

A letter to the church from Bishop Emma

“Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet ...”

Today is Maundy Thursday, normally the day on which clergy and lay leaders of the Diocese would gather in the Cathedral for a service renewing our commitment to ministry. But there is nothing normal about these days, and this year there’s no gathering. Maundy Thursday is also the day on which churches would be meeting to remember the Last Supper, when Jesus shared a meal with his friends and washed their feet. But these days we can share meals only with those we live with, and hand-washing is more likely than foot-washing.

So what does it mean to be a Christian in these unprecedented times? What is God saying to us as a church in these days?

Over the past few weeks Bishop James and I have seen the extraordinary lengths you have been going to ensure that your congregations are communicated with effectively. Many of you have been right at the centre of efforts to care for the most vulnerable in your localities. You’ve not let the restrictions constrain your faith in Jesus Christ, and you’ve found creative ways of speaking out about what faith means to you in these times. You’ve prayed earnestly for your towns and villages, for the sick and dying, and you’ve cried out to God for the pandemic to end. You’ve become experts in technology, harnessed your creative gifts to make sure worship continues and is accessible, online, via social media, through websites and even on paper. Many of you have become quite effective video editors. You’ve lit candles, and clapped our NHS heroes.

I can truly say that I have never been more proud to be a part of the church in Cumbria.

But it’s not easy is it? Holy Week is a busy week at the best of times, and these are the worst of times. The strangeness of these days has put a strain on us all. That’s why I am struck again this year by the story of Jesus washing his disciples feet. He was about to enter the hardest days of his life, and at the end of them to give his life. Yet in that upper room he did what was at the very heart of his ministry, an act of humility and service, and he washed the feet of his friends.

But do you notice what John says?: “Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up ...”. Jesus, knowing Jesus knew who he was, where he had come from and where he was going, and it was this assurance about his own identity that gave him the strength to serve.

In these days, as we wrestle with the implications of Coronavirus, let’s allow the story of Easter - the story of our humble King who defeated death only to rise again - to remind us again who we are, where we have come from, and where we are going. We are His people. That knowledge will be the motivation for our service towards each other and our local communities. That’s what will sustain us. We are His.

On April Fools’ Day last week (what a time for jokes!), someone tried to convince me that the bishops had voted for Easter to be moved to after the Coronavirus is over. It was supposed to be funny, but it missed the point. The point is that at the heart of our faith is the belief that Easter comes right where it does, in the middle of all we are enduring at the moment, as a reminder that resurrection hope is found in the midst of the darkest days, not after they’re over.

The renewal of ministry liturgy asks: “Will you be faithful in serving others and diligent in caring for those in need and trouble, in strengthening the faithful and in searching out the indifferent and lost”? Yes, we will. We will get through this. The church in Cumbria, over the weeks and months ahead, will serve with humility and love, knowing who we are, and most importantly whose we are.

We are an Easter people and resurrection is our song.

With very much love,

+Emma