

Letter from the Vicar

Friday 3 July 2020
St Thomas, Apostle

My Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I write to you on the eve of what has been dubbed 'Super Saturday' – a day when yet more of the lockdown restrictions are relaxed including the opening of places of worship, pubs, hairdressers, and many 'non-essential' shops. Much has happened during the last week to make us question whether it is wise for so many venues to be opening up at the same time. I fully understand the fear and reticence this may bring for some, especially in the light of last weekend when half a million people descended upon Bournemouth beach. I hope tomorrow does not live-up to its billing in the press! One certainly has to question the common sense of some of the British public, upon which so much of our safety amidst these restrictions depends. But I can also understand the relief, joy, and excitement of many who long to be able to return to their spiritual home, or who desperately need a haircut! In all these things the benefits need to be weighed-up against the risks. We are still in the grip of pandemic; the virus has not gone away as we have seen in Leicester this last week where stricter restrictions have been reintroduced as the number of confirmed cases of C-19 rose.

But that picture is not uniform across the country. If I have read the data correctly, Hertfordshire has 3 confirmed cases per 100,000 people. That would mean that Hemel has just over 3 confirmed, tested, cases at the present with its population of ca 120,000 people. The risk is there but so too are the precautionary measures to try and prevent the spread and protect the vulnerable.

As a Church, the Churchwardens and Ministry Team have been duty bound to take all this into consideration in our deliberations over whether to re-open for Public Worship or not at this time. The Church nationally, and the Government, have issued clear guidance and stressed that we are permitted to return to Public Worship but are not obliged to at present. Having weighed-up the risks through completing an extensive Risk Assessment we believe we have mitigated as much of the risk as possible and hold that a trip to the supermarket has a higher level of risk than returning to church. That being said, I must stress that it is for you to decide for yourselves whether you are ready/able to return. I know that many of our congregation are on the vulnerable and sheltering list and for whom a return to church is not permitted until August. I know that others are part of a bubble where someone is being protected. I know that others think we, our society, are moving too fast and there is not enough evidence either way to confirm or disprove whether this is the right decision. Whatever your reasons for not coming to church, I understand. I hope that you will still feel part of our congregation and be able to engage with our recording of the Parish Eucharist which will go out later in the day – we hope at 6.00pm, if technology permits, but please bear with us this week as this is, once again, new territory.

For those who are able and want to return to Public Worship this weekend, here's what to expect. Firstly, it will be a delight to welcome you back but it should be noted it will not be a return to services as normal – not yet anyway. For instance we are not permitted to sing so our music will be recordings of hymns. Unless you are members of the same family/bubble you will be required to sit 2 metres apart from your neighbour. You will be required to use hand sanitiser on both entry to and departure from church, and are most welcome to use it during the service. The Peace will not be able to be shared in a physical way nor are we able to use the Communion rail. Instead we will receive in one kind – the Body of Christ (the use of the common cup is still suspended) – at standing stations at the Chancel step. We will be using the nave Altar (as we do for All Age Services) so that no matter where you are seated you can see what is going on (pillars permitting). The Children's Room and activity bags are out of commission and Junior Church remains suspended. Only 50 people will be permitted entry into each service so that social distancing can be observed and on entry we will require your

contact details for track and trace, as per Government guidelines. These details will only be used for this purpose and will be kept for 21 days. As we have to limit the number of people joining us for Worship entry will be on a first come first seated basis. It would be both wonderful and problematic to be inundated this Sunday. Please note that the Eucharist will be offered twice on Sunday and once on Wednesday, and up to 50 people can attend each of these services:

Sunday	8.00am	Holy Communion (<i>Book of Common Prayer; no music or sermon</i>)
Sunday	10.00am	The Parish Eucharist (<i>Common Worship, music and sermon</i>)
Wednesday	10.00am	Holy Communion (<i>Book of Common Prayer; no music or sermon</i>)

And finally we will not be able to offer any refreshments after the service. When we put all this together it will, inevitably, feel quite different. And yet, at the heart of what we are doing there is very little change since we, and all who are able, are coming together to share in the meal of God's Kingdom whereby we are fed and sustained as we offer prayer and praise to almighty God.

The phrase 'unprecedented' has been banded about quite a bit during this pandemic but in the case of re-opening a place of worship, whilst still observing various restrictions, it certainly is unprecedented. In the 15 years I have been ordained (today is actually my anniversary of Orders) I have never experienced anything like it and hope and pray I never will again. Our return to 'normal' is measured and phased. I look forward to the day when all the phases have been completed, when no-one is sheltered or excluded, and we are once again worshipping in glorious song, next to our neighbours, sharing the peace, etc etc... but for now, we are in this phase.

On Thursday of this week it was very moving to see approximately 30 people come to St John's to line the route along Station Road as Stella Chandler's coffin made its way to the crematorium. I must confess despite having an inquisitive 3yr old in tow (who wanted to know what was going on) I welled-up. Knowing that that farewell was all we were able to offer Stella, a long-standing member of the congregation, at this time was incredibly sad and yet at the same time very fitting. Her proud time in the Land Army was honoured when a Regimental Association Standard was dipped as her coffin drove-by.

As always please be assured of my prayers and best wishes for the coming week. I hope to see as many as are able to join us this weekend for Mass. Regardless I hope you stay safe and well, confident and enfolded in the love of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

In Christ,



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