

Vicar's Letter #7: 1 May, 2020

Ready, set..., wait.

Dear Parishioners

The resurrection of Jesus brought great joy to those who loved and followed him. It renewed their faith and energised their hope. It changed their lives. But it also prompted new questions and wonderings. What did his resurrection mean for them and for the world? What would happen now? In one of Jesus' resurrection appearances, his followers asked him one of their "what now?" questions. "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6) Jesus made it clear to them that he would not answer their question in those terms. Their job was to wait for "the promise of the Father", and by this he meant that they should wait prayerfully and expectantly for the power that would come upon them from the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, when God would commission them to be Jesus' witnesses in their city, their wider region and throughout the world.

Just like the disciples, we might have many questions to ask of God or of others at this time. "What will Alert Level 2 look like?" and "how long will it last?" would be two of my questions. I also wonder, "How can we best serve the Lord in a post-pandemic world?" "When should we start worshipping together in our church buildings again?" "What do we most need to focus on while we are waiting for the next step to be revealed?" It's clear that I have a whole lot of questions! Perhaps you do too.

If you or I get too tied up in demanding an answer to our questions at this time of uncertainty, we are bound to get deeply frustrated, because answers will not come at once. And if we get too focused on our own questions, we will almost certainly find ourselves out of step with God's invitation and challenge to us at this time. The issue to focus on is not so much "What are we asking of God?" but "What is God asking of us?"

The disciples had no concept at all of what Pentecost would be like. As they waited for it, prayerfully and expectantly, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was beyond their comprehension because it was beyond their experience. In the same way, we cannot really imagine what the world will be like after the pandemic, because we have had no experience of the sort of changes a pandemic brings. We can't rely on **ourselves** for this next step, we need to rely on **God** - on God's love and God's creative power.

In the Sunday gospel passages of the Easter season we have moved through stories of Jesus' resurrection. Now our Sunday Gospel readings move on to passages that tell about Jesus' gift of life. These Gospel passages emphasise the closeness of the relationship that God wants us to have with Jesus. This Sunday, Jesus uses traditional Israelite imagery to describe God's people as sheep who follow him as their shepherd. They know the voice of their shepherd and they pay attention to it. With Jesus as their shepherd they go in and out of the sheepfold. Their life is shared with him.

In this time I believe that we are called to wait prayerfully and expectantly, with full dependence on Jesus as our shepherd and our guide to life. As someone said in our small group yesterday, that life is both peaceful and comforting within the sheepfold, and adventurous and challenging outside the sheepfold. The key thing is that we continue together in the company of our shepherd, who gives us the fullness of life.

In this time of uncertainty I sense that God is asking me personally, and all of us, to set aside our questions and our agenda, and in prayer and trust to deepen our fellowship with Jesus who is the one who brings life. The life that Jesus will bring us in the next season is to an extent unknown, but that's not a reason for relying on ourselves instead. Only Jesus can bring us the quality of life, the fullness of life, that he promises. So let's draw closer to Jesus, offering him our whole lives to do with as he wants, trusting in his love for us. Let's pray for our community, our nation, our leaders, our church members, and for God's kingdom to come in all its newness of life and resurrection power. And let's be very open to his leading at this time - and responsive to his voice.

For your information

The Bishops and other Diocesan leaders will be discerning in the next few days what guidelines to set for our Diocesan churches when we get to Alert Level 2. I expect that an announcement will be made about this in the coming week or so. Please pray for those who have to make such difficult decisions on behalf of the Diocese.

Thank you

Thank you to all who continue to give regularly to the parish by automatic payment, and to those who have taken the decision to make their offerings to the parish by automatic payment while we are not meeting at church. At our recent Vestry meeting we learned that the parish had exceeded the budgeted amount of direct giving for March despite the fact that we did not hold church services on 22 or 29 March. Our total income for the first three months of the year just covers our total expenditure. Vestry sees this as a sign of God's provision and many people's generous support at this difficult time. We give thanks to God and the parish for this.

Invitation on Tuesday afternoon

Mondays are my day off, but I am happy to take calls on other days, preferably between the hours of 8.30am and 8.30pm. I would also like to make a particular invitation to anyone who would like to talk with me to feel free to call me on Tuesdays 2-5pm. Until further notice I plan to be actively available as your Vicar for a phone or Zoom call at that time, if you would like to talk about anything with me. My phone number is (021) 2541354. The Zoom meeting ID for those who want to contact me in that way is: 872-1563-2239. Please do feel free to call me.

With my warm greetings in Christ.

Peter Bengé

Vicar
(Anglican Parish of Lower Hutt)