

A New Normal

Restart...Revive...Renew. That's a helpful summary of what needs to happen next with our economy as we await a phased return to the lifting of current 'lockdown' restrictions. As the government struggles with difficult choices (not least between lives and livelihoods) and attempts to ameliorate pressure on the NHS we continue to pray for everyone involved – as well as for those who have already been deeply affected in so many different ways by this global pandemic.

But those three 'R's apply to church life as well – at least, to life as it was before Coronavirus (BC?!) Out of Beveridge's reflection towards the end of the Second World War came the Welfare State and NHS – and this is a good time to reflect on what happens next to God's Church in Cumbria (and further afield). Of course, our reflection needs to be primarily theological, but remain rooted firmly in the pragmatic reality of what we see happening around us. I am most grateful to those who have already contributed to our thinking on this – and try, in what follows, to bring together some of the helpful comments they have made by looking at Lessons Learnt; Opportunities Presented, and Challenges Posed.

First, some of the lessons we have learnt (or are learning) from this extraordinary and unprecedented time. In no particular order, they include:

- An awareness of our own frailty and mortality. We have begun to realise that we are not actually 'masters of the universe' – or even ('Invictus') of 'our own fate'. The neo-liberal metaphor of 'growth' has been profoundly modernised, and our trust in market solutions and instrumental notions of well-being is now in question. In other words it is (hopefully) becoming clear that God's 'good gifts' to us, and the blessings he bestows are not best described in terms of material possessions and consumerism. When forced to think about what really matters in life, some of our society's basic assumptions about value and security have turned out to be rather hollow; and the intrinsic worth of each individual as someone made in God's image has come into sharper focus.
- The importance of human contact and touch. (see my previous paper). For an Incarnational faith this should come as no surprise; especially one which places such importance on 'Koinonia' and fellowship. Quite simply, we need each other: we are called to be inter-dependent, not independent, and current circumstances are making that increasingly clear. This is right at the core of our purpose and mission and is vital for our mental health and well-being. Zoom You-Tube, Facebook Live and so on are all very well (and have been an enormous help during this time): but the thing people have missed most is meeting and being together. We know that in family life. Seeing your children or grandchildren on a screen is one thing. Giving them a hug is quite another, and physical proximity matters. That's one reason why the Word became Flesh.
- Chaplaincy (especially at the moment in the NHS) is a vital feature of our mission and not some sort of 'extra' or 'add-on'. We are incredibly fortunate in Cumbria to have Glynn Jones as our 'Chaplains Champion', and our experience during this pandemic serves to reinforce what he has consistently maintained about the vital role Chaplains have to play.

- The natural environment is a gift from God (his creation) which our previous way of life was destroying. Of course, this insight is hardly new, but the coronavirus has given a fresh impetus to global efforts to reduce global warming and our pollution of the planet – and the environmental benefits of the ‘lockdown’ have been noticeable.
- Local matters – especially here in Cumbria. This is a central plank of our ‘God for All’ strategy, but it has been re-emphasised by the current crisis, which warns us against over-centralisation and encourages us to persist with our determination to have a Christian presence (whatever form that may take) in every local community.
- People need Rhythm and Ritual: and if they don’t have it, they invent it. Take, for instance, ‘clapping NHS workers’ at 8 p.m. on Thursdays. This has implications both for what we do and how we do it in our churches.
- ‘Key Workers’: is a new phrase, but one which has terrific resonance for the esteem in which we hold people whose daily, often unsung efforts act as glue in our society. Carers, shop assistants, refuse collectors, cleaners and so on, not to mention the NHS staff who are risking their own lives to serve the community. This must raise questions about the absurd discrepancies and inequalities in such things as pay and social status between those who earn vast sums in our society and those who labour for a pittance.
- Our pace of life had become manic for many here in the west – and perhaps the opportunity this interlude has provided may help us to slow down a little and place more emphasis on Being as well as Doing. I should say that this is not an invitation to all of us to become lazy! Rather, it provides a chance for us to consider what are our core values and activities – and how those can be prioritised in our busy schedules.
- The importance of Education has been very obvious to me during this period; and many of you will be grateful for teachers in the past whose influence has prevented boredom in the present. As the Church Times put it recently, ‘A well-stocked mind is as important for survival as a well-stocked supermarket’. Our ministry in and to our schools, colleges and university matters in more ways than we might have imagined.

So what Opportunities are Presented for the Church by the pandemic? Again, in no particular order here are a few which have occurred to me or been suggested by others:

- Growth of a ‘New Fringe’. This is not a reference to our inability to visit the barber! Rather, it alludes to the many thousands of people – some of them with little previous church attachment – who have appreciated the extraordinary range of live-streamed services, talks and study groups that have been such an outstanding feature of the lockdown. There is a huge opportunity here – to stay in touch, develop relationship and promote discipleship.
- Community Development. The outpouring of kindness, compassion and friendship that we have seen in so many of our towns, villages and rural areas in recent weeks has reminded me of the way in which our society is still (albeit in a residual sense) founded on Christian teaching (c.f. Tom Holland’s new book ‘Dominion’). Serving others – whether through phone calls, cards, shopping, food-banks, streamed worship, prayer – has been at the heart of what we have

been doing and must continue to do: both because that is part of what the church is there for, and because relationship and pastoral care lies right at the heart of effective evangelism. People's spiritual needs (everyone has them) are as important as their physical and emotional needs; and I hope that this time will help us to go on placing an emphasis as much on the community as the individual – and more on values than on things. Loving one's neighbour is the second great Commandment – and what a great opportunity there will be to do exactly that with the probable tsunami of memorial services, baptisms and weddings that has yet to come! We are the Church, not just of England but also for England.

