jesus Christ gives us *faith* to trust in his care for us, *hope* for the future however dark the days may be, and the inspiration to *love* our neighbours at a time when COVID-19 might make us view our neighbours as threats to health and wellbeing.

When we were mandated to close our churches back in March, we went through a very steep learning curve of developing online capability and content that would support our churches in what we naïvely understood to be the short term. Many months later, what is equally challenging is discerning how to begin to open up our churches in a safe and appropriate manner. For St John's having a large congregation in a small church poses many questions when considering how to safely open up again.

Whilst online services have given us many previously unthought of opportunities, I do believe in the public and corporate gathering of the saints. Over the last few months, I have missed gathering with the church to worship Jesus together and for the real fellowship we share in our churches. And I know that I am not alone. The reality is, I am concerned about sustaining this model of ministry throughout the winter and well into next year.

And yet we need to be safe and practical. We are likely to have to grapple with our current format well into next year. And whilst online church presents many positives, it also tends to lend itself to a consumer led approach which becomes a little pic and mix as we have the option to attend virtual church at whatever time and from whichever church we wish. I would like to encourage you that we are the people of God in this place and that attending church is a privilege but also a habit. Our online worship on Sunday morning at 10:00 as the body of Christ in Nursling and Rownhams is the time when we meet together, to worship God, to pray and build one another up in unity and in the bond of peace. I encourage you if you are able to make a habit of joining us for the live act of worship, rather than picking things up later when the service is downloaded. Church is meant to be a shared and corporate experience and the best way we can achieve this is together on line until we manage to return to church physically.

In the meantime continue to Pray in the Holy Spirit who prompts us to pray - our first calling as Christians is to do just that - for ourselves, our families, our neighbours and communities. Building the faith to cope will mean we need to be rooted in disciplined habits of prayer, as far as we are able, turning to God each day for our daily needs in a way that expresses our dependence and trust in him.

God through his love for us gave us this world and the joy we have as Christians is to learn to experience God's creation through the lens of the love of Christ. We can be brought back to that love in many ways – through sharing our worship together, daily Bible reading, finding time for silence, accessing online content, enjoying God's creation as we go out walking, listening to music, reading or being active in our local community. As we intentionally make time for these things, a sense of the deep reality of God's love for us and for his world, will encourage us and enable us to be drawn back to Christ, and begin to see ourselves and others the way Christ sees us. It will also remind us that we are grounded in the knowledges that we have the hope of eternal life

Let us also continue to reach out to the lonely, anxious and those who doubt. To redouble our efforts, despite ourselves, to be salt and light to others, to bear one another up and to give ourselves to our neighbour as Christ sacrificed himself for us. We can only do any of this if we find our hope and strength and faith rooted in Christ through his Holy Spirit. My prayers are every day as we go through this time of challenge and doubt, that we will continue to rise to the challenge of the days ahead as the people of God in Nursling and Rownhams.

August 22nd 2020.

In my recent letter, I asked a number of questions regarding going back to church. In the main the results were mixed. Folk from St Boniface were prepared to return to

church – though by no means everyone. Whereas many from St John's were happier to wait until restrictions had lifted.

Whilst new guidance emerges every week the most significant seems to be the wearing of facemasks inside churches, which is now compulsory. In addition, congregational singing has been withdrawn for both indoor and open-air services. It's a bit like being at a football match and not chanting. Our sung worship creates the atmosphere in which we meet with God. It doesn't mean that we can't worship without singing. But our main service would be a very different experience without singing. Until we can sing - something that online worship does permit - then the heart of what we do will be missing.

As a consequence, we are going to have to be careful how we migrate back to church. In August we began to worship at St Boniface twice a month in the morning. This will be expanded to include St John's also twice a month in the evenings at the start of September. This means there will be an act of worship somewhere in our parish every week for those who would like to attend, though there will be social distancing, no singing and face masks must be worn.

