

05.01.2021



Abington's Response to National Lockdown

Dear Friends

Things are once again changing rapidly which is why I am writing to you again although it has been only a few days since the latest letter.

All of you by now know that we are in another national lockdown. It is thought that this will be the most difficult and hardest period of all since the pandemic began. Yesterday alone, there were 58,784 cases. There have been 383,834 cases over the last 7 days which is up by 127,614 cases (49.8% increase) compared to the week before. It is suspected that the actual number of cases could be much higher than this because the number of tests conducted is up by only 2% in the same period.

All these facts indicate that the situation is as serious as the one we saw in February last year if not worse. There are more Covid patients in hospitals than in the first wave. Today I heard that there have been cases of outbreak in churches and care homes in Northampton. I also am told that members of the Clergy in the Deanery are self-isolating. Those churches and colleagues of mine have been following all the rules and doing everything they could to follow the guidelines. It just shows how effective this virus is in its capability of spreading itself. And how serious the consequences can be.

According to the new guidance issued yesterday, places of worship in England are exempt from the lockdown rules. Churches are not required to close and can have public worship in their buildings provided that they can ensure all the social distancing measures can be met sufficiently.

I have prayed and thought long and hard over this. I have discussed this and discerned carefully together with our churchwardens and the lay-chair of the PCC. And we all agreed that we have done everything in our power to keep the church open so far but we have reached a point where we need to make a difficult decision and to close the church building.

Although the government does not ask all churches to close their buildings, I believe it is in our calling as disciples of Christ that we share the burden of lockdown with our community and stand together with our neighbours in their sufferings and sacrifice. Choosing to close the building at this time is choosing to love and protect the people God loves. Prophet Hosea once said the following about the worship that God desires.

"For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings."
(Hosea 6.6 KJV)

One modern translation translated that passage as the following which makes the meaning clearer.

"I desire loving kindness that lasts, not more religion. I want you to know God, not go to more prayer meetings." (Hosea 6.6 MSG)

I believe therefore that this is a decision based on the values of the gospel and the commandments of our Lord.

That doesn't mean that it doesn't pain me. I realise this news will come to some of our friends as disappointment. Over the last 11 months, each of us had to make decisions which were neither perfect nor satisfying to everyone. And yet we have come this far. The night is darkest just before the dawn. We will get through this together. And until we get there, we have to listen carefully to the voices of guidance from our heavenly Father through our doctors, scientists and through the Holy Scriptures.

There are times when God asks his people to take the risks. And there are times when God tells his people to move out from dangers. Think of the moments when Joseph and Mary were told to move out from Bethlehem and move to Egypt. (John 2.13); Or when Lot and his family were reluctant to move from their city, the angels of the Lord grasped their hands and led them out of the city. (Genesis 9.16); Or when the people of Israel were told to stay at home on that night when the final disaster struck Egypt before their slaves were released. (Exodus 12.22).

Friends, I realise, no matter what I say, it probably wouldn't give you a fully satisfying answer. I want you to know that this was one of the most difficult decisions I ever had to make since I came to Abington. But I am confident that despite the challenges, despite the shortcomings of my ability, God will get us through this just as he got his people through times of slavery and times of struggle. Even when my words are falling short and unable to give you the comfort you need, God will give you the comfort and even joy that you will need for your journey for you are his child, you are his Church.

You will get through this. And we will meet again. Until then, we will continue to worship together, pray together, take care of each other. Our Sunday Worship will of course continue online.

May God bless you and all those whom you love. May he protect you and those around you.

With love in Christ

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