- Apologetic impetus. The coronavirus and its global impact raises acutely the fundamental questions faced by every human being: Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going? Some have already used the CDs from a recent teaching day entitled 'What is Human?' as the basis for discussions in groups of various kinds. Do let us know if you would like copies. We are also given an opportunity here to reflect deeply on what the Christian Church is all about, and our own place in it. Two strands of thought have been especially prominent in people's submissions on this topic. One is HOPE, especially in the face of death. The other is HOLINESS and what constitutes a prophetic way in which the Church can be different. Both are crucial to the message we will be proclaiming in the coming months – by deed as well as word.
- Spiritual Resilience isn't something which just happens. Like physical endurance, it has to be built up over time, and we can be agents of God's Kingdom in particular by teaching and helping people to pray. Many of our clergy and lay leaders have been doing that, very effectively – and the ecumenical Spirituality Group in Cumbria is there to provide advice, assistance and resources.
- Working Together. Responding to the lockdown has been quite a unifying experience for many of us. That has applied both ecumenically in our Mission Communities – and more broadly in our communities through involvement with neighbourhood groups of various kinds. We all have a role to play in developing that unity and trust.

Third, as well as presenting us with several good opportunities, this pandemic Poses some huge Challenges. These relate to:

- Our Finances. We are all deeply aware of individuals and businesses facing financial melt-down. Unfortunately, the Church is not exempt from the same threat and our brilliant staff have been doing some financial modelling. At present, even the best-case scenario is eye-wateringly painful, and this raises huge questions about what the Church of the future will look like. As you can imagine, long and serious discussions are taking place, especially in the Bishop's Council, Diocesan Board of Finance and Bishop's Leadership Team. Much of this debate is focussed on Parish Offer, since that is what pays for our stipendiary clergy, and the pandemic has greatly accentuated some of the challenging trends we have been observing in recent years.
- Our use of Technology. Reactions to streamed services and Zoom conferences have ranged from 'a taste of heaven' to 'a glimpse of hell'; and for about 20% of

our Church members they have been irrelevant anyway since they don't have access to the internet. The challenge for all of us is how to build on the helpful aspects of our technological discoveries and use them wisely – but emphatically not exclusively!) I find myself agreeing with two recent comments made to me: 'We need to resist pressure to invest in cheap and superficially attractive versions of church'; and 'Virtual replicas can never replace the real thing'. (Discuss!)

- Our Buildings. As with the use of technology, reaction to the closure of our church buildings has ranged from 'Responsible, compassionate and caring' (The 'Times') to 'Outrageous and ridiculous: a lost opportunity' (The 'Telegraph'). I don't know what the Daily Mail said (though I can probably imagine...) I have received a few irate letters on the subject, which I entirely understand but with which I also disagree. Under the circumstances, I believe this was the right thing to do, however controversial, and I admire the Archbishop of Canterbury's courage in standing firm. However this has of course raised huge questions about our 350 or so buildings and has once again emphasised the need to implement more comprehensively our 'Buildings Strategy'. I was also struck by one comment, as follows: 'Parishioners are longing to be back in their church buildings – which are valued as places of memory and hope: of continuity with the past: as places of investment of social and communal worth, of hope for future generations.. places of beauty, holiness and connection with God, embedded in their local communities.'
- Our Ministry. The lockdown has presented us with all sorts of questions about our role and purpose as Christian ministers: and the two aspects of our ministry which have emerged most strongly for me are Listening and Discerning. Listening is a key part of the pastoral and evangelistic task; and Discerning is something that has become increasingly important in recent years as we seek to develop vocations of every kind. Many people have discovered and used new gifts and skills in recent weeks (presentational as well as pastoral); and we will not only be looking for but actively expecting a range of vocations to emerge within each Mission Community during the next twelve months.
- Our Health. The Public Health repercussions of this pandemic will reverberate for years to come – especially in the whole area of Mental Health and well-being (including among Clergy). I convene a national group which is looking at this subject and which is challenging in the extreme.
- Our Focus. The biggest challenge of all in this is the question about what we need most to pursue the mission God has given us (and I will be attempting to answer that question in this year's Teaching Day entitled 'What is the Holy Spirit?')

This paper has become a lot longer than I intended or expected – so THANK YOU if you have reached this point! Perseverance is a great virtue, as we have seen in recent weeks... I guess the underlying question remains – will the 'New Normal' be a resumption of 'normal service', just as it was before...or radical change, with nothing remaining the same? And I guess the answer to that is quite simply – neither!

To which end, we will be exploring the possibility of a Day of Prayer (to include an element of Repentance, which several people have raised) and then, at some point, a big ecumenical

service for Cumbria which will be a mixture of Lament and Celebration. More about both of these in due course.

This emerging scenario also gives both impetus and context to the ongoing 'Vision Refresh' process and the further development of Mission Communities. Interestingly (though perhaps not surprisingly) much of what people have 'heard' through the days of prayer and listening is reflected in the issues raised by the coronavirus pandemic – which God knew all about long before we had even heard of it!

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