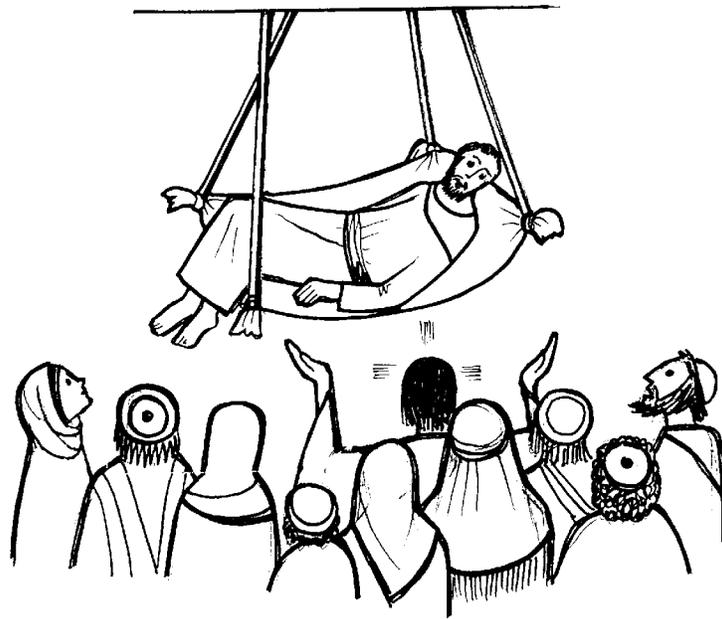


August 2020

St Mary's News

The magazine of the
Parish Church of St Mary the Virgin
A Registered Charity
Henley-on-Thames
Oxfordshire



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From the Rector August 2020

Dear friends,

This month has been the month where I have begun to find the pandemic hard-going. I know that different people have had different experiences: some struggled early on, some struggled when lockdown was eased, and I think others, myself included, are starting to flag now, as it becomes increasingly clear that we are in for a long period of restrictions, albeit short of full lockdown. And this of course has implications for church life. A liturgical equivalent of the furlough scheme is not enough. We cannot simply mothball everything in the hope that we will shortly get "back to normal"; we are going to need some creativity to find ways of doing many of the things we usually do in new ways, and perhaps also to do some things which are new altogether.

So I am glad to have the chance to take some holiday this month, to recharge my batteries and refresh myself, and to spend some quality time with my family. Weekday Eucharists will continue on Thursdays only, kindly covered by Canon Brian Shenton, formerly of Reading Minster and well-known to many here. Fr Brian will also be covering Sunday 23rd August. On Sunday 16th August, Fr Laurence Price will be covering the services. Fr Laurence is an Associate Priest of the University Church in Oxford. He read Classics at Exeter College, Oxford, before training as a barrister. In 2014, he began training for the ministry at Westcott House, Cambridge, which is where I met him. Ordained in 2016, he served his title near Grimsby in the Diocese of Lincoln. In 2019, he served as the Interim Chaplain at the Queen's College. Laurence is married to Katherine, who currently serves as the Chaplain of the Queen's College.

Six months or so into the pandemic seemed to me to be a good time to take stock, and so I have written – at rather more length than I originally intended – a reflection for this month's magazine. For that reason, this letter is rather lighter than usual on theological content!

With my prayers,

Fr Jeremy

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Monday is the Rector's day off;

Friday is his study day.

*He would appreciate being spared calls on these days except
in an emergency.*

Public worship resumes at S. Mary's

Public worship resumed on Sunday 5th July, but things are not exactly as they were before lockdown started. Please read the following instructions carefully.

