

Diocese of Exeter Lent Course 2021: THESE ARE OUR STORIES [Lent in a Pandemic Year] Emily's Story

My name is Emily and I live in London now. And I have not always lived in London, but I have been here for just over ten years, but I grew up in a small village in mid-Devon, and I am a deputy Head Teacher at a secondary school in east London. So my year I think has probably been quite different to a lot of people's, because for the most part I have carried on going to school. It has not been quite as normal, but I have carried on going to work and so in some ways that has been a real privilege and a really great thing to keep happening, because in lots of ways it has carried on as normal, as close to normal, as probably more normal than for lots of people. And it has meant that we still, those of us going to school still see people and we have interactions with some students; and we have still got some of the like lovely routines and routines and things that remind us of normality, which I know lots of my friends and family do not have. And we have not had the sort of strange experience of being in our own home for months and months on end; although we have had some periods of that.

It was a big change for all of us, especially initially, and we have talked a lot about this metaphor of like sifting. And of how in a crisis it feels like that things are sifted, and you end up with what was really there all along and – and actually that was really a lovely experience in some ways in our school, because what we felt that was that when the other things were taken away, what we were left with was really strong relationships and we worked really hard to keep those going. And, also important rhythms and routines. We have a big assembly every Friday, and normally in school, with the whole school in the hall together and it is not particularly whizzy or exciting, but we carried on doing it. So we made a little you-tube video and we uploaded it every week and it was not amazing but we found that hundreds of our children were watching it every week, and sending comments on our online platform. And I suppose we realised the power of those rituals and routines that we have, and the coming together and how important they are to all of us; even though when you are doing them week by week they do not always seem so important.

I suppose when you cannot have something, you really value the bits of it that you can have, and we really valued that. I remember speaking to a teacher in the first lockdown and her saying: 'It is fine, I am doing the work and it is fine; but I miss like the funny moments in lessons and I miss when children say things that I did not expect; and we just do not have the joy as much now, and even though it was only phone calls initially where we would connect with our students, they were really, really important'. They became really important and now we are doing more live lessons, and in those live lessons we have increased the number of live lessons so that we have time to connect with our students. Those moments where you are behind a computer screen, and it is not what any of us would want but those moments are the most important. And when we are actually working with our children and we can hear them and they are responding, and yes, we are working with building those relationships.

At church, when it is a normal year, I would go on a Sunday morning and most of the time I go with the kid's groups and I really love it. I love being part of the team and I think I probably learn most of what I know about faith and reflect a lot through working with the children, but also thinking things through beforehand and discussing, and questioning, debating and talking about how 'What things are real for us now'. So that obviously changed a lot this year and there were a few things initially that everybody found it hard to be online and getting used to all the technology, and we had several meetings where everyone was shouting a lot and could not really understand everything everyone was doing. And then we gradually got to learn how to use the mute button strategically and games that work, and it was great for them to see other people and to meet and connect. But it was also really hard. We have definitely found on 'Zoom' the children. They enjoy being together, but they tolerance, the amount of time we can be together, needs to be shorter and the sort of content needs to be slightly easier; but we have definitely really appreciated having time together online.

I think gratitude has been really important this year, and actually just this week we had an assembly about hopefulness. And the teacher leading it spoke to our students and said: 'One of the best ways of being hopeful and one of the best ways of finding moments of joy is to be grateful'. And he talked about different ways of building a practise in. He says: 'One thing you know guys, you can develop this as a habit and you can get better at it'. And I think that is something that I have learnt this year and I hope that our children in school have learnt as well; to notice the good bits, and again I suppose about when there is a lack, you notice the bits you do have more. And, actually when our students came back to school in September, there was this real atmosphere – a different kind of energy to normal where it felt like we were all so pleased to be back together. That the students really made the most of their learning and we felt really like privileged and pleased to be back together. So yes, I think gratitude has been a bit of a theme, a developing theme throughout the year and it is hard sometimes. I think I have definitely had times in the year where I have not felt that and where I felt like 'fed up' with things or that things are not fair or it is difficult that there are some people who can still see their family who live nearby and I cannot. And I think that has probably been a theme for lots of other people as well. It is funny how there are lots of things we cannot do, of course, but now in London anyway, everybody loves getting a coffee and going for a walk, because that is the thing we can do. And you can see that people are like chuffed to be out and with one other person and having their coffee. And there is a sense of real gratitude for the things that we can do and that where we can be together. So yes, that has been important for me this year.