

I expect like me that you watched the Prime Minister last Monday and that you are glad to see that things are expected to gradually get back to something more like normal this summer. It will be too quick for some and too slow for others.

Assuming that all goes to plan we shall be able to open church again for Easter day. My hope is that we shall remain open from then on.

There is though no sense in which we turn the clock back. Things have changed and we move on. I wanted to share with you part of Bishop Donald's letter to the clergy as he summarizes what we have learned over the past year. It was written before the Prime Ministers latest announcement. I have included it at the end of this newsletter. I will share another excerpt next week; it makes for interesting reading...

Reading Mark 4: 1-20.

Jesus Restores a Demon-Possessed Man

⁵ They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes. ² When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an impure spirit came from the tombs to meet him. ³ This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain. ⁴ For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. ⁵ Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.

⁶ When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him. ⁷ He shouted at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In God's name don't torture me!" ⁸ For Jesus had said to him, "Come out of this man, you impure spirit!"

⁹ Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?"

"My name is Legion," he replied, "for we are many." ¹⁰ And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area.

¹¹ A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside. ¹² The demons begged Jesus, "Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them." ¹³ He gave them permission, and the impure spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.

¹⁴ Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened. ¹⁵ When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. ¹⁶ Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man—and told about the pigs as well. ¹⁷ Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region.

¹⁸ As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. ¹⁹ Jesus did not let him, but said, "Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." ²⁰ So the

man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis¹ how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.

Comment.

Marian Thomas joined us last Sunday for our on-line service. Thank you Marian for all your hard working preparing for us. Here is the gist of what she shared with us:

This is a difficult passage to read and certainly, for me, more than a little difficult to recognise even as a possibility. I suspect that it is because I have lived such a sheltered life I have never encountered happenings such as this, or maybe I have but not recognised it when I did. God has protected me lovingly, guarded me from harm, even without me being aware that he was doing so.

But this may not have been the same for all of us, have we encountered happenings such as those we have heard of in this part of Mark's gospel. Certainly Jesus was going against all the regulations they had been brought up to follow. They were sailing across the Sea of Galilee to the land of the Gerasenes, an area now known as the Golan Heights. Not a part of Jewish territory and usually ignored by Jews as being occupied by gentiles, and sometimes called Decapolis because of the ten towns closely linked there, and an area that any Jew would definitely avoid. This fact and that they also kept pigs, not being tied by a faith, would also make it a no go area for any devout Jew.

Unlike his companions; compassionately and lovingly; Jesus ordered the evil spirits to come out of the man which is what happened, it must've been truly wonderful to be relieved of such terror, to be calm again and in his right mind and able to have a conversation with Jesus.

So what can this teach us?

I suspect that God wants us all to be aware of the possibility of us being overcome and therefore too attached to evil behaviour, to following the wrong path and getting involved with things which are against what God wants from us.

Following the example of Christ and all the saints is a joyful path to follow, trusting in God can take away all our burdens, and the unnecessary temptations and distractions of life.

God's love for us is total. God loves even those who are tempted away from the teachings of his Son, and longs for us simply to follow Jesus way and trust in Him.

Here is a song for you to enjoy.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NjOGX5zT8KU>



Here is the extract from Bishop Donald's letter:

Mixed Mode

So much has changed over the last year, not least in the way we do our worship, pastoral care, and mission. In addition, as we begin to look towards life after Covid restrictions, (however gradually we enter it, and however far ahead it may be), we ought to be thinking about how our life and witness might look.

I am of course very conscious of the level of weariness that we all feel. Proper breaks and holidays compromised or lost, no clarity about the coming year in that or any other respect, relationships stressed: it's been a very tough year, and reduced energy levels don't make forward planning easy. However, the next year or two are the most enormous opportunity to re-think and re-build that we are likely to see during the course of our ministries, and we must not waste it. That opportunity, and the knowledge that our energising, life-giving God is with us, should fire us on to give ourselves and lead our churches into the future.

