

## Letter from the Vicar

Friday 10 July 2020

My Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I don't know about you, but for me this last week has definitely had a hint of familiarity as some of my previous routines pre-lockdown were phased back into use. This of course started on Sunday when we were able to hold our first Public Acts of Worship. I presided at both the 8.00am and 10.00am Eucharists with mixed emotions and expectations: half of me was elated to be back leading you, God's people, in prayer and praise in person, whilst the remaining half was terrified the plans we had put in place would not stand-up and that we would be either over-run with worshippers and have to turn people away or be disappointingly empty and joyless. However, I'm pleased to report that the plans we put in place to manage and mitigate the risks when groups gather indoors all stood up to the test. Out of a possible physical attendance of 50 people at each service, 8 people came to the 8.00am and 35 people came to the 10.00am. Some wore masks throughout, others like myself and Ruth wore them during the distribution of Communion. I anticipate that we may well have higher attendance this week but if you are worried about spending time indoors with other people please be assured that we are keeping the church well ventilated and the 8.00am will most likely remain the quieter service. I have also been very heartened by all the comments I have received about the feel the Parish Eucharist had to those who were able to join the service virtually on Sunday from 6.00pm. This is going to be our practice now until we are fully-open with no restrictions. Please do not feel pressurised into returning to Church – only when you feel able to return should you do so. Until then we will continue to pray for you and long for your return.

On Monday I was able to hold the first of many face to face pastoral conversations. During these last months most of these have taken place either on Zoom or the phone. What a blessing to be able to talk to someone in person and really listen to them – body language as well as words and silence. On Tuesday, amongst other things such as chairing a meeting of the Deanery Chapter, I conducted a funeral at the Crematorium where 20 people are now permitted to enter the Chapel. On Wednesday I presided at the 10.00am Eucharist with 11 of us present. This service was held in the South Aisle rather than the Lady Chapel so that we could accommodate more people in accordance with the required distancing. It had the potential to feel quite remote and yet it felt very intimate... and again it was a joy to be with people I have not seen (in worship) for a long time. I was then able to dash home to host our Zoom Coffee Morning since we are still not able to offer our usual hospitality. Wednesday concluded with a wedding interview - the conversation taking place under a gazebo in the Vicarage garden for it was persisting it down!

Thursday, I interred in our Memorial Garden the remains of someone who died just before lockdown and spent much of the day on admin and at my desk. But it started like all the other days this week with being able to say the Divine Office (Morning Prayer) in my stall in the Lady Chapel. It has been a real boost to me to be back in the Chapel every day as, from the moment I came looking around the parish whilst considering if I wanted/felt called to apply to be your vicar, I have felt able to pray in the church. During lockdown, I must confess, I have not always found it that easy to pray but nonetheless have persevered and prayed for you all. This week has felt like a return from exile and, for whatever reason, praying has felt easier and more grounded.

My week has concluded with 3 things that are not normal events for me but yet symbolise a return to something like normal. Firstly, some friends of ours invited my family to go camping with them last night at Berkhamsted School. Camping is not something I am particularly fond of – especially in the rain – but to be able to see friends and do something different was exciting. Everything was managed very well and all the usual precautions were observed and the girls loved camping – even if they did wake me up at 5.00am! Tonight, tired from camping we indulged in a McDonald's feast. I'm not sure

whether I should apologise for this, but again it was seen as a treat by my girls (not having had one for 4 months) and meant I didn't have to do any washing-up! Win-win. And tomorrow we shall visit Emma's parents on the south coast giving the girls a chance to frolic on the beach and see their grandparents.

Things are beginning to return to 'normal' for me and my family. I am beginning to return to more of the everyday functions of a Parish Priest, for which I am most grateful. But I know that this is not the case universally. Many people are still incredibly vulnerable and are rightly following the guidance to remain isolated or sheltering. Others have been made redundant, remain on furlough, or are still struggling to manage family and work commitments. Some are extremely anxious about commuting to work on public transport. Others are desperately seeking employment. And in the midst of all this are our key workers who are simply exhausted and the thousands of families mourning loved ones who have died during lockdown and who have not been able to give them the send-off they would have liked. Our society is going to take a long time to recover from this. But it will. 2020 will be a year ingrained into everyone's story and will become a talking point in the future. Phase by phase we will return to something like normal or the 'new normal'. But as we do so we all need to be asking ourselves the crucial questions of what do we want this 'normal' to look like? And how are we going to help that come about?

As a Parish we will have lots of questions to ask (and try to answer). I look forward to exploring these with you and trying to shape our witness here both in the weeks and months to come, and for the longer-term future of this community. Some of these questions will no doubt be difficult, and their answers hard to comprehend or enact, but we must nonetheless be thinking proactively about our future as bearers of the Good News to this community.

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,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Mike". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above a horizontal line that extends to the right.

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