In the last six months we have developed an online service that helps us to meet together and stay connected to God as a church. The numbers attending, we estimate, have been between 100 and 150 – more than we would normally have attending on Sundays. This has been supported by a whole team of gifted and talented people. God has blessed us in being able to do this and we are likely to continue for at least another few months. In fact, it's likely that even when we return to church our online offering will continue.

We have also tried hard to develop other online content. We have initiated on line Alpha which has been extremely encouraging. So much so that we hope to repeat online alpha again in October. If that is something you would like to support or get involved with, then please let me know. We have also developed some wonderful youth work activities which Andy has overseen. Our online bible study will recommence in September. If you have not joined us before then please do, it's suitable for those with families as you can jump in and out as family needs dictate. And of course, every day of the week we have been engaging in morning prayer – a time to reflect on scripture and pray in fellowship together, if you haven't managed to join us, then please do because your prayers can change the world.

We are also going to run a family concert on Zoom on Saturday the 26th September – I hope you are practicing hard, whatever it is you can do. Our family quiz will begin again in September and will be available on the first Saturday of every month.

If you have any ideas about how we can support other people, improve what we do on-line, or how we can further adapt what we are doing then please get in touch. The church office phone and email are being monitored during normal working hours, please do call or email if you need support.

It's time for us to be the church without walls: a place that connects communities together, keeps hope alive, and demonstrates that peace that only Jesus Christ can bring. Now is the time to be a great neighbour, to stay in touch with others, to pray for

one another and to listen to each other's stories. Now is the time to share our faith and keep our heads.

This time away from the church building has reminded us of the vast difference between our relationship with God as Christians against those of ancient Israel who worshipped in the great Temple in Jerusalem. For them it was all about a day spent in the courts of the Lord. This Covid crisis has shown us that we have God with us in the form of His Holy Spirit wherever we are. We have this gift of grace because Jesus died so that we might know God's presence in every moment of our lives. As we slowly begin to return to the church building may all that we do seek to bring glory to Him.

July 8th 2020

In the last few days we have been given advice by the Church of England on how we may go about reopening our church buildings for services. The guidance is clear that we can open only if we deem it safe to do so. In addition, all clergy are encouraged to consider continuing to stream worship or other events, both to avoid large gatherings and to continue to reach those individuals who are self-isolating or particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 as well as to those who have joined worship for the first time online during the lockdown period.

The steering committee and then the PCC will be considering how we return to our churches and when. The recommendation may be different for each of our churches. For St Boniface where many of our congregants are over 70, the Church of England is clear, individuals who fall within this group are advised to stay at home as much as possible and, if they do go out, to take particular care to minimise contact with others outside of their household. We may need to reflect this in our decision making. For St Johns, the size of the congregation means that we will not all be able to worship together, as social distancing recommendations mean we will probably be unable to seat more than 30 people in church at once safely. Our normal congregation size is almost three times that number.

We also need to reflect on the additional measures that we shall need to put in place to comply with the new requirements – singing is not allowed at the moment, hand sanitation is mandatory, social distancing will be 2M and over, and then there are additional cleaning requirements. The list goes on.... We also have limited resource as some of our leadership team are in the vulnerable category.

So how we move forward with the restrictions that have been put in place is a matter for careful consideration. As we reflect, services will continue online as they are now as well as opening our buildings for prayer on Wednesday mornings. It is also possible that we take the opportunity to have an act of worship outside, perhaps at our next All Age worship service in August, but that is to be confirmed and is subject to us being able to sort out the logistics. We may also consider running a midweek service for those who have little access to our on-line content.

In the meantime, your support in answering the following questions would be useful:

1. Under what conditions would YOU feel you can return to worshipping in church?
2. Would you feel safe to go back to worshipping in church with social distancing provisions in place? Y/N

3. Would you choose to return to church knowing that singing is not recommended until further notice? Y/N
4. Would you be happy to undertake ticketing arrangements or a rota system for services on Sunday, in order to allocate fairly the limited numbers permitted in church at any one time? Y/N
5. Do you plan to wait until all restrictions are completely lifted / a vaccine has been developed before returning to worshipping in church? Y/N
6. Would a said act of worship on Wednesdays be something you would attend? Y/N

Please add any other additional relevant comments.

