



Friday Fellowship News No 24 2 October 2020

BISHOP Steven writes ...

AFTER a difficult year, we are now facing an immensely challenging winter. All the graphs for coronavirus are moving rapidly in the wrong direction. There are more restrictions, more challenges to our health, more threats to our economy and way of life, and more challenges for our church communities.

Thanks be to God for the ministry of clergy, lay ministers, wardens and thousands of volunteers who have worked to sustain worship, both online and back in our church buildings. Thanks be to God for the love and care extended out to the community, in partnership with many others through different ministries. Thanks be to God for our schools and chaplaincies in every place which are channels of God's grace. There has been immense creativity and renewal everywhere, but there is also now a deep tiredness.

But the announcements of the last two weeks will bring fresh mountains to scale. How can we live well as Christians in these times? Our aim must be to bring as much of the church safely through the pandemic as we are able but also to continue to extend love and care to our neighbours in months of acute spiritual, physical and social need: to be the Body of Christ in the world. This is the call of every disciple to everyday faith.

I don't have any easy answers. But as I've reflected with colleagues on the Prime Minister's new Rule of Six, it seems to me that there are other lessons and challenges we can draw from this number as we go forward in our families, churches and communities.

Six months is the new horizon

We need a new horizon for our hope and for our lives. I want to suggest that all of us set that horizon now on Easter, not Christmas. The spring will bring better news after a difficult winter. We now know the journey through COVID-19 will be a marathon, not a sprint.

Within that six month horizon, we will need to lean back into the great themes of the church year. You will have different ways to interpret this locally. In October

we will give thanks for harvest, celebrate the beauty of creation and remember our responsibilities to care for the earth. In November we will dwell deeply on the themes of remembrance, grief, human mortality and the hope of resurrection.

In December we will celebrate God's kingdom of justice and peace and the coming of Jesus. We will try to mark his coming at Christmas in different ways but with creativity and joy. In January, we will dwell on Christ the light shining in the darkness and never overwhelmed.

In February we will celebrate the gift of our baptism and seek to be renewed in our everyday faith. In March we look forward to Holy Week, to remembering our salvation, and looking forward to Easter.

October

The Beauty of creation & care for the earth

November

Mortality & hope of resurrection

December

God's kingdom and the coming of Jesus

January

Christ the light shining in the darkness

February

The gifts of our baptism, everyday faith

March

Our salvation; the cross and resurrection

Our common worship both online and physical will be vital for the Church and for our communities at the present time. As a Diocese we intend to continue to offer Church at Home through the whole of the next six months (including Christmas Day) and seek to support the mission and ministry of the local church in every way we can.

Six days to work and a sabbath to rest

This will continue to be a demanding season. It will be vital to watch over ourselves and to rest. Make sure you plan your sabbath and keep it. Rediscover the gift of one day each week for re-creation, not just chores. Plan it

well.

Days off and holidays will be vital for our clergy but also vital for our churchwardens and volunteers, many of whom are working so hard with extraordinary dedication and skill. Please ensure you encourage one another. Spread the load wherever you can for lay officers as well as clergy.

Six people to journey with

The Christian faith began with a small group of disciples. This is a time for us all to rediscover Church as a small group of six people who support one another; pray together (online or in one place); care for each other, serve together and explore everyday faith together.

Many seasons of renewal in the church have begun with the renewal of small communities: think of the stories in Acts; or the early Franciscans; the classes and bands of early Methodism; or the underground churches behind the Iron Curtain.

All churches can rediscover small communities in ways which go with the grain of your tradition through dividing up the parish list into small groups for pastoral care; through meeting for the offices online; through traditional housegroups, discipleship or interest groups and in a range of other ways.

Six ways to be salt and light

This will be a demanding winter for the communities we serve in so many ways. It's a good time to ask one another, who are the people and organisations you are supporting in the wider community? What plans will be needed to strengthen foodbanks and night shelters? How will you serve those who may be isolated over Christmas? How can you encourage and support schools and teachers and health workers? Who is on the margins, who has slipped away and who is in danger of being forgotten?

This is a season to remember that our communities need us to be salt and light and to bring courage to others.

Six percent to your church

This is a challenging time for church finances. Income from lettings and fairs and cash collections has dropped. We need a miracle of giving to sustain the church through this period.

The Church of England recommendation is to give five percent of our income to and through the local church. If your income is falling or uncertain you may, of course, need to reduce this.

But if your income is stable can you give 1% more through the pandemic through the whole of next year and until church finances recover? And can those who have previously given in cash move their giving in some way online?

Six people to pray for

All around us, people are searching for faith and meaning in these times. As Christians we must not be silent witnesses to the wonders of our faith when there is so much strength and healing in the Christian Way.

Are there six people you can pray for, invite into community and encourage to discover more of Christian faith during this season? Can you accompany them to baptism next Easter? Can every local church find ways of teaching and sharing faith online in Lent next year and let us see what God will do?

And finally...

This has been such a hard and challenging season but also, strangely, such a season of creativity and renewal and growth, by the grace of God. We need to go on encouraging one another through the months ahead. No-one can do everything. We are fallible and will fall and stumble often.

We also need to reflect together on all that we are learning about rebuilding in and through the pandemic. Together with Department of Mission colleagues, I will be offering ten Bishop's Webinars in November and early December. Details, along with a range of resources and materials available to use right now, [can be found on the website](#).

This is God's Church and God's mission. Thankfully the final responsibility does not rest with us. But daily we offer what we can – like the child bringing five loaves and two fish to Jesus – and we discover that God takes this and uses it to make an immense difference to the lives of those around us.

Six may indeed turn out to be a rich number, but of course the sign of completeness in the scriptures is seven. As, by the grace of God, we do all we can to make the most of these days, let us remember that our ultimate hope and assurance is in the God who will one day bring all things to completion, in the Christ who is the beginning and the end.

Together we are called to be a more Christ-like Church for the sake of God's world: contemplative, compassionate and courageous. It is such a privilege and joy to serve with you in this season. May God bless you richly in the months ahead.

In Christ

+ Steven

Bible Readings for Morning Prayer

PLEASE see the separate sheet, covering the whole of October.

With my love and prayers:

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