Times and locations of services

(Some locations of services have been changed to ensure that the same seats are not used more frequently than every 72 hours, to reduce risk of transmission)

N.B. Weekday Eucharists: When Fr Jeremy is on holiday in August there will only be the Thursday Eucharist on weeks beginning August 9th, 16th and 30th

Sundays

8am Holy Communion (BCP), Jesus Chapel, access through the south door

9.30am Holy Eucharist at the Nave Altar, access through the main doors

11.15am Holy Communion/Matins at *St Nicholas, Remenham*

Mondays – No service

Tuesdays

9am Morning Prayer in the stalls, access through the main doors

7.30pm Holy Eucharist at the High Altar, access through the main doors

Wednesdays

9am Morning Prayer in the stalls, access through the main doors

11am Holy Eucharist in St Leonards, access through the main doors

Thursdays

9am Morning Prayer in the stalls, access through the south door

10am Holy Eucharist (traditional language) in the Jesus Chapel, access through the south door

Fridays

9am Morning Prayer in the stalls, access through the main doors

12noon Holy Eucharist in the Lady Chapel, access through the main doors

Saturdays

No services

Church opening

Church will be open at the times detailed above, until 5pm on Sundays, and on Wednesdays from 11am – 5pm. Moving to fuller opening is dependent on volunteers coming forward to help supervise visitor compliance with hygiene rules.

Who should come to church?

People who have Covid-19 symptoms must not come to church – the key symptoms to look out for are a temperature, a new continuous cough, and/or changes in your sense of taste and/or smell.

People who are currently shielding are advised not to come to church.

People who are vulnerable, either because of age or underlying health conditions, are not encouraged to come to church.

How can I attend church safely?

Church will not be exactly the same as it was before lockdown. For the foreseeable future, the following changes will be in place:

- 1) Face coverings are now mandatory in places of worship so please wear a face mask if attending services.
- 2) Everyone will be asked to sanitize their hands on arrival using the sanitizer provided; communicants are also asked to sanitize before and after receiving the Sacrament
- 3) Everyone will be asked to provide their name and a telephone number on arrival so it is possible to trace contacts in the (relatively unlikely) event of a church-based outbreak
- 4) 2 metres social distancing between individuals (or households) is to be observed; please take particular care when arriving and leaving; seating positions have been pre-marked; the only exception is when receiving Holy Communion from Fr Jeremy
- 5) The Peace will not be shared
- 6) Holy Communion will be offered under one kind only; the chalice will not be offered to the people
- 7) The words of distribution ("The body of Christ") usually said to each communicant will be said to everyone together after Fr Jeremy has himself received the sacrament; all who intend to receive reply "Amen"; the sacrament will be administered by Fr Jeremy silently
- 8) Holy Communion will be received standing, not kneeling
- 9) There will be no singing
- 10) Service books will be quarantined, so each book is used only once a week, removing any risk of transmission
- 11) There will be no refreshments offered after the service
- 12) Fr Jeremy will be using strong hygiene measures at the altar.

Please also note that there are many opportunities to worship on weekdays, at services which are usually very thinly attended. The same safety rules will apply at all services.

What is offered for those who cannot attend?

Our 9.30am service will usually be recorded and uploaded to Fr Jeremy's youtube channel, although this may not be possible on the two Sundays when Fr Jeremy is away:

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCF0WRLKWtkgWJjZw_d4S6Mw/ .

The Parish Office

Julie is back at work, but the parish office remains closed to visitors. If you need to get in touch, please telephone or email rather than dropping into the office.

Henley in Days Past

Compiled by Norman Topsom

Grandpa

My grandpa says that he was once
A little boy like me
I s'pose he was; and yet it does
Seem queer to think that he
Could ever get my jacket on,
Or shoes, or like to play
With games and toys, and race with Duke,
As I do everyday.

He's come to visit us, you see
Nurse says I must be good
And mind my manners, as a child
With such a grandpa should.
For grandpa is straight and tall,
And very dignified;
He knows most all there is to know,
And other things beside.

So, though my grandpa knows so much,
I thought that maybe boys
Were things he hadn't studied,
They make such awful noise.
But when I asked at dinner for
Another piece of pie
I thought I saw a twinkle in
The corner of his eye.

