

Dear friends

This Monday everything goes back to normal... well, maybe not. There will still be masks and distance and lots of hand washing, but we are being given the freedom to choose – Lord, may we choose wisely. Whilst vaccines are driving the numbers of serious illness and deaths down, we are not out of the woods yet, facing rising rates of infection and, sadly, deaths too, although thankfully not on the level that we have seen over this last year. The truth is that despite the dangers, we will have to learn to live with Covid as a constant companion. For some this time of change has not come soon enough, for others it is too soon. So, as we negotiate the twists and turns of returning to our (new) normal, it is important that we also negotiate with each other a sensible way forward that doesn't leave people behind but also doesn't leave others frustrated.

In a different world, having been released from the government's legislation we should be taking time to build a consensus, a social contract if you like, on a way of behaving with one another that keeps the economy, schools and life generally open but does its utmost to keep the most vulnerable safe - something we can all sign up to, even if it means giving a bit of leeway on our own hopes and desires. But we are not in that world, so it is being left to individuals and organisations to work it out for themselves. That will need a great measure of GRACE, which makes me thankful that the organisation I belong to and have to manage is Christian both in name and in practice. What would we do without the guiding love of God, and the constant reminder, in the Lord's prayer for instance, that it is God's Kingdom - where love for neighbour is equal to love of self and second only to love of God - and God's will for us that we are striving towards?

That being said, it is tricky even in church. The PCC spent a good hour and a half on Tuesday discussing what we should be doing to get back into our (new) normal as far as our worship is concerned. It was a constructive discussion – difficult on zoom, but good, nonetheless.

'So, what did you decide?' I hear you ask. Well, we didn't dot the i's or cross the t's - we will be meeting again as a working group to do to that as much as we care able - but we did make progress. Part of the problem is that we are still waiting for official guidance from the C of E, although I will get back to that later. The first thing we decided is that we would not do anything substantial until September, so until then we shall still be meeting in church at 8.45am for a quiet communion (not sure about singing yet) and have our 10am on zoom.

The aim is to go back to the 8am and 10am pattern in church on 5th September, the latter with a zoom link open for those who are not able to join us physically. We looked at moving the times, but after some discussion the meeting felt that what we had before was the most helpful in retaining a sense of unity - which, by the way, was the general feel of the responses to my questions the other week - thank you to all who got back to me, it was all very helpful and constructive.

However, we were thinking that a bit of change would be good. Whilst the 8.45am communion during these restricted times has seen good numbers – 30 to 40 coming now – we anticipate that those who would normally attend 10am are likely to go back to that. But it would be good to see the early communion numbers increase. One thought was for the 8am service to have a mix of liturgy over a month, which in my mind would mean not solely BCP(1662) but include services from common worship or maybe Iona or similar, in recognition that some people prefer a quiet, more reflective atmosphere but maybe aren't so easy with the old service. It was pointed out that 8am is quite early for many of us, so one option would be to create shorter liturgies that would last up to half an hour, and eventually set the service time at 8.30am – we need about an hour for the musicians etc to get ready for 10am. Another option is to move that service to Sunday evenings or even midweek. I will be canvassing opinion from the folk who are likely to want to come as time moves on, but do let me know what you think in the meantime.

We will be keeping the same pattern of services at 10am, although changes in Messy Church may mean a bit of a change to the second Sunday (more about that at a later date). 10am will still be the busier service - we

would often get around 80 or 90 adults plus children pre covid and our numbers even on zoom have been up around the 70 mark for most of the year – but we all realised that it would be unlikely that people will want to return to a crowded service, at least until we all felt that it was safe to do so. One popular suggestion was to use the first few weeks in September to ease people back in, and build up confidence, by limiting numbers. So, we will use some kind of booking or invitation system to allow those who have not physically been into a church for a service for nearly 18 months opportunity to do so in a safer way. Depending on how the rates of infection are going, we may need to keep some form of booking system going for a while.

As far as other issues like wearing of masks, safe distancing, communion, and singing are concerned, once we have guidance from the national church the working group will put together recommendations. However, I received a letter from our Diocesan Secretary, Jonathan Wood, after we had met which again did not dot i's etc but did reiterate three principles - Can does not mean must; Love our neighbour; It is not a race, there is no competition, so go slowly and cautiously – and contained helpful advice based on what is already known. Here are a few extracts.

*The government have made clear that from the 19 July, choirs can return to both practice and performance. In doing so it has not put restrictions on number or the need for social distancing. We also assume this allowance of singing extends to all forms of worship for worship groups and congregations.*

*The need to social distancing has also been removed, and so pews and seats that were previously out of service can be brought back into action as needed.*

*We believe that face coverings will no longer be legally required in places of worship. However, the guidance on whether they are encouraged is less clear. We would suggest you consider:*

- *Making clear that wearing of a face covering is welcomed and will not be frowned upon*
- *Whether wearing a face covering when moving around the church but not sitting down is a sensible approach*
- *Whether face coverings being worn during singing would give those attendance greater confidence in attending*
- *Looking at different areas in the church for those who want to social distance and wear face coverings to those who do not*

*Above all, we would urge you to consider how you can ensure that all those who want to come to church (whether they want to social distance or not) feel able to attend and actively participate in the service.*

*At present we are not clear on what the changes mean for Holy Communion. This might take longer than other areas and we would suggest you carry on with your current practice until further guidance is provided.*

I hope this letter has been helpful. We will tell you more when we know more.

We started our PCC with a short piece from Ephesians 1 (15-19) which is Paul's prayer for his friends. I have slightly modified it for us to use here.

*May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, give us a spirit of wisdom and revelation as we come to know him, so that, with the eyes of our heart enlightened, we may know what is the hope to which he has called us, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. Amen.*

Blessings of peace to you and your loved ones

Peter