Please email the office with your responses at Office.twinspires@gmail.com as soon as possible.

We want to make sure we get things right, where people are as safe as they can be, before we go back to church. Your prayer and support at this time is valued and appreciated.

In times of challenge God said to Joshua, 'I command you, be bold, be strong do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.' Joshua 1: 9.

If you would like to talk to any of us about this, then please contact the office or call me on my mobile.

June 28th 2020.

There is a Hymn I used to sing as a choirboy. Through all the changing scenes of life, in trouble and in joy. I haven't heard that that hymn for many years and yet it seems to resonate with where we are as individuals, as church and as a community at this time. We are about to mark a rather strange anniversary. Its 100 days since lockdown began. I wonder if you thought it would last this long, or indeed, that it would not be over yet – there is more to unfold.

When I worked in the secular world of business it would be typical to ask a potential employee at interview, what would you like to achieve in your first 100 days. Some people wanted to change the world, start again, rewrite the book. Others would hope to ease into the role, learn the ropes as it were, take time to settle. Whilst others wanted to have a single impactful moment, do one thing really well, that would define them and cement their future in the business.

I wonder how the scene has changed in your life over the last 100 days? For me it feels like we have re-written the book in some ways, though that was rather unintentional. In any given week we are likely to be live streaming many things – Sunday services, daily morning prayer, Alpha, virtual home groups, MORE and NET, vestry vigil etc. 100 days ago none of this was even remotely a possibility. And now for many of us the weekly scene is so very different. Some have not been part of this virtual journey, lockdown has been isolating, defining and debilitating.

It's important at these times to take stock and reflect. As a church we have perhaps rather awkwardly adapted to online opportunities. And now as things are beginning to open up again it's a real chance to explore together what has happened over the last few months. The good and the bad. Maybe think about what life was like before lockdown, what did we do well, what has changed, how have we changed, what have we learned, what is God saying to us and how do we discern through prayer where God is leading us as things unfold. These are very much questions you could ask yourself as you look back.

During lockdown we journeyed virtually through Easter. Easter tells us that over three days the world changed. Over those three days nothing anywhere could be the same again. Creation, humanity, our relationship with God all changed, because of that first apocalyptic Easter Sunday. One of the profound learnings of the Christian journey is to live as Easter people. Easter reminds us, that in order for something to live, something else may have to die. New life often comes when we re-evaluate our priorities and decide that if we want to change something, we are going to have to give something else up, in other words something else has to be sacrificed.

It would be, I suggest, foolish to simply return to normal as we tentatively and gradually migrate back into church. We have come so far and learned so much in such a short time. And yet we can only move forward by first looking behind us to see where we have come from. To work out what God has done and where he might be leading.

I urge you to take time to reflect on a big question. 'what happens next'. What happens next in our churches. What do we retain from lockdown as church and individuals, how do we emerge well and what might have to die, to enable us to start new life. The hymn I mentioned tells us – Your wants shall be his care. I wonder what that is for all of us as we seek to live well between the now and not yet in our community. Between this new virtual world, the world we left behind 100 days ago and the world of the future that lies before us.

Isiah 43:19 tells us: See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.

God through his spirit is always on the move, always doing a new thing. He is doing a new thing in our churches, with all of us. Together we have the opportunity to join in what he is doing, as we seek to hear his voice. We are sailing into uncharted waters, be bold and be strong for the Lord our God is with us.

May 25th 2020

At the start it was clear. We knew that there was a terrible disease to fight and we all needed to play our part by beginning lockdown overnight. Coming back from those deepest days of lockdown is not going to be easy. The close down was clear. How to reopen again will be less straightforward. It seems that new patterns are now falling into place. There is the obvious desire to get back to a more normal way of life. But it's tricky to work out the best way back.

