

Vicar's Blog – 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 pie 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.

Rev. Graeme Dixon