



AD CLERUM Update 9

31st March 2020

Dear Colleagues

You will have seen pictures of the new 4,000 bed NHS Nightingale Hospital built and opened in only two weeks at London's ExCel centre. It is an amazing achievement. I continue to be moved by the dedication of all who work in the NHS and the way a tidal wave of volunteering is sweeping through the country as together we rise to the challenge of this virus. London and our major cities are coping with a surge of infections. Here in the South-West, we are two to three weeks behind the curve. Although the Government's social distancing policy seems to be slowing down the spike in infections, it will happen. This is going to be a long haul and not a sprint.

Funerals

In the Diocese, the archdeacons are in conversation with the Rural Deans to see how we can help support our GPs and NHS staff. Inevitably, the death rate will rise. Our churches are already closed and funerals can only take place at the graveside or at the crematorium. The number of mourners at funerals needs to be strictly limited in order to minimize the risk of infection. As of yet, there is no national guidance from the Government about numbers and this is reflected in different rules operating in different parts of the country and indeed county. Some crematoria are limiting the numbers of mourners to five and some to two. In London, all funerals are now taking place without any congregation.

Across the county, the civic authorities have strategic plans in place for the provision of temporary mortuaries, an increase in capacity to register deaths and additional funerals. We are inviting clergy and Readers authorised for funeral ministry who are under 70, without underlying health conditions, and not subject to any other self-isolation requirement to volunteer for a crematorium rota. This will be coordinated by each archdeacon. At present, we are simply asking for the names of those willing to assist and drawing up a rota, which is ready to be used if and when the need arises. This rota may include covering services at the graveside in a civic cemetery or, where the local clergy need to self-isolate and are not available, in a churchyard of their priest's parish.

I am sending with this letter a variety of attachments, in particular guidance on the Pastoral Care of those who are dying and guidance on the Preparation and Conduct of funerals. Also appended are shortened forms of service for use at the graveside or at the crematorium as occasion demands, and a form of reflection that can be given to those who are unable to attend a funeral.

Bereavement

We all know that bereavement is a journey, often deeply painful, as a person moves from mourning to remembering. That journey is more complicated when leave-taking is inhibited. We need to be thinking about how best to minister in these circumstances, making better use of memorial services, the internment of ashes and bereavement support groups.

Mental health and self-care

All this carries a price tag for us as ministers in terms of our own well-being and mental health. It is vitally important that we pace ourselves and care for one another. To that end, I attach a further document about self-care. This link will also take you to resources on the Church of England website.

<https://exeter.anglican.org/resources/coronavirus-guidance/well-being-during-coronavirus-crisis/>

Worship and Prayer

Finally, can I salute the way so many of you are recording or streaming worship to your parishioners with huge creativity. The diocesan website has various links and resources for worship and prayer at home, plus tips on streaming:

<https://exeter.anglican.org/resources/coronavirus-guidance/coronavirus-resources/>.

The national Church of England website also offers advice about HOW to livestream: a digital tutorial for novices! <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-churches>

If you do stream, please remember that this should be done from your home, not from church. One of our Diocesan priorities is to get prayer back into the home. If nothing else, this crisis presents us with a golden opportunity to do just that. Some of you are streaming a Eucharist from home with other members of the household present. Enquiries have been made if they could invite their congregations to join in by zoom (fine) and eat bread and wine in their own home as a reminder of holy communion (not fine). To quote the guidance of the House of Bishops on this:

Participants in a streamed service of Holy Communion should not be encouraged to place bread and wine before their screens. Joining together to share in the one bread and the one cup as those physically present to one another is integral to the service of Holy Communion; this is not possible under the current restrictions, and it is not helpful to suggest otherwise.

Not everyone is up to streaming worship in this brave new digital world which has suddenly impacted on us in a big way and it is important that no one should feel under pressure to do so or compare themselves unfavourably with those churches and clergy who do. A regular phone call and a chain of prayer counts for a lot to a person who is self-isolating and is bereft of the sound of another human voice.

Looking ahead

In the last couple of weeks, mindful that not all parishes can stream their own worship, we have greatly expanded our digital output both within the Diocese and nationally, and you will be able to access these through the diocesan website. On Maundy Thursday I will lead a shortened service from my chapel in the Bishop's Palace with the renewal of ordination vows. I hope that many of you will be able to share in it with me. The order of service will be put on the website in advance so that you can join in the responses and prayers at home. A Good Friday reflection will be led by Bishop Nick, and I will be leading a short act of worship on Easter Day with Bishop Jackie and Bishop Nick. All these services will be uploaded on the website at 10am on the day in question.

I write to you on a day when the Church remembers the poet John Donne. In one of his sermons, he says:

'No man ever saw God and lived.' And yet, I shall not live till I see God; and when I have seen him I shall never die. What have I ever seen in this world that hath been truly the same thing that it seemed to me? I have seen marble buildings and a chip, a crust, a plaster, a face of marble hath pulled off, and I see brick-bowels within. I have seen beauty, and a strong breath from another tells me that that complexion is from without, not from a sound constitution within. I have seen the state of Princes and all that is but ceremony. As he that fears God, fears nothing else, so he that sees God, sees everything else: when we shall see God, we shall see all things as they are.

In this time of enforced solitude when we find ourselves contemplating our vulnerability and mortality, perhaps it is a time to go deeper, to look beneath appearances, and find in God our stability, our hope and our joy. It is God who teaches us how to see.

May God keep us all safe in his strong and tender love.

+ Robert Exon