So yesterday, when they went out
And left us two alone,
I was not quite so much surprised
To find how nice he'd grown.
You should have seen us romp and run!
My! now I almost see
That p'r'aps he was, long, long, ago
A little boy like me.

Henley Standard January 1901

Calendar and Prayer Intentions for August 2020

Saturday 1st	Feria	The departed
Sunday 2nd	The Eighth Sunday after Trinity	The Parish and People of God
Monday 3rd	Feria	The global struggle against Covid-19
Tuesday 4th	S. Jean-Baptiste Vianney, Curé d'Ars, Spiritual Guide, 1859	Spiritual directors and those who help us to pray
Wednesday 5th	S. Oswald, King of Northumbria, Martyr, 642	The United Nations
Thursday 6th	The Transfiguration of Our Lord Jesus Christ	The Parish and People of God
Friday 7th	John Mason Neale, Priest, Hymn Writer, 1866	Those who suffer
Saturday 8th	S. Dominic, Priest, Founder of the Order of Preachers, 1221	Those who mourn
Sunday 9th	The Ninth Sunday after Trinity	The Parish and People of God
Monday 10th	S. Laurence, Deacon, Martyr at Rome, 258	S. Nicholas, Remenham
Tuesday 11th	S. Clare of Assisi, Founder of the Minoresses, 1253	Humility
Wednesday 12th	Feria	The Prison Service and all prisoners
Thursday 13th	Jeremy Taylor, Bishop of Down and Connor, Teacher of the Faith, 1667	The Bishops of Oxford and Dorchester
Friday 14th	S. Maximillian Kolbe, Friar, Martyr, 1941	Those in need
Saturday 15th	Feria	The departed
Sunday 16th	The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary	The Parish and People of God
Monday 17th	Feria	Godparents
Tuesday 18th	Feria	Rupert House School
Wednesday 19th	Feria	Victims of crime
Thursday 20th	S. Bernard, Abbot of Clairvaux, Teacher of the Faith, 1153	Vocations
Friday 21st	Feria	Those who suffer
Saturday 22nd	Feria	Those who mourn
Sunday 23rd	The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity	The Parish and People of God
Monday 24th	S. Bartholomew the Apostle	The spread of the gospel
Tuesday 25th	Feria	Local GPs surgeries
Wednesday 26th	Feria	Our Benefice Administrator
Thursday 27th	S. Monica, mother of S. Augustine of Hippo, 387	Parents
Friday 28th	S. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, Teacher of the Faith, 430	Theologians
Saturday 29th	The Beheading of S. John the Baptist	Victims of injustice
Sunday 30th	The Twelfth Sunday after Trinity	The Parish and People of God
Monday 31st	S. Aidan, Bishop of Lindisfarne, Missionary, 651	Holidaymakers

Parish Giving Scheme

For his sermon on 26th July father Jeremy took a text from Matthew 13 44-52:

Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is old and what is new.

There is a lot that is old that we treasure at St Mary's but we do not set our face against change and that includes new ways of giving. The goodbox is back in use and delivering donations and despite lockdown we have received £367 in donations this year. The Parish Giving Scheme was registered at the beginning of May and a mailshot sent out towards the end of the month. Our first significant report was received mid-July. This provides the following information:

- thirty people have already signed up to this way of giving;
- seventeen of these have agreed to the inflationary increase which will cut down the need to keep revisiting giving. You will be given 30 days notice of an inflationary increase and will be able to let the PGS know if you are unable to meet it.
- Eighteen of the people signed up do not currently give by standing order so this will cut down the amount of envelope giving and make life easier for Richard Fletcher our cashier. It also means that we are receiving support from people still unable to come to church and not giving by standing order.

We receive the monthly donations on 10th of the month and the gift aid on the next day thus giving us a considerable cashflow advantage since we normally receive gift aid for the year the following February.