In each of our situations, we have had to do some things differently. In each we will have made some mistakes, but in each we will also have done some new, creative, and fruitful things. We have all developed new skills, and the great majority of us have seen a new and enlarged group of people looking to us and our churches in some way or other. I am hugely impressed and grateful for many of the things I have seen and heard about in our church lives over the last year: thank you for all you have been doing.

Let us acknowledge too, that we have also, many of us, lost touch with some of our former regular or occasional worshippers. We will need to find ways of putting that right. The good shepherd goes out to find the lost and bring them back.

So, what will we do when we can get back into our church buildings in relatively normal ways? I hope nobody is saying or thinking, *let us get back to the way we were*. That would indicate a failure to learn, a failure to see and take opportunities, a failure of nerve and of trust. Equally, I hope nobody is thinking, *let us forget the old, and press on into a new world*. (I acknowledge that is rather unlikely in the C of E!) Instead, I hope we are all thinking, and beginning to talk, about being a new kind of mixed-mode church for the foreseeable future.

Archbishop Rowan Williams encouraged us to be mixed-mode in the sense of being both traditional and experimental, both pastoral and missional. Now we need to expand that idea, and determine to be present both in our buildings, and also online. Some of our former worshippers have moved to telephone or Facebook or Zoom or YouTube, or whatever, and won't be coming back into the church buildings. Some who had previously left us for different reasons, have now returned online, and want to stay that way. Some we have reached for the first time online: they may join us in the church building in the future, but we shouldn't bank on it. Others are dying to get back into the buildings, either for the worship they are used to and missing, or for the fellowship and proximity of people. It is up to us to mobilise our churches to seek to meet these needs as far as we can.

I have been watching many online services and meetings from across the diocese and further afield, and am now firmly of the opinion that the one thing that does not really work is simply to film or livestream our previously normal worship. To do that well you need lots of cameras and camera angles, really good sound quality, a very competent production team, a director who understands both worship and television, and seriously expensive IT kit. Simply livestreaming our normal Sunday services isn't what brought many newcomers to our online offerings last year.

Shorter, simpler, clearer, worship and messages is what people needed and wanted to. We can produce really good online worship material if we keep it short and straightforward: a couple of hymns or songs to listen to or maybe join in with; one Bible reading, clearly explained and applied; good prayers which don't ramble on; a warmth of personal approach; people seen head-and-shoulders rather than at a distance; minimal liturgy (responses don't work well on Zoom), but a eucharistic prayer if you wish, again filmed in relative close-up and with meaningful manual acts which work on a small screen; everything aimed at an all-age audience; informal and probably unrobed. Dumbing down? Not if it is done well. Accessible, personal and friendly: that is the idea – but still challenging and with real content.

This involves real skill, new skills for many of us. But I've seen it happening in a number of our churches with very modest resources, and it needs to become a new norm alongside our more established worship patterns. If we do this well, we can be building whole new congregations alongside our older ones. Obviously there will be work to do in getting to know people, sharing the gospel personally and one-to-one, providing pastoral care, teaching and enabling giving online, providing ideas and opportunities for practical discipleship – but isn't that what we are here for?

In the smaller churches, it will not be possible to offer a full range of worship and fellowship opportunities, both gathered together and online, but I hope it will across a benefice, and certainly across a deanery in the more rural areas. Please make sure that benefice councils and deanery chapters/synods are having these discussions. I would be very open, for example, to the idea that some of our clergy and lay ministers might in future provide online ministry on behalf of a small group of churches, while others focus on worship in and witness from the church buildings. Let's talk about this. You know your areas and parishes: it is time to think, pray, and talk, creatively about the future.

A short footnote, some of you will have seen press reports that the Church of England is planning wholesale clergy redundancies and church closures. There may be a degree of that in some limited areas of the country with particular problems, but I assure you that in this diocese we have no such plans or intentions. We face a major new opportunity for mission in the coming years, and I have every intention that we should grasp it with all the energy and resources we can muster. That is our calling.