

Vicar's Letter #3: 3 April, 2020

Dear Parishioners

Nine days and counting! Can it really be fewer than 10 days since we went into lockdown?

It is good to take this opportunity to connect with you again, some way into our 'lockdown journey'. I hope and pray that your journey through this period is going okay. Please remember that you are welcome to phone any of our staff if you need help or would appreciate a phone call. Our contact details are in the Newslink for this week, which has been emailed to you with this letter.

Thanks

Thanks to all of you who are doing a great job of physically isolating yourself during this time. For us, carefully observing the guidelines is one way that we can "love our neighbours as ourselves", even without meeting them (or rather, precisely by NOT meeting them!).

Thanks too to the more than 30 people in the parish who phoned others on the parish roll last week to check how they were doing and invite them to connect by computer or phone with the Diocese and the Parish during this difficult time.

It has been great over the past week to hear about all the ways that parish members are supporting one another - and the wider community - during the lockdown. Some are helping with delivery of necessities to those particularly at risk. Others are connecting with their streets and communities through Facebook or phone. Still others are connecting with parish members through a 'Zoom' small group and supporting our community life.

Small groups/house churches

At the time of writing we have 12 small groups in the parish gathering using the Zoom app, and one using the Chinese app WeChat, with over 120 people as part of those groups. That's amazing! Even in lockdown, that amounts to 4/5 of our normal Sunday morning congregation of 150 regularly meeting for Bible study, fellowship, worship and prayer. Meeting in a smaller group of people than a typical church service is helpful, because it allows us to share our Christian journey, to ask our own questions and to listen to others. It is a great way to engage more deeply with our faith, and to be formed as disciples of Christ. The early church typically gathered in small groups, meeting in homes, and Jesus himself led a small group of disciples, so it's nothing new. Rather, it's a great way of continuing to grow as Christians when our church buildings have been shut down. Perhaps we will find the small groups so encouraging that we won't want to stop meeting this way when the buildings are open again, and we will continue with both ways of 'being the church' - small group meetings in homes and corporate worship in our church buildings. We would only be richer spiritually and relationally if we did that.

Although we have lots of groups, we still have the potential for more. We don't want anyone to miss out! If you would like to take part in a small group, please contact Andrew at youth.team@stjames.net.nz or tel. 021 222 6474, or Raewyn at parish.admin@stjames.net.nz or tel. 021 245 2677.

Keeping a healthy focus during the pandemic

It is so easy to worry when the Covid-19 pandemic is causing huge dangers and disruptions in our country and around the world. But worry destroys our peace of mind, and our lives don't have to be distorted by it. Jesus encouraged his followers not to focus on their worries but to focus on God, "Do not worry.... But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (Matthew 6: 25-33).

If we find ourselves worrying unduly, let's remember that we can pray to God about the things that disturb us. And we can refocus our lives so that God, and God's faithfulness, and our commitment to being God's people, are front and centre for us in what we are thinking and how we are acting.

Human resources might be limited at this time, but God's resources are unlimited. So let us turn to God for what we need again and again, trusting that God knows our needs, that God loves us with an unlimited and overflowing love, and that God wants deeply to be in relationship with us.

Rhythms of prayer

At this weird time, when things are so out of the ordinary, rhythms of life are particularly important.

One of the most important rhythms of life for Christians is our rhythm of prayer. A glance at our Prayer Book shows that Anglicans are strongly encouraged to pray both in the morning and the evening. In the morning we thank God for the new day, we read from the Bible, we pray for others and for ourselves, and we dedicate our day to God, thanking God for the opportunities that God will bring us in the coming day to live as God's people. In the evening, we reflect on the day we have had, thanking God for all that God has given us in it. Again we read from the Bible, and we commend to God's care those for whom we pray. This simple rhythm is really helpful in grounding us as Christians, and making us aware of God's loving presence in our lives at all times.

Many of us will already have our own rhythm of prayer, but if you don't have your own personal rhythm, then this lockdown is a great time to discover one. Why not join others in the parish via Zoom? (Full information on how to connect is in this week's Newslink under the heading 'Morning and Evening Prayer'.) We gather for Morning Prayer at 8am and Evening Prayer at 5pm, and you don't even need to come down to the St James' chapel to join in! What could be easier!!

God has given us all the gift of prayer - a wonderful resource that can help us not only to survive this period of lockdown but to thrive through it. If we walk through this period in company with God and alive to God's Holy Spirit, then God will have brought good out of a bad situation. And God is always bringing good out of bad, life out of death. It is God's way, God's nature.

I have also heard that other regular daily rhythms are helping people to feel grounded in this uncertain and unsettling time. What rhythms of life and prayer would help to ground you, support you and encourage you at the moment? It isn't only good physical health we need during the lockdown. We also need to sustain good emotional, spiritual and relational health.

Holy Week and Easter

I understand from Bishop Eleanor that the Diocese will provide daily services online during Holy Week. Please go to www.movementonline.org.nz to find those resources.

Our parish will not be doubling up on those services, but we will provide various resources for reflection during the days of Holy Week and Easter. You will find these on our parish website at www.stjames.org.nz. I will also be putting up the occasional video clip to connect with you all in a more personal way.

So may God's blessing be on us as we journey as Christ's friends and followers through unfamiliar territory. Perhaps, by taking a new route, we will discover treasures we never found on more familiar paths!

Peter Bengé
(Vicar)