If you have not already signed up you can do so by ringing 0333 002 1271 and someone from PGS (Parish Giving Scheme) will contact you to help you set a direct debit and gift aid. You may not get through straight away, but you can leave a message and they will get back to you. Our Parish Code is at the bottom of this article. Alternatively I have a copy of the mail shot which I can either scan and email to you or give you in hard copy. Don't be embarrassed to come forward if you have mislaid the original. I do that sort of thing all the time! If you are not coming to church, you can contact me on Henley 578998 or email kathryn.turner266@btinternet.com.

Parish code: 270627170

Kathryn Turner, Treasurer

Gardening August 2020

Come ye thankful people come, raise the song of harvest home. Hymn 259 NEH.

And what a harvest it will be. The garden is now full of produce ready or waiting to be picked. It is this time of year you know what has gone well and what has not been so good. I miss not being able to hand out bunches of sweet peas and tomatoes to my friends on a Sunday, but this may pass before the season is over. I hope we will still have a harvest festival service as it has always been my favourite. Well the garden has transformed over the last month with the new nature garden being dug, constructed, lined, filled and planted up with lots of plants. Many of the plants are split from the ones I had in the fishpond, so we saved a bob or two there. We have already had several visitors drinking and flitting from and over the pond which always cheers me up. I have put a series of pieces together and incorporated them in my July video which can be seen through my one drive link. Whilst this is not about mowing lawns, deadheading flowers and growing masses of veg it is to me a vital piece of gardening. It is too easy nowadays to reach for the insecticide as a first-choice option but a good spray with water will often move much of the offenders and encourages the little critters we like to see such as ladybirds and hoverflies. We hope to have frogs, newts and dragonflies as regular visitors for a start. With that done we have to look at the rest of the season as it is important to keep planting the next crops as you pull one out. I have filled the broad bean bed with lettuces and put spinach where the early garlic was and put up wigwams for climbing beans on half of the pea bed and planted a second batch of peas for a late crop. Peas are great fun to grow but can be hard work, so I am considering the possibility of buying frozen peas next year and grow something more exotic in the space and to use up the time more practically. Maybe some Turk's Turban squashes or a pumpkin again. The last one three years ago was too big to move and caused much merriment in the process. We have eleven melons already set and getting bigger by the day and the onions have gone mad, particularly the ones in the greenhouse which have been lovingly tendered since Boxing day. Maybe someone knows a recipe for melon and onion pie. Well as ever you are always welcome to come and visit, we have plenty of room to safe distance and we can always supply tea and cake. If you would like to see any of the videos (number 7 now) please contact me. Keep safe, keep happy and keep praying for each other.

You can view our latest garden video here:

<https://onedrive.live.com/?authkey=%21AA2n%5FGdG1HpD6XE&cid=4BB3E8FC6A22EF1E&id=4BB3E8FC6A22EF1E%212664&parId=4BB3E8FC6A22EF1E%21141&o=OneUp>

Dave and Sheila Croton

Notices

Diary Dates

Bishop Colin was to have visited us for a confirmation service on the evening of 8th September. This will now not go ahead. Fr Jeremy will make arrangements for another confirmation service at a later date.

Our visiting preacher for our Patronal Festival Sunday (6th September) was to be the Dean of Salisbury, the Very Revd Nicholas Papadopoulos. Given that the celebration this year will inevitably be rather more low-key than we had hoped, Fr Jeremy has agreed with the Dean that he will instead join us for our Patronal Festival on Sunday 5th September 2021.

Food Bank

Although we cannot bring donations to church at this time, please continue to support the Food Bank.

The supermarkets have donation points and you can also donate to NOMAD online:

www.nomadhenley.co.uk.

Thank you.

Mothers' Union

Henley Mothers' Union have not resumed meetings yet but we hope to meet again in September.

News from around the Diocese:

We have all been disappointed that meetings and events have been cancelled or postponed this summer, that we have not been able to meet for worship in our churches or meet up with others for fellowship. We have sustained and supported each other with phone calls, help with shopping and many things that have helped us to feel connected.

