Clergy Letter: “Have you enjoyed your rest, Vicar?”

It will not have escaped your notice, that our church buildings were closed for services since the beginning of Lockdown. I would like to have collected a £1 for everyone who has since asked me, if I was ‘enjoying my rest’ with our buildings closed – I would have enough to go on holiday now (if anywhere was open!!).

But joking apart, this strange existence called ‘Lockdown’ and even ‘Easing of Lockdown’, has changed my job in many ways, but the church has definitely not been ‘closed’. And many of our congregation have been working hard to keep the ‘show on the road’.

***So, what has been going on?***

**Thoughts for the Day**

From Ash Wednesday, a daily ‘Lenten thought for the day’ email started to be sent out. The original plan was to continue until Easter. But Easter came and went, by which time we were into Lockdown and no longer able to meet in our church buildings, so it seemed a good idea to continue ‘thinking on a daily basis’.

So, the ‘Lenten Thought for the day’ morphed into the ‘Eastertide Thought for the Day’ which has now become simply the ‘Thought for the Day’…. And so, it continues. Much thinking has occurred and, more to the point, a daily reflection on a verse or two of the Bible has been widely appreciated. As a bonus, I would hope that every recipient’s appetite has been whetted for regular Bible reading and reflection. Long may that ‘appetite’ remain and develop.

**Parish Buddy System**

As soon as Lockdown was announced, a Parish Buddy System was put in place to connect church family members together and to provide a listening ear and offers of practical help where needed. This has been remarkably successful and has encouraged a congregation-wide system of pastoral care. As Christians, we are all called to care for our neighbours and the way that our congregation works should be the ultimate example of ‘neighbourliness’. I feel proud to belong to such a caring community of ‘Buddies’.

**Zoom services**

Yes, our buildings have been closed, but worship has *never* stopped and in fact has increased. We always say that the ‘church’ is the people not the buildings, but it is only when our buildings become inaccessible that that our commitment to that truth is ‘tested’. As a congregation, we seem to have passed the ‘test’ with flying colours. We have gone from one weekly session, in church, of Morning Prayer attended by three people, to six weekly Zoom sessions of Morning *and* Evening Prayer attended by an average of 14 people.

On Sundays, our regular congregation has grown through our online services. Some people who came infrequently to Sunday worship are now ‘zooming’ every Sunday. And even more exciting: people who preferred one church building over another, have been happy to worship altogether via Zoom. If you have not joined a Zoom service yet, please consider doing so either via your computer, or your phone. The details can be found on Page XXX

**Our Community Store**

In April, Effingham was devastated by a fire at the Village Supermarket and Bevans Butchers. The question was: ‘Where will local residents be able to buy their basic supplies without a long walk or car or bus ride?” The answer was to set up a Community Store. At first, we were delighted to have the free use of Layla’s Café and subsequently have ‘moved home’ into the Douglas Haig Pub.

Many of our congregation have been involved, but volunteers have also come forward from the Methodist and Catholic churches as well as those with no connection with our village churches. It has been a marvellous community effort, and from our church point of view, a chance to serve our neighbours in a very practical way.

**All Saints and Private Prayer.**

In June, we were pleased to start opening All Saints’ Church again for private prayer on Tuesday and Saturday mornings. We have not welcomed a huge number of people, but those who have taken advantage of the availability have been very appreciative.

**“But when will things return to normal, vicar?”**

To be honest, I don’t think that they ever will! And in some ways, that will be a blessing!

For example, I would like to think that having had a taste for daily Bible reflection, that many people will remain on that journey. I would like to think that our Parish Buddy Scheme will carry on connecting people in a supportive and loving way. I would like to think that we can maintain some sort of daily Morning and Evening Prayers in the Parish – probably online. I would like to think that those who have joined us regularly on a Sunday morning will continue to do so, wherever the worship takes place. If these ‘success stories’ become part of our Parish DNA, we will all be the better for it.

But I recognise that there are many aspects of our Parish Life that are sadly being missed and of course we will want to re-establish them, in some form as soon as we can.

To maintain Covid -free buildings without the necessity of costly professional deep cleans on a regular basis, at first out ‘in church’ services will only take place at St Lawrence, thus leaving All Saints available for private prayer. We plan to start with an 8am Sunday service at the end of August. Please see page XXX for further details

Our 10am services will continue to take place on Zoom for the foreseeable future. This is not to everyone’s taste, but the alternative is to severely restrict numbers within St Lawrence and effectively make it impossible for several vulnerable people to attend a church service at all on a Sunday.

The following prayer may help whilst we patiently wait:

*May we come to know justice and compassion and repent for those who have let the viruses of greed and lies make this situation worse.*

*May we who are merely inconvenienced remember those whose lives are at stake. May we who have no risk factors remember those most vulnerable. May we have the necessary righteous indignation in this moment to fight for transformation. May we who have the luxury of working from home remember those who must choose between preserving their health or making their rent. May we who have the flexibility to care for our children when their schools are closed remember those who have no option.*

*May we who have to cancel our trips remember those who have no safe place to go. May we who are losing our margin money in the tumult of the economic market remember those who have no margins at all. May we who settle in for a quarantine at home remember those who have no home. As fear grips our country, may we be the kind of people who stand up and who refuse to lay down. May we choose love.*

*During this time when we cannot physically wrap our arms around each other, let us yet find ways to be the loving embrace of God for our neighbours. And let us recognize that we cannot give up in this moment, and no matter what it takes; let it at least be written down in history that with our last breaths we fought for the world that ought to be. Amen*

With many blessings,

Your Rector,