



AD CLERUM

Christmas 2020

Dear Colleagues,

It is good to be able to greet you in these final days running up to Christmas. I write on the first day of the vaccine rollout, the logistics of which are mind-boggling. Although face-coverings, social distancing and good public health hygiene are likely to be with us for some time yet, today is a momentous achievement and a step on the road to normality.

During this month I have been joining various Deanery Chapters to hear how people are faring. It has been fantastic to discover the creative ways our churches are celebrating Advent and Christmas this year, from SW Carols online to car park carol services. I've heard about mini-Christmas tree festivals, Advent Calendar trails, Christmas Bags for Care Homes, Christingles in a Bag and Carols from the steeple. This simple scene of a baby in a manger in Molland Church porch under Exmoor skies has attracted huge interest with families travelling from neighbouring villages to see it.



As those of you who have shared in the Archdeacons' webinars will know, the latest Government advice relating to public worship is to be found on the Church of England website. Sadly, congregational singing is still not possible, but you will find information about children's activities and outdoor worship. The guidance is set out in tabular form, corresponding to the enhanced three tier system the Government introduced earlier this month <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/COVID%2019%20Permitted%20Activities%20under%203%20Tier%20System%20v2.1.1.pdf>

If there were to be a surge in the infection rate after Christmas, we should be prepared that the tier in which Devon, Torbay and Plymouth currently are, may not stay the same. So please be alert to any changes that impact your community and check the Church of England website for updates.

Holy Communion

One of the challenges during this pandemic has been the periodic closure of church buildings and negotiating the public health restrictions surrounding any celebration of the Eucharist. For Christians of all traditions, the absence of the sacrament of Holy Communion has been a painful deprivation. Since March our normal practice in the Church of England of receiving from a common cup has had to be suspended. Receiving communion under one kind is perfectly acceptable, if not ideal, and for many it will make sense that this practice is continued. Mindful that it is not possible to sanction the use of individual communion cups, the Archbishops have issued interim guidance for those clergy and PCCs who would wish to explore the option of administering communion under both kinds by a form of intinction, termed 'simultaneous administration'. This is far from straightforward, but if you would like to explore this option, then please consult their guidance: <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/COVID%2019%20Receiving%20HC%20by%20simultaneous%20administration%20v1.1.pdf>

Please be assured that there is no obligation for anyone to do consider adopting this practice, and indeed I anticipate that most churches and clergy will prefer to continue administering in one kind only, for as long as necessity requires the suspension of the common cup. It remains the clear teaching of the Church of England that those who receive Holy Communion in one kind participate fully in the sacrament of Christ's body and blood, no less than those who receive both bread and wine.

Christmas Break

Christmas this year will certainly feel very different. Gatherings of family and friends will be smaller and, depending where people live and the restrictions in force at the time, some gatherings may not happen at all. The Government has signalled a window of relaxation of restrictions around Christmas to permit families to meet and we need to make wise use of this opportunity as best we can. I am conscious that the First Sunday of Christmas falls on 27th December within this window of opportunity which may add further complications for those of you hoping to travel.

You may already have organised appropriate cover but, if not, you are welcome to take the Sunday off. You may wish to draw people's attention to the Cathedral Eucharist which is broadcast online every Sunday. Alternatively, for those who prefer to pre-record a service, you could incorporate either my Christmas address or that of Prebendary Giles King-Smith, who is scheduled to offer the diocesan sermon that

Sunday. Here is the link: <https://exeter.anglican.org/resources/worship/sunday-services-to-watch-online/>

In these ways I hope that we can all rest up over the Christmas break. I am conscious how tired we all are, some to the point of exhaustion. And not just clergy and readers. Our Diocesan Staff based at the Old Deanery have been working long hours under huge pressure and are as much in need of putting their feet up and spending quality time at home, as are hard-working parsons.

Please don't forget...

A key way of connecting with your local community and ensuring that you do not lose track of 'the fringe' will be through advertising 'in person' and 'online' your Christmas services and events via www.AChurchNearYou.com. Through its Resource Hub, you also have free access to lots of high quality pre-recorded Christmas music. Over the Christmas break you may also be interested in reading the annual Diocesan Report which can be accessed online by following this link: <https://exeter.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Diocese-of-Exeter-Annual-Report-2020-Final.pdf>

Finally, what makes a poet? The poet Luci Shaw says, 'the slender antenna of awareness combing the air for messages'. Her words also describe the task of the preacher this Christmas as we seek to speak God's word of hope to our anxious world. Here is her poem about the Incarnation:

Blue homespun and the bend of my breast
keep warm this small hot naked star
fallen to my arms. (Rest ...
you who have had so far to come.)
Now nearness satisfies
the body of God sweetly. Quiet he lies
whose vigour hurled a universe. He sleeps
whose eyelids have not closed before.
His breath (so slight it seems
no breath at all) once ruffled the dark deeps
to sprout a world. Charmed by doves' voices,
the whisper of straw, he dreams,
hearing no music from his other spheres.
Breath, mouth, ears, eyes
he is curtailed who overflowed all skies,
all years. Older than eternity, now he
is new. Now native to earth as I am, nailed
to my poor planet, caught
that I might be free, blind in my womb
to know my darkness ended,
brought to this birth for me to be new-born.

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May God bless you, your friends and families this Christmas with his peace and give you eloquence to speak with joy of the Word-made-flesh.

With my thanks for our partnership in the Gospel,

+ Robert Exon