

Dear friends

How have you found living in freedom this week? My guess is that there will be as many different answers to that question about life in step 4 of the government roadmap as there are readers of this letter. For some it will be a huge relief, for others a deep worry, and for many it will be somewhere in between - it will very much depend on your point of view.

My own observations of people as we have been into town, around the supermarket, on the moor and being at a family funeral midweek in Wakefield, is that not much has changed. Most people seem quite cautious in their approach to others, keeping distanced, wearing masks where appropriate, but experimenting a bit with not wearing a mask when it feels safe to do so. You may have observed or done similar things.

Of course, freedom is a tricky concept. The question “can we ever have total freedom?” is a bit of chestnut in school moral debates, where we quickly find out that one person’s freedom can easily lead to another person’s oppression. Also, if everyone was totally free to do as they liked, we would be in a state of anarchy which surely is a bad thing. But even as I say that I can hear my eldest son telling me that *anarchy* does not actually mean the chaos I imply, but rather lawlessness which is different. I looked the word up. My online dictionary tells me that anarchy means “*the organization of society on the basis of voluntary cooperation, without political institutions or hierarchical government*”. I don’t know about you, but to my ears that sounds quite appealing and possibly describes what we might hope for as the government regulations cease to be in operation – *voluntary cooperation*. However, I suppose that only works if we think of, and act for, the good of the other, perhaps loving our neighbour as we would love ourselves... what does that remind me of?... Oh, yes.

Now, before you write to the Bishop to complain that the Vicar is claiming Jesus to be an anarchist or that you are worried that I am about to run off to join a revolutionary cabal, don’t worry, I am realistic enough to recognise that no system is perfect, except God’s Kingdom which is not anarchic but monarchic. So, I for one will simply try my best to put that *voluntary cooperation* into action without overthrowing the state but by gently trying to emulate the servant King.

Related to all this freedom - or not – and service, I received a weighty document this week from the central church office which contains guidance for churches to navigate this part of the roadmap as most services start back in church. I have read through it and there is some helpful advice in there which I need to digest before discussing it properly with PCC. However, I thought I would include some of the introduction to the advice document which sets the scene for us and links in with what I have said above.

Within the Church we believe that everyone is known and loved individually by God and that, as many members within one body we are called to be responsible to and for one another, respecting the more vulnerable whose suffering is our suffering (1 Cor 12:12-27). The move to step 4 means we are being asked to take even more personal responsibility around coronavirus than when we were compelled to adhere to Government restrictions. These restrictions have necessarily been blunt instruments and for some people and in some places seem unnecessary or overly restrictive. For others, each easing of restrictions seemed to bring additional risk to themselves or those they love who have remained vulnerable to the virus. As a body we now need to move forward without these legal restrictions and as churches decide how best to manage the risk to ourselves and others. Church leaders are best placed to know their own communities and environments, the situations where there will be many people together who do not normally meet, and the places where they will come together; to listen to the voices of [the]vulnerable in their communities and where their fears and concerns lie.

As the covid restrictions lift, there remain the legal responsibilities of the Incumbent, the PCC and of course the duty of the church wardens to maintain order and decency in the church and churchyard, and, possibly quite

relevant, to allocate seating; but it is strongly urged that the approach to differences of opinion is above all pastoral and that the help and support of senior pastors is sought if and when that is helpful.

In every situation there is likely to be a range of feeling about risk, both to ourselves and to others, that will need to be accommodated by our churches in a way appropriate to each of them. Online and hybrid worship services have opened up opportunities in this regard and local practice at services may differ to accommodate different groups of people. This document is intended to be a first step in thinking about future practice in relation to coronavirus and public health, briefly covering a spectrum of church activities and signposting where further information can be found.

As I said, freedom is a tricky concept and sometimes even trickier to put into practice. Having read the guidelines contained in the document I can see places where we will need to be very aware of one another, seeking to understand each other's journeys and stories, as well as fears and frustrations. This will need a good bit of patient listening and, above all, praying that God will guide us in our coming back together so that we don't fall apart in response, and to re-unite us as a family in a way that allows even the "birds of the air", that Jesus mentions in his mustard seed parable, to find a place to rest. We will need to be there for each other, be gentle with one another and encourage one another, all the while remembering that it is Jesus who comes to bring us true peace, and Jesus who then sends to take that peace to the world. If we who have Christ are a bit wobbly about all this then how much more will some people who do not have faith be finding it hard and perplexing.

Related to that, here is an advance notice. I have registered my interest in doing some training for a new enquirer's course written by Rev'd Sam Wells from St. Martin's in the field which I think would fit in well with who we are as a church and with the needs of those around us. I will say more about this at another time, and may even use a sermon slot to play the video of Sam talking through his reflections on this. But to whet your appetite this is part of the blurb:

"It's based on two theological principles: that the Holy Spirit has been at work in participants' lives since they began; That God being with us is the purpose of incarnation, and thus of creation, salvation and heaven – and this, that Jesus came out of the overflowing of God's abundance, and not as a result of the scarcity of our sin. This means the course is designed to have a seamless connection of form and content, and be a profound experience of church for those who have never been or who have not been for a long time."

That sounds interesting, especially if we were to run such a course for people who have not been able to *be with* others for so long. I understand that it involves the sharing of stories and listening to one another which is something that we all appreciate and learn from. It also is a good reminder that as we have been apart, and as we come back together, God is always *being with* us and calls us to *being with* each other.

Here as a prayer is a hymn by the 19th century English Vicar, John Ellerton:

*The Lord be with us as each day His blessings we receive;
His gift of peace on all we pray, Before His courts we leave.
The Lord be with us as we walk Along our homeward road;
In silent thought or friendly talk, Our hearts be near to God.
The Lord be with us till the night Enfold our day of rest;
Be He of every heart the Light, Of every home the Guest. Amen.*

Blessings to you and all who you care for
Peter

PS there will be no letter next week as I am having a break.