

Vicar's Letter #8: 8 May, 2020

Are we there yet?

Dear Parishioners

"Are we there yet?" I well remember that question being chorused by our children in the back seat as we went on a long drive in our car. I know that we are only reaching a pandemic milestone, rather than the end of the journey, but it has felt like a long drive already! As we come closer to moving to Alert Level 2, somewhere deep inside me the question emerges, "Are we there yet?" It will be so good to get out of lockdown and collectively as a country to stretch our legs and get ourselves more functional again, before we get on with further travel in the direction of a post-pandemic world!

When I come towards the end of something I often ask myself, "What have I learned from this experience?" In this case, what have I learned about myself and others, and the journey we have been on, through this time of lockdown?

I have learned that there is a difference between my *circle of interest* and my *circle of control*. While I am very *interested* in the worldwide pandemic, I cannot do anything much about it. And a lot of the news has been so concerning! It has been better for me to focus on things that are *within my control* such as keeping a good rhythm of life - praying regularly, going for walks, eating healthy food, doing something for others where I can, and being grateful for all that I have, during this time of limitation. Working with what I can change during the lockdown has been better for my mental health and general wellbeing than lamenting the things I cannot change. (Of course, this is always the case, but the pandemic has made that even clearer!)

I have learned how various people have responded to the lockdown, and have seen some great examples of service to the church and to the wider community. I love the example of the South American couple who decided that they would express their thanks to essential workers by making 100 meals a day in their family kitchen during the lockdown, and delivering them to people who were serving the community. They paid for all the ingredients themselves until others joined them. I have appreciated examples of caring for others much closer to home - people including in their bubbles others who needed support and protection, sharing their homes with them, or shopping for people in the 'vulnerable' category. It has also been inspiring to be part of a Diocese that has been looking after people really well, for example providing services on Freeview so that there is faith support for those who don't have access to a computer. I have appreciated how leaders in the Diocese have kept in touch with me, and how many people in the parish have kept in touch with others during this time. I have also appreciated those who have initiated and led and joined the small groups in the parish, creating new dimensions of discipleship and community, which I hope will continue to flourish when the pandemic is long past.

There's another thing I have learned from this experience. When we suddenly cannot do something that we are used to doing, it causes us to think about the importance of that activity. Over this time we certainly haven't been able to worship together in the way we used to. This disconnection with my normal life has caused me to think about what my faith means to me, and I know others in the parish have been thinking about their faith too, and what it means to them. These weeks of lockdown have been a time when we have had to own and live our own faith, often in isolation, in a way that has been very different from normal. It already takes energy to keep on a spiritual path, but it takes much more energy when we have to create a new rhythm of faith and practice.

What have you learned about your faith over this lockdown time? Have you realised how important it is to you? Have you sensed any prompting from God to give it more time and focus? Have you been drawn to prayer or to trusting God more? Has this lockdown been more of a 'holiday with God' for you - a time of letting go the many duties you have in your normal church life? Have you even started wondering whether your faith practice and connection with public worship is of any great significance in your life?

Whatever you have been noticing and reflecting on - either consciously or unconsciously - there is something to learn from this time. I suggest you bring your reflections to God and ask what God wants you to learn from them. What would God want to say to you through your experiences and reflections? And how would God be inviting you to respond to them as we come towards the end of this unique time of lockdown? What in these experiences and reflections could you share with others to encourage them on their journey of faith?

As I come to the end of this letter I have just received a message from the Bishops, which urges each parish to discern its own journey forward when we get to Alert Level 2, as long as we are all complying with the Government requirements for this Alert Level. We will not be rushing to open the churches in our parish for Sunday worship. Our task will be to discern what is God's best for our whole church family at this time. Please pray for your ministry leaders as we consider this matter.

And as for Alert Level 2: no, we are not there yet, and yes, we will be there before long!

With my warm greetings in Christ.

Peter Bengé

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(Anglican Parish of Lower Hutt)