During July and August MU members are collecting donations and toiletry bags for the new Ronald McDonald House at the John Radcliffe hospital Oxford, which during the current pandemic has been used by hospital staff as well as by parents of patients from the Children's wing of the hospital. 150 bags of toiletries were contributed to the hospital in June - each bag contains soap, shower gel, shampoo, toothbrush, toothpaste and tissues. Toiletry bags have also been given to the Maternity Wards at the Royal Berkshire Hospital.

August 9th is Mary Sumner Day (founder of the Mothers Union), this year falling on a Sunday. Please remember the work of the Mothers' Union here in the UK and around the world in your prayers., thank you.

The Mary Sumner Prayer (written by Mary Sumner, the founder of the Mothers' Union, in 1876)

All this day, O Lord, let me touch as many lives as possible for thee;
and every life I touch, do thou by thy spirit quicken,
whether through the word I speak, the prayer I breathe, or the life I live. Amen.

The Mothers' Union Prayer

Loving Lord,

We thank you for your love so freely given to us all.

We pray for families around the world.

Bless the work of the Mothers' Union as we seek to share your love through the encouragement, strengthening and support of marriage and family life.

Empowered by your Spirit, may we be united in prayer and worship, and in love and service reach out as your hands across the world.

In Jesus' name. Amen

You can join the midday prayers, Monday to Saturday, live on the Mothers Union Facebook page.

The Children's Society Collection Boxes

We are looking for someone new to take on The Children's Society Collection Boxes. The Society are a joy to work with, in a way that best suits the volunteers. Our thanks go to Inez Hemsley who has kindly been organising the boxes but would now like to stand down. People take a collection box home for a year, which can begin any time. Inez has been collecting the boxes back in during the autumn, so the money can be counted before Christmas. The congregation are good at returning them!

If you are interested, please speak to Inez in church or call her on 576242.

Macmillan Coffee Morning

Due to the Coronavirus pandemic, our usual coffee morning in aid of Macmillan cannot take place as in previous years. I am awaiting more information regarding virtual coffee mornings, socially distanced stalls and other fund-raising ideas and once I have read the information will make arrangements for something to take place to support this magnificent charity. So for the time being WATCH THIS SPACE!

Sue Hockley

Would you like to help a young, aspiring athlete studying Elite Sports at Henley?

The Henley College is looking for local families to host 16-18 year old male students taking the Elite Rugby Sports Programme on a term-time basis in the forthcoming academic year.

Being a host family is a fantastic way to supplement your income whilst providing a really rewarding experience. You could be supporting a sports star of the future!

If you are interested in this opportunity, please email gweb@henleycol.ac.uk or fphe@henleycol.ac.uk for more information.

HGVs in Henley

Some of you are very likely already aware of the new campaign to stop HGVs using Henley as a short cut. There are concerns about pollution, damage to the historic bridge, and the safety of other road-users. From a church point-of-view, heavy vehicles passing our ancient church, sometimes at considerable speed, cannot be doing our fragile fabric any good, and the noise is disruptive to our services, especially as we are now making greater use of the Jesus Chapel. Please consider whether you would like to sign the petition: <https://www.change.org/p/oxfordshire-county-council-traffic-regulation-order-to-ban-hgvs-who-short-cut-through-henley>. You might also consider writing to the local MP and our County Councillor.

Some thoughts on six months (or so) of pandemic

Fr Jeremy

"In sickness, the soul begins to dress her self for immortality" (Jeremy Taylor, 1613-1667)

On 13th August each year the Church of England commemorates Jeremy Taylor. I remember an English teacher in my school days remarking that I (almost) had the same name as one of the great seventeenth century churchmen, "the Shakespeare of Divines" as some have called him. At thirteen I had never heard of him, but I suppose it was inevitable that I should eventually seek to familiarise myself with at least some of his works. Jeremy Taylor lived through the period of the Civil War and the Interregnum. His fortunes largely followed those of the Royal Family. Close to King Charles I, he struggled during the Cromwell years, and was imprisoned for some short periods. At the Restoration, he was made a Bishop. During the difficult years of the interregnum he wrote the books for which he became well-known, in particular *Holy Living* and *Holy Dying*, which were among the most popular devotional books in the Church of England in the time between the Civil War and the Evangelical and Oxford Movements of the nineteenth century.

