

Vicar's Letter #9: 15 May, 2020

Dear Parishioners

I am sure that there has been a collective sigh of relief as we have moved out of lockdown and into Alert Level 2. It is a good thing to make progress and move in the right direction! But we are still in a process of transition with this virus and, as people have been saying, it is in many ways more straightforward to go into lockdown than to come out of it. The unprecedented scale of the government's recent Budget bears this out.

What is true for our country's journey through the pandemic is true for churches and individuals as well. We now need to work our way safely out of a "shelter in place" mentality and move with courage and wisdom into whatever the "new normal" will be. It will be a "new normal" because we can never go back to how things used to be. We have been changed by this experience, and not just for the worse. I am sure that all of us will have learned or experienced things in the lockdown that have been different and good.

In this letter I will outline what our parish's plan is for Alert Level 2 and then suggest a few things to keep in mind as we travel through this time as individuals and members of a community of faith. God is still at work, and we are called to respond faithfully to what God is doing in our lives and the life of our community.

Our Parish in Alert Level 2

In Alert Level 2, our Bishops have given parishes the freedom to make choices that comply with government guidelines and meet the needs of our parish. They have also pointed out that the government's health and safety requirements under this Alert Level are intensive and complex, and would take a great deal of effort to meet. Your parish leaders agree. Given the complexities, and the small number of people who could meet anyway (currently restricted to 10 people at any service apart from funerals, for which the current limit is 50 people) **we have decided not to offer worship services in our church buildings under Alert Level 2.** The Diocese will continue to provide a worship service each Sunday at 10am on Freeview channel 200 and via <https://movementonline.org.nz/>.

We will continue to offer programmes for children and youth via Zoom. Groups of up to 10 people can meet together in homes under this Alert Level, but our small groups may prefer to keep meeting via Zoom for the time being. This is for the groups themselves to decide.

Because of the responsibility the parish has for health and safety requirements under Alert Level 2, we will not be making our parish buildings available for others to use either. Staff will work from home under this Alert Level, but can access the buildings if they need to. All of the staff are available via telephone or email (see the Newslink for staff contact details) or please call me on 021 2541354 if you have any further questions.

I have been very encouraged by how well people have stayed in contact with others over the time of the lockdown. Congratulations to all of you who have contributed to these parish connections, and please don't stop connecting with others in Alert Level 2. In fact, you can now meet with them in person! And if you or someone you know would particularly like a visit from a member of our pastoral team, please contact me on 021 2541354.

Moving forward ourselves

The lockdown will have had a range of effects on people. Some will have found it a real challenge, others might have found that they have settled into it more and more deeply. I want to note that there is no one right way to come out of lockdown. I encourage you to listen to your soul - that deep place within you where God speaks - and respond in ways that will be life-giving for you and for others.

Moving forward as a community

During the lockdown our parish staff meetings have been conducted via Zoom. I have been encouraging staff members to reflect, both on our own and together, on questions put to Diocesan leaders by our Bishops. These questions focus on discerning the direction that God is calling us to take as a parish and a Diocese as we emerge from the lockdown and move into the future. One of the questions was, "What parts of Scripture are speaking most vividly into this season?" We talked about this at our staff meeting this week and Derek Lightbourne commented on a passage in Acts that he thought spoke very clearly to our current season and the way we should travel into the future.

Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers. (Acts 9:31)

It's a fairly ordinary passage in some ways, but it speaks of some beautiful qualities, which we all at the meeting felt God wanted to see flourish in the parish at this time.

- The first quality is biblical *shalom* - the peace of God. This peace is the peace of right relationships with one another. This sort of peace is a sign of God's blessing on God's people.
- We were also all attracted to the idea of the church being built up through this time - not just surviving but thriving, as God gives us new opportunities to love and serve God and others.
- 'The fear of the Lord' is a biblical way of speaking about reverence for God. And when the words 'the Lord' are used here they also suggest the risen Jesus, Lord of the church. We want reverence for God and for Jesus our risen Saviour to breathe through our church's life.
- The comfort of the Holy Spirit is not just that which keeps us comfortable, but also the unfailing resourcing that the Holy Spirit provides to renew and enable the church as we continue to follow Christ and his way.
- The church increased in numbers. Increase in numbers is something we should seek, because God came into our world as Jesus in order to be known by all. We want our church to be a place where people are coming to faith and bringing others to faith.
- And finally, to return to the start of the passage, Luke who wrote the Book of Acts, speaks of 'the church' (not churches) throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria. He clearly had a sense for the unity of all aspects of what God was doing in and through those who followed Christ. We seek to grow in unity as a staff and as a parish, and we also recognise that although the church is at work in other places, - neighbouring parishes, the wider diocese, and throughout the world - it is all God's church.

Our reflections on this Bible passage inspired us to look forward to what God will do as we continue to put our faith in God and follow the way of Christ. God is always at work and simply cannot be confined by lockdown or anything else. Let us continue to love and serve God wholeheartedly, and see what God will do in us and through us.

With my warm greetings in Christ.

Peter Bengt

Vicar
(Anglican Parish of Lower Hutt)