

The View from the Vicarage - 20th March 2020

Dear all,

I want to start by thanking all those who have written back either to me or Richard expressing thanks for the letter I wrote to you on Tuesday evening. (If for any reason you haven't seen it yet, it can be found at <http://www.stmaryspb.org.uk/CoronavirusPastoralLetter.pdf>). As many of you have noted, it was not an easy thing to write, and I have truly appreciated all the phone calls, emails, and letters that I have received in response to the sad situation we now find ourselves in. Thank you also for your prayers and good wishes towards Meryl. As was expected, her school closed on Friday, though we do not yet know whether it will serve as an education centre for key workers children and if she will be expected to contribute to that if so. But the most important thing is that we are both well, and in all honesty we are hoping that one silver lining in this dark cloud is that we might get to see a bit more of each other during the week than we normally do!

This letter to you could potentially be the first of an occasional series of newsletters, giving you information on where we stand as a parish, whether there is any new guidance from the Diocese that will affect us, directions to resources to help you continue your life of prayer and worship, and so on. I would be interested to hear from you as to whether you would find that helpful or not.

Worship in church

To be clear, there are no public acts of worship taking place, and this is likely to last for some time. What that exactly means is that attending services in church is not an option for the general congregation. Bishop Alan has been very clear with clergy that services are expected to continue if at all possible, especially on Sundays, and that efforts should be made to share these acts of worship digitally via the Internet. Currently, he has said that those regular services for which we would normally gather, principally on Sunday but also midweek Eucharist's and Morning and Evening Prayer, should be attended only by licensed clergy, Readers and Lay Leaders of Worship (which is a category of lay minister that we currently do not have at St Mary's). This means that, barring exceptional circumstances, services at St Mary's will have physically present only myself and, where possible, Richard. I am sure I don't need to tell you how sad and difficult this is for me, and I know it must also be so for you. But we must do as we are told and remember that this is all to keep us safe.

So, our Parish Eucharist will continue to take place on Sunday at 10am, but access for yourselves and for the wider parish community will only be online. Details of how you can access it are below.

Online presence and livestreaming

Our online presence is now where we will have to focus a great deal of our attention and efforts. If you have not yet, please consider adding www.stmaryspb.org.uk to your Internet favourites tab, or even making it your home screen when you load your web browser. You will continue to find there the weekly news/readings sheet (most likely just readings as there can be little "normal" news while we are not able to meet for worship or events), and important documents like my initial letter this week and potentially other things like this news sheet may also be posted there as well.

But you will also find much more. Towards the bottom of the page you will find our Twitter and now Facebook presence has been embedded, so that at a glance you can follow along with our presence on social media. I strongly encourage you to engage as often as possible, even daily, with our Facebook page in particular, as that is where we will be broadcasting our services. The direct link to that webpage is <https://www.facebook.com/stmaryspb/>.

Note well that you **do not** need to have a Facebook account in order to view any of the content on the church's Facebook page. You will have a cleaner and more intuitive experience if you do, but if you do not then all you should have to deal with is banners popping up every once in a while encouraging you to create an account. You can safely ignore these, and should be able to get rid of them by clicking something in the advert variously titled as "not now" or "maybe later" etc. I will say it may be worth reconsidering joining Facebook or other forms of social media if you are not on any of them currently, as it is a way to have social engagement with all sorts of people without being at risk of ill health. But there are many reasons why people steer clear of signing up for things which involve creating a personal online presence, and the good news is that you will be able to access our Facebook content whether you have an account with them or not. If you do have a Facebook account, I strongly encourage you to "Like" our page which will mean it will be easier for you to find it the next time you visit Facebook, and under Video you can also click the bell icon to get a notification to your device each time we start broadcasting so know when to "tune in".

Spiritual Communion

I have made a video about this which you can find either on our website by scrolling down to the bottom and going through the videos until it comes up, or directly at the Facebook link here: <https://www.facebook.com/246690152075939/videos/2662065330736440/>. The Church of England has just today released some guidance on this church teaching, although it is almost impossible to find on their website. We will put a direct link to it on our website for easier access. Please watch my video and read this document before Sunday if possible, as it may help you to feel more connected to the Eucharist I will celebrate in church on Sunday.

