

Sermon for 23rd August 2020 – Year A – Trinity 11 – Matthew 16:13 – 20

Yesterday, churchwardens and I, spent most of the day at church doing a risk assessment so that we can reopen the church and come together to worship on Sundays.

All of our readings talk about new beginnings. In the book of the prophet Isaiah, God calls people to trust in Him, and there will be God's promise of a new beginning. *"Look to Abraham... and to Sarah... for he was but one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many."* Paul encourages the Romans in his letter to offer themselves to God, and to allow God to work a new beginning in them. *"Transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God..."* And in the Matthew's Gospel, Jesus asks his disciples who they think he is, and Peter boldly says that Jesus is the Messiah – *The Christ*. Jesus' response is a promise of a new beginning – for Peter, and believers ever since.

So, what does this new beginning looks to us today. Well, let me tell you a story. Let's call it 'new beginnings at the Resurrection and St Barnabas Church during the Covid-19 Pandemic'.

I was really pleased to get an email saying that Church would reopen for worship on Sunday 6th of September. The email said that we must call to book a seat. I've really missed worshipping in church, so I called straight away saying I would be there and book a seat.

When I spoke with Rev Maria, she explained that there are many new things expected of us. That made me realise that worship would be quite different. Rev Maria said that she would email me the instructions. When I got them, I read them carefully. It was very

clear about what to expect and it even had some links to the Church of England and Government website, which I didn't bother to read. Who would, eh?

I always try my best to be in church on time, but it's not always easy. I love my lie-ins. So, I'm not the only one who arrives at Church during the first hymn. There's often a last-minute rush. But now the instructions said that the doors will open at 9.45 am with no admission after 10 am. Of course, I realise that being late makes things tricky but that seemed a bit harsh! Anyway, I decided to be on time, and set the alarm!

Oh, I'm so pleased with myself. I got to church just before 9.45. There was already quite a few of us waiting but it was a nice day and there were clear signs about where and how to queue. Everyone kept 2 meters apart.

Going in was very organised. Individuals, or households, were invited forward one at a time. There was a steward on the outer door in a Hi-Viz jacket, mask and gloves. That was a bit of a shock. She checked that I was on the list and explained that the Government had asked for names and contact details of people attending to be kept for a short period in case there was an outbreak of Covid. I said, I was happy to be contacted if we had so bad luck. I pray we all do our bit and don't come to church if we feel unwell. After all the checking in was sorted, I was asked to wait until the next door way was empty so we could all keep our distance.

Unfortunately, the person behind me hadn't booked and wasn't happy when they were told they couldn't come in. The steward explained that the Church could only accommodate a limited number of people safely. The normal congregation was about 60-70

so booking was necessary. I didn't hear the end of the conversation and I didn't see them in Church.

At the inner door I met another steward, again in a Hi-Viz jacket, face mask and gloves on. She told me to use the hand-sanitiser gel and asked if I had my mask with me. . . 'Yes, of course,' I said and she asked me to put my mask on before I was allowed to move on. She asked if I had my collection envelope with me and showed the plate where to drop it.

Then she told me to follow her and directed me to my seat. Of course, there was no one else near me. I was asked not to move from my seat, except in an emergency, and to call the steward if I needed anything. On my seat there was a pew sheet only. No service booklets or hymn books. I read the pew sheet which explained how the service would run. No usual processing or singing and the words for service would be on the screen.

It was all a bit strange. The layout wasn't too different. It was clear that there was a couple of rows for just families. I also spotted the camera facing the altar for the live-streaming. It was great to see familiar faces. I have missed people. Nobody moved about. You couldn't speak to others easily, but then again it is supposed to be quiet before the service. There was some waving and smiling – with the eyes at least! Stephen was playing organ quietly which was calming. A doors behind Rev Maria's chair was open and another door in the corridor was open so there was plenty of fresh air.

Normally, I don't need the toilet at church but I was a bit nervous so I asked if I could use it. There was one way system to the toilets and clear signs inside, paper towels and bin. There was disinfectant spray and wipes and I was happy to wipe things down as I left.

Just after 10 am, after everyone had been seated, Rev Maria entered on her own. She was wearing a mask. It was a bit strange to do the

responses from behind a mask! The service was shorter than usual. Rev Maria put on a visor and gloves to distribute the holy bread at the communion. We were asked to stay seated in our places and hold out our hands like a cup. Those who wanted a blessing, Rev Maria just made an air cross over them. Taking communion is important to me and I thought it was done safely.

At the end Rev Maria processed all the way outside. We were asked to remain in our seats until we were directed to leave. The people at the back left first and, again, it was all very organised. We were asked to make sure we took the pew sheet with us and didn't leave anything behind. The church is going to be locked up for the next 3 days.

The stewards made sure that people didn't gather around the door and didn't hug or anything like that in the car park. I wonder what will happen on a rainy day? I stayed outside for a while and spoke to few people I hadn't seen for months – 2 meters apart of course. It was lovely to see them.

Wow! The first service back at Church felt so different, but I'm glad I went. It also made me realise that it will be a long time before we get back to anything like before the lockdown. I guess this is now what they call 'new normal' and we just have to get used to it.

Now, of course, our readings point towards something much deeper and more profound than just a new beginning in the life of our church. The new beginning that the readings speak is about God's salvation, meaning *'being saved'*.

So maybe what we can take away with us this morning as Good News is that we are to continue our journey with Jesus and God, whose will it is to offer salvation to each one of us. Yes, we live in the world of change in so many levels. So many things we thought as normal, isn't normal any more. We won't be able to worship as

we used to, but each day we are offered a new beginning in our Christian '*being saved*' – salvation journey with Jesus and God.

Amen.