

Vicar's Letter #11: 29 May, 2020

Dear Parishioners

At Pentecost the Holy Spirit was poured out upon members of the early Church, as they prayed together in a house in Jerusalem. The power that came upon them from God was so strong and miraculous that it caused complete strangers to gather outside in the street, drawn by what was happening. Members of the Church spilled out of the house and Peter started to witness there and then to the crowd about Jesus (Acts 2). From this beginning the good news of Jesus Christ spread to people throughout the world. We can trace our own Christian faith back to this remarkable event, through which the worldwide Church came into being. That first Pentecost was in a special way “the birthday of the Church”.

Reaching local community a key value

It is good to remember that missional outflow of Christian witness, because it reminds us that our God is a missional God. God wants to be known by humanity and will use every means, both human and supernatural, to become known. As members of the Church it is our privilege and our calling to play a part in this outflow of God's grace, love and truth to the world around us. In recognition of this, one of the key values that our leadership teams have identified for our parish is **reaching local community**. We are called to look for opportunities to proclaim Jesus, and to love and serve others, in our communities.

Togetherness a key value

We know that some other parishes are returning to worship with socially distanced services this Sunday, but we will not be doing this in our parish. Your ministry leaders and Vestry think it is important that, when we get back together, we do so as a whole community. In fact, we have identified **togetherness** as another key value at this current time. If we were to seek to worship in our church buildings now, there would be a range of requirements that we would need to fulfil, which would mean that some of us could not really join together. For example, our more vulnerable people have been advised not to mix in crowds during Alert Level 2. All Saints would not be able to gather as a full worship community because of the current social distancing restrictions. In St James's we could not currently worship as a whole parish community together, because we are restricted to having no more than 100 people within the building. While we long to return to worship, your leaders think that it would be altogether better if we were able to celebrate together as a parish when we have all come through this pandemic. We hope that we will be able to do that at Alert Level 1, and that Alert Level 1 will not be far away. However, we will pay attention to the government announcement on 8 June and update you after that about our timing for a return to corporate worship in church.

In the meantime we can continue together as ‘the church outside the walls’ in a number of ways. The small groups continue to operate really well, some via Zoom and some now in person. Part of the ethos of the small groups is that they welcome newcomers! So, if you are missing fellowship, feel free to join one of the 14 small groups by contacting Andrew Spence on 021 2226474 or email him at youth.team@stjames.net.nz. A list of the groups, their leaders, and the times when they meet, is in this week's Newslink.

There are other ways of connecting, of course, including the telephone, and visits to public places or homes. Various people and groups are staying connected through these means. And our AAW group also stays in touch through a weekly letter which is posted out. I would not want anyone to feel that they are without support at this time. If you would like to connect with someone, please phone me on 569 7685 or 021 2541354, or email me at vicar@stjames.net.nz.

Receiving communion

Because of the desire for togetherness and solidarity on this journey outside the walls of the church, I have chosen not to take communion while there are others in the church community who cannot receive it. I want to assure those who are grieving the lack of communion, that I personally also grieve that lack. But God works in and through us even while we are prevented from receiving communion together. And what a celebration there will be when we can all join together in communion again!

A number of the other parish leaders feel the importance at this time of remaining in solidarity with those who continue to be unable to receive. But we also recognise that receiving communion is a deeply personal matter between each one of us and God, as members of the body of Christ. We want to make sure that those who feel the need to receive communion are not prevented from doing so by the fact that we have not returned to worship in our church buildings. Some of the small groups have shared communion together and if your group would like to receive communion in a home, or if you as an individual would like to receive communion or share with others in communion before we return to worship in our church buildings, please contact me on 021 2541354, and I will arrange for someone to assist you.

Discipleship a third key value

Sometimes even an adverse event can lead to blessings. An example of this is the way that the pandemic has led to the flourishing of small groups in the parish. A particular joy of mine is the way that people have been coming to faith in Jesus, and growing in faith, even during a pandemic through membership of a small group. Gathering disciples of Jesus, building them up and developing them, has always been a fundamental and challenging task for the church. One of the reasons that small groups are so important is that discipleship happens best in a small group setting. It is no surprise that Jesus himself had a small group of disciples into whom he poured his life and who became the leaders of the early Church. Jesus put his best efforts into encouraging discipleship.

For all these reasons, a third key value for the parish in this season is **discipleship**. As followers of Christ we are called to be disciples who make disciples. Unfortunately, the Church has not been so good at discipleship in the last 60 years. One sign of this is the radical decline in the percentage of committed Christians in our society. As leaders of this parish - and as members of this parish, as Christians - we are called to reverse this decline and strengthen our parish's witness to Jesus Christ in every conceivable way.

The church outside the walls

So although we are still outside the walls of the church building, there is a big vision of what we can be and do as members of the Church in Lower Hutt! Please reflect on these three values: discipleship, togetherness and reaching our local community, and ask God to help you find ways to live these values out. Pentecost was a remarkable time when the Church was launched to transform the world by the power of God. I cannot help thinking that God must be equally eager to transform our world, our community, and our parish through the power of God's Holy Spirit today.

May God's Spirit be with you and flow through you this Pentecost!

With my warm greetings in Christ.

Peter Bengie

Vicar

(Anglican Parish of Lower Hutt)