For us as a church, we have developed the technology to do church the best we can during lockdown. There is likely to be continued live streaming for some considerable time. The problem is that whilst we have adapted to this intermediate existence, we will

need to gather strength to start again as restrictions are eased. We are busy getting on with what we are doing now and yet the real challenge still lies ahead as we finally fashion our new future.

When lockdown started, we hoped we might be able to meet in some way for Easter. That was over 10 weeks ago. Now we look forward to the next big festival of our year, that of Pentecost, in the same lockdown mode. To some degree we have adapted, and in some way, learned to live with the challenges and obstacles the disease brings. We have started new things and reached new people. There has been an increase in social get togethers, like quizzes in our church community, even if they are over the internet. It has been so encouraging to share thoughts and prayers during our daily morning prayer sessions. Many of our elderly and vulnerable have been supported with lots of good will, phone calls and practical support such as picking up medicines etc. Many people are being nicer to one another and saying hello more.

And yet, change once again is in our midst. At our primary schools last week preparations were being made to welcome children back to school. The mood had definitely changed amongst the staff. The task of getting things ready for classes of fifteen children in different year groups is huge. It presents a massive logistical challenge and will undoubtedly emotionally affect both teachers, parents and children as this will not be 'normal' school. The underlying issue is that there are more uncertainties than many of us can imagine. Both our head teachers are being asked to organise and implement an awful lot. Our thoughts and prayers must be with them and their staff. In the end we can all simply do our best.

We are learning afresh to live each day as it comes. Jesus said some wise words about each day having enough trouble of its own so we shouldn't worry about what tomorrow might bring. Now is a time in which these words have never felt so real. We must trust in God and leave the future in His hands. In God we trust.

We have all changed in the way that we act and interact. There will be less chance of the dreaded spread across communities because we've all been trained to behave differently. I'm not certain that any of us can emerge from lockdown the same people. Some have experienced profound isolation, which still continues, some have lost and buried loved ones in the most disorientating and cruellest of ways, no farewell or family hugs. Others have spent 10 weeks in the grips of intense fear and anxiety. We will need to hold on to each other and simply listen to each others' stories as they unfold, for many months and years to come.

There is much comment and thought on the internet about not just simply shifting back into old habits and ways of behaving. This is a chance for a whole new way of doing life. A big part of that should be seeing that we are not ultimately in control of our lives. We never have been. There are always seismic shifts that knock us off balance. Many of us have been following the journey of the people of Israel over this whole period of lockdown in morning prayer, as God's people wrestled with challenging and inhospitable circumstances with forty years of wilderness and wandering many centuries ago. Much hope has been found as we have reflected on what God did for his people in the midst of adversity. Perhaps we should reflect more on the God who has engaged in the biggest search and rescue mission in history, the saving of humanity through his son Jesus Christ. Despite God's people getting it wrong time and again, even when they turned their back on Him, this God, our God, never turned his back on

his people. He never stops caring and he never stops giving and he never stops loving, even when we journey through the valley of the shadow. And yet today, we still forget to build the kind of world that God wants. A world based on kingdom values. This God wants us to be different, to love one another, to put others first, to bear one another up. We have the opportunity to learn as church and as individuals not to fall into the trap of returning to normal, of forgetting what God wants the world to be like. We have the opportunity to press the reset button and start to live again in a way that would honour God and each other.

April 23 2020

So here we are in the middle of this very strange time, the number infected seem to be declining, the end of lockdown maybe in sight. We long for things to get back to normal. We wonder if life will ever be the same? So how will we look back on this time? What will we tell our children of how we responded?

I have seen wonderful local initiatives where people are supporting each other. People buying each other shopping, dropping bits and pieces round for neighbours, looking out for each other. People praying for each other, for those in need, for those who are struggling. New on line forms of worship have ben explored. Schools remain open to support children. Teachers putting themselves in harms way to keep things going. Parents trying to keep families on track, to educate their children, to hold it all together. NHS staff in some cases literally scarifying themselves for others, the core of the Easter story in real life everyday on our screens. On the whole the community has seemed to respond well, even when we know that so many of our loved ones are putting themselves in the front line to care and support others. The increased sense of community has been a real blessing.

