



AD CLERUM

July 2021

Dear Colleagues,

The word holiday, long before it was attached to seaside jaunts or cheap flights to exotic foreign destinations, literally meant a ‘holy-day’. In the Middle Ages this included obligatory attendance at church. We bridle at the thought of obligation, but the bonus of the medieval system was that people learned to rest and pray on a regular basis as the ground of their ‘re-creation’.

Today we’ve lost the spiritual link between holidays and holiness, and with it the opportunity to forge a personal rhythm that will enable us to thrive. We’ve imprisoned holiness in shrines and stained-glass windows, and detached it from the rough and tumble of daily life. As we emerge from three lockdowns and recover our equilibrium, or at least try to, it’s a link we need to rekindle because it is fundamental to human flourishing.

In the Bible, the Hebrew for holy is *qadosh*. It is first applied not to a place or a building, or even to a person, but to time. ‘And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because God rested from all the work that he had done in creation’ (Gen. 2.3).

Holiness is first and foremost about how we use our time. Interestingly, holiness is not linked to work, but to rest. This is the ancient wisdom that lies behind the Jewish observance of the Sabbath. We grow in holiness by learning to let go and to rest because when we rest we become more ourselves, and when we are more ourselves God is better able to draw close to us. In the words of the apostle Peter, ‘Cast all your cares upon God because God cares about you’ (1 Peter 5.7).

I’m conscious of just how many of us are exhausted. We have all been under considerable pressure and it has taken a heavy toll. God does not delight in exhaustion or being burnt-out. This summer, whether we are going away or staying at home, let’s make sure that we take the opportunity simply to rest, to put our feet up, to do nothing. Let go and let God draw close. A friend once described prayer to me as ‘wasting time with God’. It’s not a bad definition.

Step 4

Many of you will have shared in the Archdeacons’ recent webinar following the decision of the Government to lift the majority of legal restrictions. In response to the so-called ‘Roadmap Out Of Lockdown’, the Church of England has issued comprehensive new guidance. You can access it by following this link:

<https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance>

The approach taken by the Government is to promote guidance that emphasises the personal and corporate responsibility of individuals and organisations to protect others and themselves. As clergy and lay leaders, you are best placed to know your communities and buildings, and we will support you in the unenviable task of steering a path in the months ahead, including making fresh risk assessments in the light of the latest information we have.

For some people and in some parts of Devon, the Government's restrictions seemed unnecessary or overly prescriptive. For others, the easing of restrictions has been met with considerable anxiety because it seems to bring additional risk to themselves or to others vulnerable to the virus. Whatever our view of the wisdom of the approach being adopted by the Government, what is abundantly clear is that this virus is not going away. Cases of Covid are once again rising and hospital admissions will rise. This is a bad time to need a hip replacement. We are embarking upon the slow journey of learning to co-exist with this virus and how best to manage risk. Health professionals tell us that the journey is likely to be measured in years, not months, and we need to have expectations that correspond to that time-frame.

In third century North Africa, St Cyprian of Carthage, reflecting on the impact of a virulent outbreak of plague in the city, wrote: 'Certain people talk as if being a Christian guarantees the enjoyment of happiness in this world and immunity from contact with illness, rather than preparing us to endure adversity in the faith that our full happiness is reserved for the future. It disturbs some that death has no favourites. And yet what is there in this world that is not common to all? Diseases of the eye, attacks of fever, weakness in limbs, are as common to Christians as to anyone else because it is the lot of all who bear human flesh. What distinguishes the righteous should be our capacity for endurance.' *(On the Mortality Rate, 8, 11-13)*

Next Steps

The pandemic has changed every aspect of life over the last eighteen months and the life of our churches is no exception. Like our fellow Christians in Carthage, we have been profoundly challenged and will continue to be in the months ahead which is why we need to rest up this summer. Like Elijah who, exhausted by Queen Jezebel's relentless pursuit of him, sat down under a broom tree and fell fast asleep, if we do not rest, the journey will be too much for us as well (1 Kings 19.1-9).

Going around the Diocese, I have been moved by the way people have stepped out in faith and I give thanks for your leadership and for deeper engagement with our local communities. Most of our parishes and Mission Communities have revealed their resilience, but some are feeling fragile and apprehensive about the future. The picture is mixed. As a Diocese, it is time to take stock so that we emerge from this extraordinary period with a clear sense of direction and a realistic plan for how to get there.

