



AD CLERUM

Epiphany 2021

Dear Colleagues,

‘Arise, shine; for your light has come; the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. Though night still covers the earth, and thick darkness the peoples, above you the Holy One arises, and above you God’s glory appears.’

At least we know for certain that we are three old sinners,
That this journey is much too long, that we want our dinners,
And miss our wives, our books, our dogs,
But have only the vaguest idea why we are what we are.
To discover how to be human now
Is the reason we follow this star.

You will recognise the inspiring words from Isaiah 60 that are often read on the Feast of the Epiphany, but you may not recognise the quotation from W. H. Auden’s, *For the Time Being*. This long poem is subtitled *A Christmas Oratorio* and the lines quoted above are spoken by the three wise men. Auden wrote the poem in New York in 1941 as he felt his way back into the Christian faith he had abandoned as a young man. The poem takes the form of a series of dramatic monologues spoken by the characters in the Christmas story and events are portrayed as if they occurred in the contemporary world. Set against the backcloth of the seemingly unstoppable rise of Nazism, the poem stands as a powerful expression of the meaning of Christmas. The wise men follow the star in order ‘to discover how to be human’ in a violent world immersed ‘in thick darkness’ that had lost its moral compass and seemed bent on self-destruction.

We too are discovering ‘how to be human’ though in very different circumstances. This pandemic continues to mete out painful lessons about our mortality and vulnerability, but as we face another national lockdown it is also teaching us lessons about neighbourliness and community. Too often society is a place of strangers whereas what we need is an extended family of friends. A community is where we create the things we cannot buy in the shops and which no Government can legislate for like friendship, generosity, loyalty and trust. By their very nature, these things

exist only as they are shared. Community is society with a human face. It a place of belonging, the place where we learn 'how to be human' and discover that we are not alone. In this enterprise we each have a part to play and the opportunity to witness to a vision of 'how to be human' measured by nothing less than 'the full stature of Christ' (Ephesians 4.13). At its best, the Church of England is a great community-building institution. We have a lot of experience to bring to the table as our communities cope with this lockdown and, in spite of the grim litany of statistics flooding social media and our television screens, this should give us confidence and hope.

Navigating the lockdown

The updates from Public Health England that record a daily rise in the number of infections and deaths from Covid are concerning. It is clear that the latest mutation of the virus is highly transmissible though thankfully not more virulent. Sadly, the full impact of families and friends gathering at Christmas is yet to be reflected in the figures. As a consequence, the rate of infection is likely to rise still higher.

I am conscious how hard everyone has worked to ensure that our church buildings are Covid-secure spaces so that people can attend worship without undue anxiety. According to Public Health England, in the forty weeks of the pandemic running up to but excluding Christmas, there were only 47 cases of Covid that seem to have been linked to a place of worship. This represents only a fraction of the cases and it is remarkable. The fact that in this third national lockdown the Government is permitting church buildings to remain open both for private prayer and for communal worship is a tribute to how effectively clergy and lay leaders have risen to the challenge of arresting the spread of this disease. It is also a recognition by the Government of how significant our buildings are in the life of their communities for people's mental health and well-being. They are holy ground where we learn 'how to be human'. You can view the Government guidance here:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/949536/NationalLockdownGuidance.pdf

Over the Christmas break, a number of you were in touch with me to ask about the appropriateness of suspending communal worship on Sundays in light of the rising tide of infections. I continue to hope that this will not generally be necessary in the South-West, at least not at the moment, but we need your help to keep the situation under constant review. So please review your risk assessment(s) and, if at all possible, keep your church buildings open at least for private prayer.

Ideally, it would also be good to hold some sort of service in at least one church in the benefice, either in person or for broadcast on line. However, if you and your churchwardens are clear that, in your own local situation, none of the church buildings in your benefice will be able to offer communal worship on Sundays safely as required by Canon Law, then you should consult your PCC(s), and with their agreement write to me to seek a temporary dispensation. I can assure you I will look upon any such request sympathetically. A dispensation is important so that we can build up a coherent picture, but also protect you from the complaints of disgruntled

parishioners who may disagree with your assessment of the local situation. These are difficult judgement calls. Whatever you decide, please know that I and my colleagues on the senior staff will back you.

To be frank, it is rarely the church service that is the problem, but the mingling before and afterwards. *This needs to be discouraged rigorously and it would be wise to review your stewarding arrangements for when people arrive and leave the church as part of your risk assessment.*

Please make sure that your church websites, social media pages and noticeboards are kept up-to-date with clear information about where people can access online or telephone services or receive pastoral support. Throughout the weeks ahead, we need to remain vigilant and cautious. Together we need to ensure that 'the voice of prayer is never silent'.

