

Vicar's Letter #4: 9 April, 2020



Dear Parishioners

What a strange experience it is to be unable to journey through Holy Week and Easter in the familiar patterns of our parish worship! As the Right Reverend Stephen Cottrell, Bishop of Chelmsford (and Archbishop of York elect) expressed it in a recent article in the *Spectator USA* magazine, "A first for Christendom: Holy Week without church."

Normally during the great services of Holy Week we focus on the sufferings of Christ, who died for our sake so that we might have eternal life in God's presence. Of course, we will continue to do that again this year in the diocesan services and our own personal reflections. But this year we have the context of Covid-19, which has made an unprecedented change to our life as a Christian community, and to the life of the world. We are very aware of the deep suffering that is taking place throughout the world, and of suffering in our own country. Although at this point we have been spared the worst of the pandemic, people's livelihoods are at risk or lost, many are anxious, and enforced isolation is having all sorts of challenging effects.

One of the gifts of Holy Week, and of our Christian faith as a whole, is that we can share our own sufferings and trials with Jesus. The fact that God came to be with us as Jesus shows us that God chooses to share our human experience of joy and sorrow, acceptance and rejection, life and death. So we can experience our sufferings in conscious connection with him and the message he lived of God's amazing love for us. Wherever we go, whatever we experience, God is there.

This applies to our patterns of Christian worship as well. Today is Maundy Thursday, and for as long as I can remember, I have met with other Christians for worship on Maundy Thursday evening, to give thanks at that service for the great gift of the Eucharist - the sharing of Christ's presence with us in bread and wine - his body and blood. But this year I cannot do that. For as long as I can remember I have shared with others in the Eucharist on Easter Day in celebration of Christ's victory over death. But that is not possible this year. I feel the sorrow and isolation caused by the lockdown, and I know that other Christians in this parish and throughout the world feel it keenly too.

When we can no longer experience a good gift that we are accustomed to enjoying, it is natural for us to miss that gift and to grieve what we cannot have. Many of the biblical Psalms are laments, in which the psalmist expresses grief at the loss of what had formerly been enjoyed. And yet so often in those Psalms of Lament there is also a sense of hope and movement, that God can and will do something new in that circumstance. So, in our situation as Christians, we can be aware of our loss of the Eucharist and corporate worship, we can lament that loss, and we can still be hopeful of God's presence with us in a new way despite this loss.

Lament would not be lament if it failed to recognise the hardship that is being experienced. We need to recognise the situation of loss we are in. There is hardship in not sharing the Eucharist as a body of believers. And because we will not be sharing in it as a body, I will not celebrate the Eucharist this Easter when I cannot do it with you. We will lament together.

But lament and loss can lead to new insights and new life. In going through this together we might come to reflect even more deeply on the importance to us of the Eucharist. We might explore even more deeply what we are seeking in the Eucharist - the most intimate sharing with Jesus our Saviour in his life and death and resurrection. And perhaps, as we forgo taking communion together out of regard for the health and well-being of our community, God will give us other blessings, because God is gracious and we have been willing to forgo this joy for the good of others in our community.

This is a totally new chapter of our life together in faith. We have not gone this way before, but now we will take this path. We don't know what will come of it, but we know that God will be with us in it. And so we don't need to be downcast by restrictions or the loss of our normal patterns of worship, because whatever happens to us, nothing can separate us from the love of God.

What is God asking of you as a faithful response over these most holy and sacred days of the Church's year? How can you journey through these days in devotion to Christ? Some thoughts I have are:

- participation in a parish small group using Zoom,
- live streamed services available via the Diocesan website at www.movementonline.org.nz, or via Freeview channel 200
- other worship resources on the internet (our own parish resources are at www.stjames.net.nz, which links to our parish YouTube channel and Facebook page)
- a deeper engagement in your own personal prayer and journey with Jesus through this time,
- your own reflective reading of the story of Jesus' Passion in one of the Gospels (e.g. Matthew chapters 26-27) and, on Easter Day, of his resurrection (e.g. Matthew chapter 28).

Being isolated from one another can also make us realise how important it is to be together, to realise that we are truly part of one body - the body of Christ. We might need to be apart for a season, but we still belong together. This is precisely how I feel today on Maundy Thursday.

As we go thoughtfully and worshipfully into these next few days, may we be aware that we do this in the company of others and in the company of God, who in Christ loved us and gave himself for us. May we who have died with Christ through our baptism also rise with him through his victory over death. And this year, may we know the power of that victory not only in our own lives, but in the life of our community, our country, and our world - the world that Christ came to save.

Peter Bengé
Vicar