The document 'Next Steps', together with the accompanying video 'God's Vineyard', is now published on the Diocesan website. You can access it by following this link: <https://exeter.anglican.org/who-we-are/vision-strategy/vision-next-steps-2021/> It represents the crystallisation of our collective learning to date about how we take forward our vocation to 'Grow in Prayer, Make New Disciples, and Serve the people of Devon with joy'.

The document draws on the Listening in Deaneries consultation, 'For Such A Time As This', carried out in 2020 and the work of the Theological Reflections Group, a group of clergy and laity from across the Diocese who met during lockdown. It incorporates feedback from the Diocesan Synod held in May 2021 on the Church of England's Emerging Vision for the 2020s and what I learnt at first-hand during my online visits to every deanery chapter. With so many rural parishes, it also draws upon the wisdom garnered in the excellent 'Lightening the Load' toolkit and we have consulted our Growing the Rural Church team.

During the months ahead, I hope it will stimulate imaginative and realistic conversations about how our Mission Communities can develop over the next three years so that they are strong, healthy and resilient. This will help inform how our stipendiary clergy can best be deployed. As you will discover, Next Steps sets out our values for the first time, something that many organisations have found to be really helpful. Later in the year, we will be producing some Mission Community Next Step templates to help you and your own Mission Community discuss how things might work out in your local context. It is my hope that we can build a culture that is mutually supportive, working together to make bold decisions, and always willing to listen and to adapt.

We are initiating these 'Next Steps' conversations via the Archdeacons' Visitations and a series of online and in person autumn webinars/information events in each archdeaconry (dates to follow). Members of the Diocese are also welcome to comment by emailing communications@exeter.anglican.org or by using the Jamboard discussion boards that have been set up:

https://jamboard.google.com/d/1n0AF_7jzpQPoaZuufmngSWVRdJVY6AXIbnPovPQXfIM/edit?usp=sharing and <https://jamboard.google.com/d/15UIbkYBGa2S-YN8ljntzoumoNWDQ2t4xnfWshaGjHbs/edit?usp=sharing>

Going forward, there are opportunities to be grasped and challenges to be negotiated, both as a Diocese and as a nation. Doing nothing is not an option. We need our Mission Communities to be fruitful and sustainable, with thriving congregations that make a difference.

Living in Love and Faith

Since the publication of 'Living in Love and Faith' last November, Mission Communities, Deanery Synods and Chapters have been engaging with the excellent resources that the Church of England has produced. Many of you will have read the book, looked at the films, participated in the course or are planning to run the course this autumn. I know that a number of you have said that you wanted to delay running a group until you could meet in person, and I hope that now we are able to do so you have plans in place. This is an unprecedented and significant venture for the Church of England as together we seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

'Living in Love and Faith' is an invitation to all who are part of the Church to engage with the resources and contribute feedback. It is important in the process of discernment that a wide variety of perspectives are expressed, and that the voices of the laity of all ages and walks of life are heard. If you have not already planned to engage with the materials, either in the course, or as a book club, or perhaps running it café-style in services, then please do plan to do so.

The time frame for this wide engagement has now been extended and the survey will now be open to the end of April 2022, and I know many of you will be pleased by this and can plan a course for the new year or as a Lent course. After that the baton will pass to the College and House of Bishops and to the General Synod. The plan is to maintain the November 2022 General Synod meeting as the moment when a clear sense of direction is reached. Please enrol in the LLF hub <https://llf.churchofengland.org/> and use the excellent resources available to you, and encourage others to do the same, and do get in touch with the LLF team if you would like any further help or support llf@exeter.anglican.org.

Transformative change comes not in response to informed pessimism or uninformed optimism, but in response to hopeful realism. And hope is born when we see the world through the lens of our Lord Jesus Christ. As Paul says, 'If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation' (2 Corinthians 5.17). This is God's world and God invites us to build communities of grace that speak hope.

Bishop Nick, Bishop Jackie and my colleagues on the senior staff join me in sending you our good wishes and prayers for a restful summer.

With my thanks for our partnership in the Gospel,

+ Robert Exon