Older retired clergy operating under Permission to Officiate and Readers Emeriti should not feel under any pressure to assist, and clergy and Readers who are shielding for themselves or a member of their household should continue to broadcast from home as best they can.

Advice and Support

As always, the archdeacons are available to talk through any concerns you may have. They will be holding a webinar tomorrow afternoon (Wednesday 6th January) at 4.30pm. It will follow previous formats with scene-setting by the Reverend Professor Gina Radford, followed by an hour of Q&A. You are welcome to submit questions in advance to Archdeacon Andrew or via the chat function during the webinar.

We will be continuing to provide weekly pre-recorded video sermons which can be downloaded from the diocesan website in advance:

<https://exeter.anglican.org/resources/worship/sunday-services-to-watch-online/>

This page also lists churches which livestream services and information about the national weekly online service and Daily Hope phone line. If you would like advice or training in providing online worship, then please email

communications@exeter.anglican.org.

Supporting our Schools

This lockdown is proving to be particularly tough for our schools, for their staff and governors, and for children and parents, particularly those in exam years. I will be writing later this week to leaders of our church schools in Devon to express our support, but you may wish to find ways of doing so locally. Like the rest of us, we need to pray for their resilience amid the shifting sands of Government policy.

Supporting the NHS

Throughout this pandemic, there has been immense support for the NHS and its front line workers. The emergence of 'Clap for Carers' on Thursday evenings was a significant experience of solidarity in the first lockdown. Such support binds communities together and our doctors, nurses, chaplains, carers and key workers, all of whom are giving of themselves sacrificially, need our prayer. Are there ways you

could offer tangible support to your local GP surgery, care home or NHS staff at this stressful time?

Learning from Covid: a Diocesan Resource for Lent

It may be that you already have plans in place for Lent. If not, the Mission and Ministry team, supported by colleagues from across the Diocese, are encouraging people to reflect on their stories from the Covid-19 pandemic via a specially designed Lent study course. The course will be suitable for use by groups meeting either in person (if allowed) or via Zoom, and be based on videos and other resources. It is designed to enable people across Devon to listen, explore and reflect theologically both on their own experiences and those of others over the past twelve months and this latest lockdown. The resources will be released in parts following a CMD preparatory session on 28th January at 2pm via Zoom, led by Prebendary Philip Sourbut, Director of Mission and Ministry and Jon Curtis, Lay Discipleship Project Manager. Please email m&m@exeter.anglican.org to book a place on the introductory session. Details of how to access the materials will be included in *Roots & Shoots* nearer the time.

Diocesan Clergy Conference

We all look forward to the roll out of the vaccines that have been produced in record time by various research groups based in Germany and Oxford. At the same time, we can all recognise the logistical challenge of immunising the entire British population. However efficiently the NHS manages to do this, we cannot be certain that we shall be in a position to hold safely our residential Diocesan Clergy Conference in Cirencester scheduled for this summer. We have therefore decided to postpone the conference to **20-23 June 2022**. Please put the new dates in your diary, but hang on to the existing dates 28-30 June 2021 because, if at all possible, we would still like to use these days to offer opportunities for theological reflection, albeit remotely via Zoom.

The changing face of Devon

Inevitably, the biggest challenge confronting our nation will be recovering from Covid and its aftermath, but there will also be the added challenge of life outside the European Union. It will be interesting to see how the new trade agreements play out for the farming and fishing industries of the South-West. As far as rural communities are concerned, we will see the beginning of a quiet revolution in agriculture and land management. In combination, these changes are likely to affect our county profoundly.

As a result of leaving the European Union, direct payments formerly given to farmers under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAPs) will be phased out by the Government. The payments will be replaced by a new scheme of support through **Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELMs)**. The new mantra shaping Government policy is 'public money for public good'. There will be three foci of financial support:

- to incentivize food production in an environmentally sustainable way

- for locally targeted improvements to the natural environment, including hedgerows, heathlands, rights of way, species management and biodiversity, and educational infrastructure
- for the creation and improvement of coastal wetlands and woodlands

These changes in national policy reflect the strength of environmental concern in Britain today. All change generates uncertainty and, in addition to understandable concerns about the impact of the latest lockdown, we need to be alert to a degree of anxiety in the farming community. The new arrangements will undoubtedly accelerate changes that are already under way in British agriculture and it is likely that many smaller farms in Devon will go out of business.

‘For you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings’ (Malachi 4.2)

On this Feast of the Epiphany, we rejoice in the revelation of God’s love to us in Christ, a love that embraces both Jew and Gentile and brings healing to fractured humanity. Together let us follow his star and discover how to be human. Above all, let us discover the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Bishop Nick, Bishop Jackie and my colleagues on the senior staff join me in assuring you of our support and prayers at this season. With you, we pray for grace to persevere with joy.

With my thanks for our partnership in the Gospel,

+ Robert Exon