Publicly broadcast church services

If watching our services over the internet doesn't appeal to you, one small silver lining in this dark cloud is that there seems to be more of an impetus behind the public broadcasting networks to bring religious content to the nation via television and radio. Much is being made of the Archbishop of Canterbury's "National Broadcast" which will be live on BBC Radio 4 at 8:10am and available to listen to anytime shortly afterwards at the BBC's dedicated Sunday Worship webpage at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006qnds>. Below is a full list of week to week broadcasting of church services, though it is almost entirely on radio.

Television programmes:

Songs of Praise Sundays at 1.15pm on BBC 1

Radio programmes:

Prayer for the Day daily at 5.43am on Radio 4

Sunday Worship Sundays at 8.10am on Radio 4
Daily Service Monday to Friday at 9.45am on Radio 4 Longwave and DAB

Lent Talks Wednesdays at 8.45pm on Radio 4

Celebration (Act of worship) Sundays at 7.30pm on BBC Radio Wales
Choral evensong - Wednesdays at 3.30pm and the same service is repeated Sundays at 3pm on Radio 3

Keeping church open

The current advice from the Archbishops is that, despite acts of worship needing to be private, church buildings themselves should be open to the public as much as possible, so that people can come in and pray privately. Ordinarily this would fall to our Watchers and Welcomers, but I am very conscious of the fact that very few who are currently on Heather Hawkes rota for this are under 70. So I am appealing to those who have not done this before and who are in a younger age bracket to help with keeping our church open. We will of course need to observe all the social distancing measures and hygiene guidelines.

One enhancement that we are soon due to have is that we should be getting wireless internet installed in the church at the beginning of April to help with our livestreaming, and that will mean that those who are needing to work from home and are inclined to help could continue at least some of their internet based work from church. Please let either myself or Richard know if you think you might be able to help with this, and thank you to those who have already offered to do so.

Prayer Resources

In my initial letter I gave the link to the Church of England's dedicated prayer resource page for the Coronavirus (<https://www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/coronavirus-covid-19-liturgy-and-prayer-resources>). Now I want to give a few more resource options for how you might continue to pray and reflect on the Scriptures at home.

- You can find services of Morning, Evening, and Night Prayer from the Church of England online at <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/join-us-daily-prayer> where everything is arranged for you in one place including the readings of the day.
- There is also an app called "Daily Prayer" which you can download to your smartphone or tablet (follow the link on the web page above or search for "daily prayer" in your app store and look for the blue and white logo) that reproduces the same content as the webpage above. However the app allows you to change font size (very helpful!) and gives you the option to choose whether to pray in modern language, or to use the Book of Common Prayer/traditional language.
- The "Time to Pray" app by the same people has the two shorter daily offices of Prayer During The Day and Night Prayer only, and you may feel that this is a gentler start. The benefit to both of these is that the services here are the "official" prayers of the Church and you will be praying them along with Anglicans throughout the country and all over the world.

- Pray As You Go: <https://pray-as-you-go.org/>. A short (11-12 minutes) daily act of prayer and worship, available online or as a tablet and smartphone app (search for “pray as you go” in your app store and look for the headphone logo). This easy to use, beautifully produced site uses music and pictures to help you pray and reflect with a passage of Scripture. Follows the Roman Catholic calendar, but widely used by Christians of all traditions. There are also special seasonal meditations.
- The Northumbria Community: <https://www.northumbriacommunity.org/offices/how-to-use-daily-office/>. Short but poetic forms of daily prayer in the “Celtic” style.
- Word Live: <https://content.scriptureunion.org.uk/wordlive/living-faith>. Daily Bible study and prayer points from Scripture Union.

In addition I will be making available soon a booklet of prayers that you can print off at home to use whenever is helpful. I will also be taking the opportunity over the next few weeks to redesign our standard order of service books that we use on Sundays, and when that is done you will find it even easier to join in from home with the Eucharist taking place in church. In the meantime, Richard will make available on our website the usual readings sheet with the Collect and Post Communion prayer, and hopefully the words to a couple of hymns that you might even be brave enough to try singing along to at home. Remember, we sing to please God, and he doesn't care how tone deaf we might think we are!

One last suggestion. If you have either an Amazon Echo or Google Home Pod at home, then the Church of England has an app for that too! I've not tried it out much myself, but we are being encouraged to remind people of this.

- If you have Amazon Echo, say “Alexa, open the Church of England.”
- If you have Google Home, say “Hey/Ok Google, talk to the Church of England.”

And finally...

Just to end on a light-hearted note, I hope you enjoy this picture, or “meme” that has been going around the Internet recently.

With love and prayers,
Fr Stefan