Holy Dying may not seem to us to be an attractive title, and it is fair to say that it is not a particularly cheerful book. It begins with a "Consideration of the vanity, and shortnesse of Mans life"; it is beautifully written, but in a style that the modern reader cannot help finding morbid – to us it feels more like black humour than devotional writing:

A Man is a Bubble (said the Greek proverb)... He is born in vanity and sin; he comes into the world like morning Mushrooms, soon thrusting up their heads into the air and conversing with their kindred of the same production, and as soon they turn into dust and forgetfulness; some of them without any other interest in the affairs of the world, but that they made their parents a little glad, and very sorrowful: others ride longer in the storm; it may be until seven yeers of Vanity be expired, and then peradventure the Sun shines hot upon their heads and they fall into the shades below... But if the bubble stands the shock of a bigger drop, and outlives the chances of a childe, of a careless Nurse, of drowning in a pail of water, of being overlaid by a sleepy servant, or such little accidents, then the young man dances like a bubble, empty and gay... and is all the while in a storm, and endures, onely because he is not knocked on the head by a drop of bigger rain, or crushed by the pressure of a load of indigested meat, or quenched by the disorder of an ill placed humour.

And that's just what he has to say about the precariousness of human life in childhood and youth! On old age:

Baldnesse is but a dressing to our funerals, the proper ornament of mourning, and of a person entered very far into the regions and possession of Death: And we have many more of the same signification: Gray hairs, rotten teeth, dim eyes, trembling joynts, short breath, stiffe limbs, wrinkled skin, short memory, decayed appetite...

And there is much more in a similar style. We find this sort of writing morbid and distasteful, or perhaps even comical – which was surely not the intention – or perhaps a mixture of both of these things. But it is probably a fair reflection of life at a time when life was generally rather shorter, and more marked by accident, violence and sickness, than we are used to. And so it may be that this example of seventeenth century writing, that we initially recoil from as morbid, actually offers us a more honest and therefore more healthy approach to mortality than we find in our apparently more enlightened culture, where death seems to be conceived not as the natural and inevitable end of our earthly life, but rather as some sort of

anomaly or aberration best thought about as little as possible, and then only from a practical standpoint. Jeremy Taylor prescribes contemplation of our mortality as a powerful encouragement to a good and holy life, itself a prelude to eternal joys; we seek to cultivate a superficial happiness by thinking about death as little as possible.

The Church of England has sadly not escaped this mentality of death-denial. Early in the Covid-19 pandemic, the Church published a little booklet of prayers. It contains many good prayers for those who are ill, for those who are anxious, for doctors and nurses, and just about every category you could care to think of – except for the dying and the dead. The only place in the booklet where death is named is in Psalm 23; otherwise it is evaded and avoided. At a time when many people were dying, at a time when people were unable to be with their dying loved ones, and at a time when people were very often unable to attend funerals of loved ones, this was a startling omission.

“The English are not a very spiritual people, so they invented cricket to give them some idea of eternity” (George Bernard Shaw).

It is one of the characteristics of the political culture of the English-speaking world that we have a very high regard for the individual. On the whole this is something I am very glad of; I have no wish to live under a political system in which individual lives can be merrily trampled on in the service of the State or the Party or some such. And it is in many ways an idea with Christian roots: the dignity of the individual human life in God’s sight is an idea that can be traced back to the Genesis story of human beings made in God’s image. But our emphasis on the individual does have a downside in the tendency to neglect collective and transcendent aspects of human life – those things which concern human beings at a social level, and those things, which are harder to pin down, that point above and beyond us. This de-emphasis of the social and transcendent is I think related to an over-emphasis on economic life. An example of this is the way in which life has returned to our pubs and restaurants – in order to “get the economy going” – but not to our church halls and community centres, which provide vital social glue and public service, but little that shows on an accountant’s spreadsheet.

