



Abington Pastoral Letter No.13 19.05.2020

Dear Friends

Bishop's Message

Bishop Donald has been sending to the clergy a weekly bulletin. His leadership, guidance and support in these difficult times have been so exemplary and inspiring. I would like to share part of his letter that I have received this week as it gives insights into some of the questions you might have. Some of you might know our Bishop studied medicine and his wife is also a GP.

He said,

"As predicted last week, the gradual relaxation of lockdown is proving untidy. It wasn't a difficult prediction. We have to feel and pray for the politicians, scientists, and civil servants who are leading the process. Please also pray for the bishops, particularly the House of Bishops, meeting weekly at present to wrestle with a number of issues; and a number of smaller groups of the House, each focussing on one area.

I'm part of the group looking at how we can, gradually and appropriately, be church and do church over the coming months. We are currently focussing on questions relating to baptisms, weddings, funerals, confirmations, and ordinations: what might be possible, how, when? Each diocese will be able to make its own decisions, within government regulations, but we'd rather keep the Church of England together if at all possible.

Back to Church?

Those are important issues, and areas where we can make contact with many people, as well as renewing discipleship and ministry. The big question is just a bit further away, but it is exercising many of us: when and how can we get back to Sunday church in the church building. Much of course will depend on what the government says for the June

and July stages of the relaxation – unless those stages are postponed.

The simplistic school of thought says that family life-events might be celebrated in church buildings on a small scale in June, and Sunday worship in July. I hope, and I wish; but I doubt it will be anything like that simple. I find it hard to conceive of anything like the Sunday mornings we were used to for months or years ahead. We are going to be subject to social distancing, strict limits on numbers in each building, possibly mask-wearing in church buildings, possibly bread but certainly not wine at communion, possibly a soloist or recorded music but certainly not choral or congregational singing, no touching, no coffee, no hymn books or service sheets – and all this I predict well into next year at least.

Those are the negatives, the things we may have to miss, mourn, and lament. And we will have to do that work of mourning.

But there are positives too. We need to be anticipating those, preparing our people for them. We need to do this as we continue to live and lead in the present. Those of us who have been doing some sort of extended worship through modern technology, have seen our congregations grow. Those who have put effort into foodbanks, soup kitchens, care for the homeless, the shielded, the shut-ins, have seen the number of our contacts grow. Those who have innovated in worship or in community mission, have, inadvertently or otherwise, raised expectations of a different sort of church. We might have been pointing forward to a church more in tune with younger people and modern ways, more committed to its community. I have been excited to see deep conversations, warm welcome, real spiritual care, going on round the edges or on the chat channels on online worship. I am seeing really exciting coffee mornings, Bible studies, prayer meetings, offered and enjoyed online.

We mustn't lose this. We ought to be assuring those who are finding blessing in these ways, that we won't desert them when we go back into our buildings. We must also assure those whose health or other issues keep them from our buildings, including some of the clergy, that we will continue to serve them in these ways.

We are going to need a lot of hard thinking, some creative ideas, and some brave experiments."

I absolutely agree with Bishop Donald. And I am so proud of you and of how Abington has been responding to the challenges.

The Eucharist for all frontline workers

On last Sunday we have had the Eucharist which was offered for all frontline workers and who have died in the pandemic. I would like to say thank you to all those who joined our service and to those who contributed to it. As the celebrant it was very spiritual and powerful experience. Although I was standing in my living room with Simona and Emmanuel, I felt as if I was surrounded by a large congregation as I celebrate the Eucharist. The room felt full of prayers, petitions and praises. It was also very encouraging to see how the traditional liturgy could work with modern technology and non-liturgical parts. I think that is the direction that the Church and the life of worship of the Church is heading to. I hope you also felt that you could be part of the service. Thank you for all your encouraging comments.

Liz Kelly's Reflections and Prayer resources

It was so comforting and also encouraging to hear Liz's wonderful reflections on Julian of Norwich and the pandemic. You can read it below if you haven't heard it yet. She has also sent another Prayer Resource. Thank you so much Liz. I think it would be nice perhaps if you could tell her how you have been using those prayers resources or your feedback on her reflections.

I would like to share some reflections on one of my favourite spiritual writers – Julian of Norwich. When she was thirty she suffered from a severe illness and everyone thought she was going to die. Her parish priest gave her the last rites and put a crucifix in her hands and told her to look at it in her last moments. It was then that she had sixteen visions of Jesus speaking to her from the cross. Miraculously, she recovered and she spent the rest of her life reflecting on what they meant. She chose to live in seclusion as an anchoress in a room attached to St Julian's Church near Norwich so that she could dedicate her whole life to worship, prayer and contemplation. She wrote an account of the 'showings', which is what she called her visions, and this was the first book to be written in English by a woman.

Although she lived nearly 700 hundred years ago, life then was not so very different from today. There was a worldwide pandemic, the Black Death; there was social inequality; the poor and vulnerable were exploited; and it was an increasingly violent society. Things we can all recognise now. And like Julian, we may think, where is God in this mess? Why does he allow evil to appear to triumph over good?

Many of you may be familiar with her most well-known saying, which begins, "All shall be well", but there is much, much more to her writing. Her book is called 'Revelations of Divine Love' and the love of God, shown by the death and resurrection of Jesus shines through it.

This morning we are offering our service in memory of all those who have died from Covid-19 and for the frontline workers who dedicate their lives to helping others, some of whom have made the ultimate sacrifice. Healthcare professionals in hospitals and Care Homes give of themselves unstintingly and Julian has words of wisdom and comfort for them and for us.

She says, "The one who gives gladly pays little attention to what they are giving. Their entire purpose and desire is to please and satisfy the one to whom they are offering the gift. If the recipient accepts the gift gladly and gratefully, then the kind giver counts all the expense and hard work as nothing. This was revealed to me absolutely clearly."

"Then I saw that every natural, loving feeling of compassion that a person has for their fellow Christians is Christ in them. That same self-emptying which Christ revealed in his Passion was shown again in this compassion."

So, from the bottom of our hearts, we thank all those who are giving of themselves to help others. Let's listen to some more words of comfort from Julian.

"I learned that love was our Lord's meaning. And I saw with absolute certainty that before God made us he loved us, and that his love has never slackened, nor ever will. In this love all his works have been done, in this love he has made all things for our benefit, and in this love we shall live forever."

And to strengthen our endurance:

"He did not say, "You shall not be tormented, you shall not be troubled, you shall not be grieved," but he said, "You shall not be overcome."

And finally, to encourage us all as these uncertain and worrying times continue, remember:

"All shall be well, and all things shall be well, and all manner of things will be well."

Amen.

With love in Christ

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