

Maundy Thursday, 9th April 2020

I want to begin by thanking you – on my behalf and on behalf of my fellow bishops – for all that you are doing in your ministry. We are in the middle of a global and national crisis which reaches down into all our communities, directly through the spread of the virus, indirectly through the disciplines of restriction and distancing under which we are all living, and also through the anxiety which people are feeling about their jobs, their finances, their ability to feed their children. So many are suffering in so many ways. You with your churches are reaching out to them in loving service, working with other partners to keep hope alive; and doing this at the most solemn and absorbing time of the Christian year. Thank you so much.

This is a difficult time. With great regret, we have had to close our churches; we are not able to gather our people together physically; and we cannot minister in most of the direct ways that we would usually want to. I recognise that this is hard for us; as bishops, priests, deacons or lay ministers, it goes against our pastoral instincts, our training, the wisdom we have gained from our experience.

What is more, it can feel contrary to something at the very heart of the Gospel: the great truth of the Incarnation, that God comes to us in the physical reality of a human being, Jesus of Nazareth.

Think of the passage we have just heard read from St Luke. The gospel tells of Jesus going to eat in a Pharisee's house. A woman comes to him to bathe his feet with her tears, to dry them with her hair, and to anoint them with oil. There is not a hint of social distancing here; on the contrary, the emphasis is on physical contact, to a degree which some of those present find scandalous. Physical contact, in one form or another, is the way we are used to offering our ministry; and we cannot do that at present.

I think we need to acknowledge the pain of this, and to lament it. I am really missing meeting with my fellow Christians, and especially with you with whom I share the task of ministry. Yes, we are communicating all the time in different ways: virtual meetings, social platforms, e-mails, phone, even surface mail; but for me it is not the same as being in the same room as you, and that makes me realise

how much I miss the fellowship and life of the gathered Church.

And we are missing the sacraments. We rightly point to the importance of spiritual communion – see the Church of England website if you want to know more about that – but it is a hard thing to live without the bread of life in the Eucharist. A sort of eucharistic fast has been perforce imposed on our lay people, and some clergy have chosen to join in with that out of solidarity.

And for those priests who do feel called to celebrate the Eucharist with no congregation physically present, there can be no sense of entitlement, but rather the painful sense of a distance from our people even as we know we are doing this for them.

And, let us be honest, we even miss our church buildings. Yes, of course we spend lots of our time moaning about them, and sometimes we have good cause for that. But being locked out from them makes us realise how precious they are for us, and for our parishioners. I know that some of you have found this lockdown particularly hard, and I

sympathise with you, even as I know that at the moment we have to find ways to think of our homes as church for now.

So, all in all, I think that our current situation is making us realise the value of what is given to us in our incarnational faith, rooted in physical realities.

As a friend and fellow bishop wrote to me earlier this week: 'A virtual life is very well, but it is not, and cannot be, a real life'. And I for one look forward with eager longing to the day, whenever that may be, when we can re-enter our churches, when we can again join together in the Eucharist, when we re-gather in one place as the people of God. As Her Majesty the Queen said on Sunday evening, 'We will meet again.'

But that is not the only thing that is to be said: we cannot simply look to the future, but we must also live in the present. And it is in the present, right now, wherever you are, that God is calling us to be his people.

As many have said, we are learning to be the people of God in a new way. And we do that by facing in three different directions at once. If that all

sounds a bit complicated and rather painfully contorted, let me explain a little further.

First, we face towards one another. St Athanasius said, speaking of the great festival we are approaching:

The miracle of God's kindness lies in this: that he brings together to this feast of Easter those who are far off; and those who are separated in the body he makes spiritually close by the unity of faith.

Those of you who have been livestreaming services will know the truth of that, and indeed it is what we are doing this morning – from across the diocese, bishops, priests, deacons, lay ministers, separated as we are geographically, at this Easter tide we are coming together spiritually, taking the decision to be facing towards one another in mutual encouragement, support and prayer. My original idea for this service of reaffirmation was to have a gigantic Zoom meeting, so we could see hundreds of each other's faces in tiny icons on our computer screens as we renewed our commitment together.

Fortunately, wiser technological voices prevailed, but I can't help but feel that you have all ended up with a bit of a raw deal. You have to look at me, and from time to time you can see other people, including my fellow bishops; but I cannot see you. However, to prepare for this service I have been looking through whatever images of you I can find: the photos that many of you sent me when I came to this diocese four years ago; the pictures of you in your files – it is amazing how some of you never seem to age; whatever I can find from websites, Google searches and the like. That has been helping me to see you in my mind's eye; and that in turn helps me to pray for you. And I ask you, please, to pray for me. We need to be turned to one another.

But then also, and at the same time, we need to be turned outwards. And indeed that is what we are doing. So many people have remarked on this in recent days: how we are learning new ways to be church. When people cannot come to our buildings, we can reach out to them: not physically, on the whole, though many are involved with foodbanks, shopping runs, dogwalks, all sorts of practical activities. But there are so many remotely based

ways of looking out, in partnership with others, to reach into people's loneliness, to shape new patterns of community. We are planning to gather lots of good examples from across the diocese on our website, so please tell us your stories.

I hope and pray that this will be remembered as a time when the Church of England turned itself inside out to be a Church for England, and already I am hearing many wonderful stories of that happening across the diocese. There is no reason why any of that should finish when these restrictions come to an end; rather, there is every reason for this mission of outward-facing loving service to be stronger than ever as we come together again in real life in our communities.

And last, even as we turn outwards as citizens, we also as Christians need to face inwards, to seize hold in new ways of the reality of the presence of God with us and among us. And now is the right time to do this.

We are facing a new seriousness in our lives: in the face of a contagious virus, the reality of our mortality is held before our eyes with a new

intensity. Confined to our homes with only ourselves or one or two others as daily company, we are having to confront the reality of our inner selves with a new honesty. And in these coming days, preparing to celebrate the great story of our redemption in these extraordinary circumstances, the pain and the costliness of the cross may become apparent to us with a new clarity – and so may the promise of the new life that God wins for us in Jesus: for, as St John says, this is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith.

In the weeks after Easter, we will be facing a long period – nobody knows how long, but long it will be – of confinement, restriction, and what could easily feel like emptiness. Let us endeavour to see that emptiness as being the emptiness of the wilderness. In the Bible, the wilderness is the place to which God calls us back so that we may learn to be his people once again: the place where we deepen our knowledge of the faith; where we catch a firmer vision of the hope that is set before us; where we kindle again our love of the scriptures and find our hearts set on fire as their life-giving truths are opened up to us.

All that lies ahead of us in the coming weeks; but now, it is for us to commit ourselves afresh to the service of the One who loves us so much that he gave up his life and died for us, the One who leads us through this Easter celebration into the new life he has won for us.

+Michael Lich

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