We can see this in the responses to the virus. On the one hand we have those who resist any attempt to control what they regard as their right to individual freedom: “If I want a haircut, and the hairdresser wants to cut my hair, then the government has no right to interfere”. We’ve seen a lot of that sort of thing in the US, and here too, although to a lesser degree. It’s easy to see how this grows from emphasis on the individual in the political culture of the English-speaking world. On the other hand there are those who support stringent controls to reduce the spread of the virus. At first glance, we might think that this comes from a more social, collectivist mindset, but actually I don’t think it does; it is simply about the rights of the individual looked at in a different way, namely the right of the individual not to be exposed to the virus. It is a trade-off of two different accounts of individualism: individual freedom over against individual safety.

And of course there is nothing wrong with any of that; any society facing what we face has to find ways of accommodating the understandable desire for freedom from unusual restrictions on the one hand, and the equally understandable desire for personal safety on the other. But what has been missing has been the social and the transcendent, and sadly the best illustration of this has once again been in the response of the Church of England to the crisis. Religion retreated into the private space of houses, and the church authorities appeared unable to see the value of church buildings as public, social, and sacred spaces, representing the continuity of a community in a particular place through time, and standing for the transcendent values of the Christian faith. I think there are few people who would argue that

gathered public worship should have continued through the lockdown; but the locking of churches even to the clergy represented a profound privatisation of religion. The powerful symbolic value of our buildings, enriched by so much shared memory, was brushed aside on the grounds that “the church is the people not the building”, without apparently considering the value of the rich and complex connections between the people and the building. In going further than the government’s guidance in this and in other matters – such as the curtailing of ministry to the sick and dying, and the restrictions on numbers at funerals – we can see just how dominant secular and utilitarian ways of thinking have become even within the Church. And thinking of our wider political culture, a culture which had better ways of articulating social and transcendent values might have found, for example, more space for the visiting of dying relatives, or given a higher priority to voluntary activities during our current phase of reopening.

“...I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8.38-39)

During the early summer the New Testament readings at Evening Prayer found us reading our way through S. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans. It is the longest of S. Paul’s letters, and because it was written to a church that he had not founded, nor (yet) visited, it is more doctrinal and systematic, and less concerned with the specific problems of the church community, than any of his other letters. S. Paul has a mixed reputation in some quarters these days, chiefly because of a relatively small number of passages in his letters where he deals with the relationships and roles of men and women in the church. This is a pity, because his letters have so much to give us. His sense of the scope of redemption is expansive, some even argue universal – there is no “weeping and gnashing of teeth” in S. Paul’s letters! He does get cross with people at times – our English translations tend to soften the force of his language – but for me this just makes him come across as a real human being: in his letters we encounter a passionate and intense man, difficult at times, but one animated by the love of God and the desire to share the freedom and joy that it brings.

S. Paul’s Letter to the Romans includes a lot of quite complex argument dealing with the relationships between Christians and Jewish non-Christians, and between Jewish and Gentile Christians. And in the contrast he draws between striving to follow an externally-imposed law on the one hand, and being changed from within by faith on the other, we have a foundational insight for Christian thinking about morality. But the Letter also contains some of the most stirring descriptions of the Christian hope: “...I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8.38-39). S. Paul can help us to see Covid-19 in a very different light: in the context of eternity, Covid-19 is not the worst thing that can happen to us, death is not the worst thing that can happen to us. The worst thing is to be separated from the love of God in Jesus, and not even death can do that.

Thinking about Covid-19 and the long lockdown which we had to live with, and thinking perhaps of future restrictions which may yet need to be imposed, S. Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians might seem to be the most obvious of his letters to read, since the Apostle was himself living under lockdown – the exact circumstances are unclear, but S. Paul was both imprisoned and subjected to house arrest on several occasions in several locations. What’s more, it is also clear that S. Paul is facing the possibility of death – again the exact circumstances are unclear, as he faced death on many occasions, but this occasion may be in the context of a coming trial.

