



Abington Pastoral Letter No.12 12.05.2020

Dear Friends

Traveling together

I am sure many of you watched the Prime Minister's announcement just like I did on last Sunday evening. One of the challenges in times of crisis is to remain being hopeful but also being real. The truth is that we have a long road ahead of us. And that road will lead to a place that will be different from where we were.

Friends, one of the great challenges in times of crisis is to remain being hopeful and being real at the same time. We can only hold on to hope by being truthful. I think we are going to be travelling on this road for quite a long time. Longer than many of us ever thought we could be.

There are talks about the possibility of opening places of worship in July. But that will be most likely for small-scale baptisms, weddings and funerals with only families present. We must all prepare ourselves to see that it could take longer than that and prepare ourselves to find ways to support each other until we return to the church building for Sunday worship.

Bishop Donald said in his recent letter to the clergy,

"I hope to be able to authorise Sunday worship on an appropriate scale. This will depend on how many people can conveniently be in the building with appropriate social distancing (which is likely to remain in force for months at least). Please note that it is very unlikely that we will be able to permit singing in the coming months, as the medical advice is that this would require social distancing of five metres, and that no books or service sheets can be used: these are a good way of passing germs from hand to hand. Once there is a vaccine available to all, we will be able to return to something nearer normal, but all the advice I have seen is that sometime next year is the earliest possible time for that."

When the people of Israel escaped from Egypt and from the life of slavery, they were all expecting to enter the Promised Land soon. They were so excited about building a new temple in that land and all worshipping together. However they ended up travelling in the desert for 40 years without a proper building to worship. They faced so many difficulties and had so many painful experiences that they at some point said that they wanted to go back to Egypt. But they didn't. Instead, they travelled together. And as they travel together, they discovered new ways to worship together. More importantly, they discovered more about who God is and how God leads his people and works with his people in times of trouble.

They didn't waste 40 years of time in the desert. They traveled together with God for 40 years. And through those 40 years, they were able to pass on wonderful stories and testimonies about how God walked with them to their next generations. That journey is now part of our faith story. We have our faith today because they didn't give up and continued to travel together in the desert with God and with each other.

I do believe, friends, that God is traveling together with us now in this lockdown, in this exile. I am confident that we will grow as a church and as disciples of Christ through this journey of exile. And we will learn and discover more about who God is and how he works just like the people of Israel did. Because I believe that he has a plan for us. A plan that we cannot even begin to fathom. But a plan that will lead us to build our world more Christ-like place. A world that protects our planet and nature; a world that puts people first before profits; a world that promotes reconciliation not division.

Prophet Jeremiah knew this. He lived in the time of exile when his people were forced to move out of Jerusalem and to move to Babylon. They deeply missed their time together, worshipping in the temple with their brothers and sisters. Jeremiah wrote to them.

This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. "I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile." (Jeremiah 29.4-14)

I remember the first time when I was flying to England which was about 25 years ago. I was going to see my father who was staying at the Liverpool University as a visiting professor. I took a few books with me as I was going to spend a few weeks in England with my father. One of those books was the Fellowship of the Ring, the first part of the Lord of the Rings Trilogy by J.R.R Tolkien. Many of you may well be familiar with his works. I still quite enjoy Tolkien's books and the movies based on his books. He was a passionate Christian and a very good friend of C.S Lewis, one of the great modern Christian writers. They both have seen the horrors of the two World Wars. Anyway, a passage from that book really resonated in me and made me think. It's from the scene where Frodo asked a question to Gandalf. Frodo was the main character who was forced to get into a quest to destroy a ring which was the source of power for all evil. Gandalf was his friend and a wise wizard.

'I wish it need not have happened in my time,' said Frodo.

'So do I,' said Gandalf; 'and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us... There are other forces at work in this world, Frodo, besides the will of evil...and that may be an encouraging thought.' (*The Fellowship of the Ring, p.73*)

Perhaps Tolkien wanted to say to people who were struggling with the question about 'why all this has happened' in the aftermath of the war, that they are not alone and that God is walking with them even when the world seems to be in a bad place.

'Why all this has happened?' is a very important question. I know some of you have been really struggling with that question. It is one of the oldest question in faith and in Christian theology which is still going on. And actually it is a question not only about God but also about ourselves and the world that we are part of. Perhaps we can talk about it at some point in the future. But we all know it is a question that is unlikely to have any satisfactory answer. However I think what Tolkien said through Gandalf carries truth. We may not be able to answer fully why this tragedy has happened. Why some recovers and some don't. The only question we can answer through is this. How are we going to take this tragedy and make something meaningful out of it? Perhaps finding an answer to that question might be more important than finding answers to any other questions. And depending on how we answer to that question, the future will be very different not just for us but for our children. And I am confident that, just like the ancestors of our faith, we will not give up. We will continue to travel together with our God and with each other, following the footsteps of those who walked through this desert before us.

But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, 'Give them up', and to the south, 'Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth- everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.' (Isaiah 43.1-7)

Eucharist for all frontline workers with Spiritual Communion

As announced, we will have a virtual Eucharist on this coming Sunday. It will be offered especially for all frontline workers and those who lost their lives in this pandemic. Sadly we cannot share the communion physically but we can still offer the Eucharist together in one spirit and therefore reaffirm our communion with God and his people in spirit. Part of this service will include an element of what is known as the Agape Meal. You may want to prepare a loaf of bread and wine or something equivalent to that (for example, grape juice if you have children) for this service. But don't worry if you cannot. It is just to make our service more interactive. The service sheet will come later this week.

Bishop John

Bishop John and his wife Elizabeth are recovering from the virus but it is very slow. Please do keep them both in your prayers.

Prayer resource

Liz Kelly has provided a two minute meditation resource. It is attached to this letter. Thank you
Liz!

Resources for Children

I have attached resources for children for this week which includes a short bible study and colouring page, word search etc.

Online Church

There are more and more new people joining our worship on Sunday. Please may I encourage you to welcome them warmly if you happen to notice they are there by just saying hello? It is so lovely to see people greeting each other with comments and sharing prayers, thoughts and jokes(!) during the service. There is a very interesting article about online church. Bob Jackson, a former government statistician, author on church growth, and archdeacon, has written a paper on how we might continue to use technology in the future. It is really helpful. I have attached it to this letter.

St. Christopher's

Some of you may know that a few people have been tested positive at St. Christopher's. Thankfully those who have been tested positive are okay and in a stable condition. Sarah and all the staff are working tirelessly to make sure everyone is safe and well looked after. We are preparing something to show our appreciation to them from the parish and from the Northampton Deanery. A gift of some sort with a basket of treats. If you would like to donate items for this, such as handcream, shower gel, biscuits etc, please do contact me. Let's show that they are appreciated and cared for.

That is all from me for this week. I am so grateful to our wonderful lay leaders, our ministry team, the choir and to all who help us to keep our life of worship and mission going. And thank you also for all your support, good wishes and prayers. Your prayers really make difference. May God bless you and your family. May he encourage us and strengthen us each day as we travel together with him.

With love in Christ

Jun