At an individual level it's interesting to recognise how this is affecting us as people. It's tiring in a way that you don't expect. Perhaps, because of the sense of threat you feel to be under constantly. When outside you have to watch each person coming towards you to make sure they are keeping their distance. If you touch anything when you are out you wonder if it might possibly have the virus on its surface. Arriving home there's the need to wash hands immediately. Some have vivid dreams as if our brains are struggling to process what's going on, others struggle to sleep at all. The day then seems hard work after disturbed nights sleep.

I wonder if like me you have found these last weeks draining. There is always more that you feel you can do. There are so many more people to call, or contact than you will ever have time to reach. Each day is made up of decisions about how to your spend time. It seems that we have to make it all up as we go. There is no precise pattern or model to follow to navigate through this particular season. We have done our best and there has been lots of encouraging feedback. There have been mistakes and moments of deep spiritual connection. We pray, we read the bible, we reflect and we try to hope in faith.

I have seen many respond in a loving and joyful way, personifying what Christ urges us all to do everyday. We strive to listen to his voice and do as he did by following the three commands that he gave us. To love God, love one another and love those around us. If we manage to do this, to be people of faith, love and hope, in this

disorienting time, then as a consequence we will see we have responded by becoming more like the one who came to save us.

April 8th 2020

The whole situation we are going through is starting to find a rhythm where routine is clicking in. There are so many changes that have all happened so fast. We are running a new streamed service on Sundays, a new experience for all of us. We are gathering in the mornings to pray and worship using Zoom. We have started a virtual home group.

My own routine is centred around staying in touch with others. Lots of calls on the phone, emails preparing for Sundays and a huge amount of time simply in prayer. I talk to colleagues and seek advice and at last I have started to engage with Facebook.

I am conscious that we are all in very different places. There are those of us who are isolating alone, there are families who have had new and huge demands placed upon them. There are those who on the face of it are managing well and there are those who are really struggling. And there is no knowing when this will all end.

Most of us are keeping up with the news and the tragic numbers we see every day. I must admit to watching the news feeds less than normal. There are endless emails from the central Church of England and the local Diocese to keep up with. They all need to be read and inwardly digested.

There are those who can't join in for practical connectivity issues. Often they are the ones who are most vulnerable and in need of company. We are still working hard to get a good process for ensuring that everyone is contacted regularly by phone. If you can help please let Claire know.

There are so many ways in which this crisis is working out. At times there is hope at the end of the tunnel as other nations begin to emerge from the grip of the virus. But then the news that our Prime Minister has succumbed to the disease grips us all and the proximity seems palpable and unsettling.

Perhaps we just have to get used to this uncertainty. Perhaps we need to learn from St Paul who endured so many different trials and tribulations for in Jesus he found the way to a peace that passes all understanding. In Philippians 4.11 Paul says that he has learned to be content whatever the circumstances. We can do this by fully trusting in God and yet there is a lot of adjusting to do.

During Holy week we remember the great sacrifice of Christ on the cross and the hope that we find in the resurrection, where in three days the world was changed. Where death was conquered and fear overcome. And yet in these times rather like Peter, we often struggle to embrace Christ and stand firm in faith and trust in his Lordship on our lives.

The most important thing we can do is to love God, by praying to the Lord, talking to him about our hopes and fears and holding onto his promises. God hears our prayers and answers our prayers. Pray without ceasing. Keep going, it's what we are called to do, it's what the church has done down the ages. We need to hold in our prayers the

ones who are actually keeping us safe by putting themselves in danger. These people need our on-going appreciation and constant prayer.

It's also time to reaffirm that we must love our neighbour as ourselves. Putting others needs first, calling people, listening to and praying for others. It's time to rediscover our reliance on a God who saves. For there are some things too big for us to handle. And we need to realise in whose care we must leave our worst fears. John 14:27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

Rev Graeme Dixon