

Friday 10 July 2020

To all parishes in the Diocese of Leeds

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

We are living through challenging and extraordinary times. The church, committed to the real world and the communities in which we are set, has continued to worship and serve despite the restrictions. Given the nature of the virus, it will be some time before we emerge into something resembling 'normality'. We have to be clear and honest about that.

Thank you for both the remarkable ways you have continued to be the church ... in the world ... even if the buildings had to be closed for a long time. I want to say one or two things to encourage you, building on material you might have seen on the diocesan website or had passed to you from letters I have written to the clergy.

Inhabiting the Scriptures

Lockdown and our attempts to innovate ways of worshipping together have been experienced by many as a sort of 'exile'. In the Old Testament prophets (such as Isaiah) we see people exiled to a strange land where nothing is familiar. All that shaped their life and worship had been stripped away. They lamented the loss of their familiar life (and what this said about God and them); they tried to come to terms with the present realities; and they then began to look forward to shaping a different future.

This time in our life enables us to re-read the biblical experience afresh - so much of the Bible was written by and for people whose normality was uncertainty and fragility. This also accords with the daily experience of most Christians around the world, including those in our link dioceses in Sri Lanka, Sudan, Tanzania and Pakistan. Let's not waste the opportunity to learn anew how to live with uncertainty, aware of our own limitations and fragility.

Being the church

The Church of England has a unique vocation in and for England: we are committed to particular places. We are called to pray for those in our parishes, to be the answer to our prayers when appropriate, to love and serve those in need, to care for the sick and to support those who mourn, and reach out with the good news of God's grace. We have been doing all this - and will continue to do so into the future. We know we are not always strong, but God is and we trust in him ... whatever comes our way.

Emergence

We don't know what the future church might look like in every place, but we do have a role in shaping it. There will be things we need to let go of and new ways of being that are being discovered or yet to be discovered. We will emerge at different paces over the coming months and care needs to be taken over how and when we open our buildings and hold onto the new forms we have learned recently. Church House is providing detailed and digested guidance at every step, but your archdeacon and area bishop are there to be consulted for any support as we move forward.

Encouragement and challenge

I mainly want to thank and encourage you. We will face big questions - nationally as well as in our diocese - about finance and buildings, threats and opportunities. But, as a diocese we are confident and well set up to face these. Indeed, we have been doing just this since our creation in April 2014; so, this isn't a new challenge. You can be confident that we will deal with the challenges of the months ahead with confidence in God,

confidence in the Gospel, confidence in our clergy and lay leaders, confidence in our unique vocation as a church to worship and serve God together.

So, be encouraged. Use the resources available to you in the diocese and parish. Pray simply and hopefully, knowing that God is never surprised.

And please be assured of the prayers of your bishops and archdeacons, the deans and area deans, our lay staff at Church House and all who are committed to you. May God bless you in all you are and do. I look forward to the time when we can be together again, physically and in person.

In Christ.

Rt Revd Nick Baines
Bishop of Leeds