

BISHOP'S BULLETIN No 7

To the Licensed Clergy of Peterborough Diocese

14 April 2020



Dear friends

I hope you are able to have a relatively gentle Easter week, and to hold together the very mixed emotions and spiritual realities of this strange time.

Keeping in touch

It is important that we look out for each other, as both the pandemic and its numerous consequences will be making an impact on us as clergy, as well as on our people and communities. Many of us have our own networks and friendships to help in these times, but it is right to use diocesan structures as well, not least to ensure that nobody is missed out.

You will probably know that Charlie Nobbs and his mission team took an initiative early on, ensuring that all parish clergy had regular contact with someone on the mission team or the senior staff. I am grateful to them. However, for financial reasons which I am sure you will understand, most diocesan employees including Charlie have now been furloughed, so we are returning to more conventional means of clergy support.

I will aim to keep in touch with those whom I know are ill or have illness in their household, and Bishop John will continue to care for all our hospital, hospice, school, and prison chaplains. Steve Benoy will look after the ordinands, and Carys Walsh the curates. The archdeacons will keep in contact with their rural deans, and I am asking the rural deans (with their assistants in the larger deaneries) to be in regular touch with their parish clergy.

This may mean weekly short zoom chapter meetings, or a series of phone calls: whatever works best for each deanery. Please help your rural dean to keep in touch with you: we do need to pray for one another and to look out for our fellow clergy. And please let someone know (rural dean, my chaplain, or me) if you know that you or another priest are unwell or struggling.

And please commit to pray for your neighbouring clergy, for your rural dean, archdeacon and bishops, as we will be praying for you. We are in this together, and responsible for each other.

Making sense of the times

In our post-enlightenment world, where people look to science and technology for answers, there is an almost inevitable move to ask *Why* and *How*. Why did this virus arise and spread? How could future pandemics be prevented? Why did one person die, and another recover? How will we live after covid?

These are valid questions. They need to be asked, and if possible answered. Science, medicine, technology, and sociology all have a part to play in analysing what has happened, and hopefully preparing us for a safer future. There are also further valid questions for believers to ask: What was God doing in all this? Is there an element of judgement in what is happening?

But all these questions: scientific, sociological, and spiritual; they all miss out something very significant. We need to re-learn, as a society, to ***lament*** – to express at every level the thoughts and feelings of horror and helplessness evoked by this pestilence. I strongly suspect that only the Church, with our deep biblical roots, can teach that lesson: but first we probably need to re-learn for ourselves what lament really is, and how to do it.

Lament might seem a strange theme for the Easter season, but re-reading Job or Ecclesiastes, or Lamentations, or various of the Psalms, will show us how to live in a time of deep grief and sorrow, knowing the truth of God's triumph over all evil, and at the same time expressing our own grief and that of the wider world.

Deep Christian lament – expressing grief on our own behalf and for others, talking about Easter hope without minimising the present horror (as seen in Job 19.25; Ps 44.26; Ecc 3.1; Lam 3.21; all read in their wider context) – is part of the wisdom we have received. Before we ask *Why* him? *Why* her? may we first experience and express the deep sorrow, and allow others to do the same.

I'm going to try to express some of this in my video message for the laity this week.

The aftermath

Once this is all over, we and our society are going to need to find the right ways to memorialise the dead and what has happened. We can't and shouldn't do that yet – we must live fully through it all first – but we could put down a marker not just to explain it away historically or scientifically. We will need to note that we lived through it, that we knew the horror, and that our ever-faithful God was with us through it all.

With love in Christ

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