So in the Letter to the Philippians, we find S. Paul deprived of his liberty and perhaps facing a trial which could lead to a sentence of death, and yet what we find in the Letter is a sense of ambivalence in the face of death

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. (Philippians 1.20-24)

and of irrepressible joy in Christ and in fellowship with his fellow-Christians.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. (Philippians 4.4)

And death shall have no dominion.
Dead men naked they shall be one
With the man in the wind and the west moon;
When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone,
They shall have stars at elbow and foot;
Though they go mad they shall be sane,
Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;
Though lovers be lost love shall not;
And death shall have no dominion. (Dylan Thomas)

The month of August includes two great feast days that are somewhat neglected in the life of the contemporary church.

The first is the Transfiguration of Our Lord, celebrated on 6th August. Before His final journey to Jerusalem, Jesus ascends a mountain with a small group of His disciples, and He is transfigured: they see Him in his glory as He talks with Moses and Elijah, and a voice from heaven identifies Him as "My Son". The disciples are given a foretaste of the Resurrection, a glimpse of Jesus in His risen glory, to strengthen their faith ahead of the ordeal that awaits them and Him in Jerusalem.

The second is the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, celebrated on 15th August – the calendar of the Church of England rather coyly calls the day simply "The Blessed Virgin Mary". The feast is shared by the churches of the east and of the west, and celebrates the belief that Mary was taken up bodily into heaven at the end of her earthly life.

Both of these feast days point us to the hope that is the heart of our Christian faith, the hope that our lives are bound up with Jesus' risen life, and that just as death has no dominion over Him, nor does it ultimately have dominion over us.

This must be the Church's response to Covid-19; we have allowed ourselves to get bogged down in health and safety, and have so far struggled to communicate the central truths of Christian faith at a time when a message of hope is sorely needed. Not that there is anything wrong with health and safety – this earthly life is a precious gift from God which we rightly cherish, and as others have pointed out, we are not honouring our Lord's command that we should love our neighbour if we are breathing virus particles all over them. But whilst we must give health and safety its due, it should not become such an obsession that we neglect to proclaim the gospel that has been entrusted to us.

We might wish that, like the disciples in the story of the Transfiguration, we might be afforded a glimpse of Christ in His glory to strengthen our hope and our faith in difficult times. But in a way we are afforded glimpses of His glory, in the reading of the Holy Scriptures, in the Blessed Sacrament of Our Lord's Body

and Blood, and in our life together. And it is a part of our calling as Christians to make the glory of the risen Christ visible to others, in the beauty of our worship, in our acts of love and service, in our faithful celebration of the sacraments and proclamation of the gospel.

And in this way we have seen some signs of life and hope from the Church, as parishes across the country have responded with creativity and compassion at a local level to our changed and changing circumstances. Many good things have already begun to happen, but there remains much work to be done, not least in our own parish, and we must pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit to energise and inspire us to find new ways to make the glory and love of Christ real in this place in this time.

The month of August draws to a close with the commemoration of the Beheading of S. John the Baptist (29th August). The cruel and arbitrary death of a prophet at the hands of a tyrant may seem to be a strange thing to celebrate, and from an earthly point-of-view it is. The Christian faith does not hide from the cruel realities of death. It is our constant focus as we commemorate our saints and martyrs throughout the year, as we contemplate the Cross which is the symbol of our faith, and as we remember Jesus' precious death and passion every time we celebrate the Eucharist together. But contrary to what some of our critics might claim, this is not a morbid death-fixation: we do not contemplate and commemorate death for death's sake; rather, we contemplate and commemorate death for life's sake. By acknowledging in humility before God the horizon that bounds all our earthly lives, we are encouraged to learn to live better. And by holding before the eyes of our hearts the Cross of our Lord Jesus, we who are baptised into his death are strengthened in the hope of sharing in his risen life, to whom with the Father and the Holy Spirit be all praise and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

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