

Chrism Mass sermon delivered by the Rt Revd David Walker,  
Bishop of Manchester  
6 April 2020

I thought hard about whether we should simply cancel this Act of Worship - wait for a time when we could gather normally in our cathedral, bless the holy oils, reaffirm our vows and commitments to ministry, and then receive the sacrament together. It grieves me deeply that we cannot do all of that today. Yet there are two reasons that convinced me we should hold this streamed service. Indeed, that it is perhaps even more vital than in other times that we do so.

Firstly, it matters that we model what it means to come together whilst following fully the simple mantra that our nation needs to maintain during the present crisis - stay home, protect the NHS, save lives. In a society as richly diverse as Manchester, anything more nuanced than a clear, oft repeated message, applicable to "all sorts and conditions", would soon lie buried under a mountain of special pleading and exceptionalism.

Yet within the restrictions imposed on us by our present plight, we are finding that necessity is truly the mother of invention. By last Saturday, 97 of our churches had some sort of streaming offer publicly available, almost three times what it was a week or so earlier. We are discovering, laity and clergy alike, what it means to worship in our own homes, not exclusively in a church building. On line fellowship groups - I took part in something of that nature with a group of fellow Manchester Franciscans on Saturday morning - are springing up. Children's church activities are being resourced in new ways. Websites abound with prayers and ideas for devotional exercises. I am deeply grateful to my birth parish, St George's Mossley, for putting on line instructions for folding a palm cross from a strip of paper. They were so easy to follow even I could manage to make one.

Parishes are continuing to serve the needy, through ministries such as food banks, care for the homeless, support for those in debt, with just as much vigour as ever. Only the methods of delivering those services have changed. Most parishes now have some system set up for keeping in touch by phone with those who do not have access to the internet. I'm hearing tales of people being contacted who perhaps haven't been to church for some time, but are deeply grateful of hearing a caring voice, and are finding faith rekindled. A couple of weeks ago, I could barely have imagined how effectively we would find our feet in such changed circumstances.

We are not a church that has ceased to meet, we are a church that is learning to meet differently. This morning matters because it allows us to model that at a diocesan level and, by doing so, to affirm what is happening day by day and week by week, parish by parish, chaplaincy by chaplaincy.

Coming together, however virtually it has to be, also matters because it reminds us that we are not solo performers. Now, more than ever, we need each other. We are one Church: lay disciples; authorised ministers; Readers; Church Army Officers; deacons; priests and bishops. If you are blessed with the gift of being able to sit in your study, with only a camera and a microphone, to produce holy and moving prayers and liturgies, week by week or several times a day, then you are a blessing to us all. If you are phoning up the fearful and the lonely, so that not one is missed, you are a blessing to us all. If you are praying quietly for the sick and sorrowing, whilst maintaining self isolation, you are a blessing to us all. If you are walking the wards of

a hospital, bedecked in PPE, holding the hands of the distressed and dying, and supporting the medical teams providing care, you are a blessing to us all. If you are driving your bus, staffing your supermarket checkout, cooking meals for the homeless and the poor, you are a blessing to us all. Whatever role you are fulfilling in being a member of Christ's body at this time, you are a blessing to us all. None of us need fall prey to envy of some special talent or ministry that our neighbour exhibits but we don't possess.

It grieves me that when we come to the Eucharist in this act of worship - and we thought hard about whether there should be a Eucharist or not - you will not be able to receive the bread and wine with me. Yet many are rediscovering in the Church of England, how it matters to still gather around the Lord's table even if we cannot receive. The Book of Common Prayer, in its rubrics for the Communion of the Sick, makes it very clear that if any "just impediment" prevent us from receiving when the Eucharist is celebrated, then we do still receive the benefit of the sacraments, even if not via our mouth. We yearn for the day when the present restriction can be lifted, and all can gather in person and receive in the familiar way. But for now, we practice a different form of sacramental participation, both here and in our own congregations.

My second reason for wanting us to continue with this service today, is to allow many of us to renew our vows or commitments to ministry. The promises we have made to serve God are not just valid or necessary in normal times. They are needed just as much, if not more, through the difficult and sorrowful days that we now find ourselves in; days that may get worse before they get better. The ways that we will grow the church, nurture God's people, and serve our communities, nation and planet, may not be quite those we set out for 2020 in our Mission Action Plans, but serving, nurturing and growing remain our objectives. They map clearly onto the Five Marks of Mission of the Anglican Communion, binding us with many millions of fellow believers worldwide.

Back in the days when I could preside at several dozen marriages in a summer season, my pep talk to the couple made a point that, despite popular misconception, nowhere in the liturgy does bride or groom say "I do". The commitment each makes, before going on to the vows themselves, is "I will". This distinction is far more than subtle semantics. It's the difference between a statement of present fact, and an assertion of future effort. It takes us firmly away from the realm of emotional desire and into the territory of determination. The promises to be made by the couple will require, if they are to be lifelong, far more than affectionate feelings. They necessitate an act of will. I would invite the couple to look back on their wedding day, not to recapture the joys of first love, but to reaffirm that purpose of will to which they had committed themselves in the presence of family, friends, and God.

Hence we, at a time when the future is hard to predict, gather to reassert our own firmness of intention. We will keep the vows, promises and commitments made at our baptisms, confirmations, authorisations, and ordinations.

A few weeks ago, I said to my colleagues in our leadership team, that it may be helpful to think of there being three distinct periods to our journey through the coronavirus outbreak. The first is to enable the church to move into life in lockdown; the second, to maintain being the church in a time of distancing, disease and death; the third, to think about and plan for what kind of church will emerge when the pandemic passes. We may still be in stage one, but we must also prepare ourselves for the demands of those latter two stages. Today is not the moment to go into the details of those challenges, nor indeed of the new opportunities for mission, ministry and service that will emerge alongside them. But it is the day to reaffirm our trust in

God and our commitment to journey together with him, as part of the Diocese of Manchester, faithful to our individual and shared callings, wherever the future may lead.

A handful of years ago we undertook a massive exercise of consultation across the diocese in order to get a grasp of what we believed God was calling us to be. From that process emerged a very simple statement. We are Church for a Different World. The very first time I heard that phrase, I felt my heart leap. Not all corporate strap lines have quite that effect on me. We are God's church for a world far different from anything our Victorian ancestors, who built many of our buildings and set up much of our present parish system, could have imagined. We need to adapt our forms of mission and ministry to the Manchester of our own generation. And yet we are also called to work for the ushering in of a world different from what wider society, UK or global, may invite us to accommodate our gospel to fit. The Five Marks of Mission set out the key aspects of what that different world looks like: the needy are served; justice is proclaimed; the Earth is cared for; all are invited to answer the call of Jesus, and to grow into his likeness.

So today, in a time when not only the shape and work of the church of the future is uncertain, but the very future form of the society in which we live, we come before God. Together, and in his presence, we make that necessary act of will that we may need to look back on in the weeks and months that lie ahead. I pray that we will remember today, this most peculiar of Holy Week gatherings, and draw from it the strength and determination we will need.

May God, who is the Alpha and Omega, who was, and is, and is to come, who has blessed us thus far, who is faithful in all things, to death and beyond, may he be our comfort and our consolation, our strength and our sustenance. Amen.