

Coronavirus Renewal of Vows, Maundy Thursday 2020

1 Sam 3.1-10; Ps 133; Revelation 1.5b-8; St Matthew 9.35-38

Dear friends, in these days we have been asking ourselves many questions about what it means to be Church. Questions about our corporate life, our sacramental celebrations and our engagement in the world. There is an existential crisis among Christians everywhere. Most of us never imagined a time without access to Holy Communion; especially as we celebrate these most holy days in our calendar.

This virus is particularly unnerving to the Church. If infected, our *physical* bodies can fail due to the ensuing illness. But our *ecclesial* body is also affected; assembling for the Eucharist and sharing the sacrament now carries risk and is potentially dangerous for ourselves and others.

Some of us have opted to maintain a *minimalist* Eucharistic life – a mass celebrated with only a family member present, perhaps, or even with no-one gathered with us at all. Even so, the intention is still to offer the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving on behalf of the Body and to intercede on behalf of the whole Church for the life of the world. But we have to acknowledge that a minimalist celebration is anomalous; the sacred liturgy is fundamentally a public act of the community.

In the history of the Church we have faced other extraordinary conditions such as persecution or war. Out of those challenges in the past new insights have enriched the Church's life. Faced with persecution we discovered that the blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church, leading to growth in numbers and commitment. In the heartbreak of WWI, the Church of England softened its attitude to prayer for the faithful departed, out of compassionate response to families who lost their young in the battlefields.

So now new ecclesiological challenges are emerging - how can Church be Church without meeting, when we are alone, when we may have no access to our buildings, when we cannot assemble? Can the Church exist in a virtual world? These are questions for future theologians as they reflect on this period in the Church's history. But Christian leaders already recognise that the present crisis reveals what is at the heart of our calling as Church. The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew said that "what is at stake is not our *faith*—it is the *faithful*. It is not *Christ*—it is our *Christians*. It is not the *divine-man*—but *human beings*." And Pope Francis said "we may have a duty to provide the sacraments, but we have a high moral duty to protect the common good and preserve the health of people". How paradoxical it is that one of the ways to protect the Body of Christ right now is by forbidding public worship, and avoiding physical contact with each other!

So this crisis helps our *mission* to become clearer: As Church we do not look after our *own needs*, but we work together with others for the *Common Good* of humanity. The Ecumenical Patriarch sums it up succinctly: "our apostolic priority is our *neighbour*". That the Church exists to serve those *outside our fellowship and beyond our walls* is something that we have always taught. But now this is underscored as we cut back on so much that is at the centre of our life in order to preserve the health of our neighbour. So our mission, our apostolic priority, is now in sharp focus. Maybe, even those who have been critical of the Church might now see, in the drastic safety measures we are taking, that we Christians are not as hostile to rational thinking as they might have assumed!

Friends, our way of being Church has been disturbed but I urge all of us not to be too worried. We are experiencing an unprecedented seismic shift in Church life, indeed. But let us remember the promise of our Lord about the Church, the promise to Peter in Matthew's Gospel. Peter is the representative of the disciples, our representative, and Jesus says to him, to us "that the gates of Hades will not prevail against the Church". We will emerge after this crisis having

discovered that the Spirit has enabled other ways for the life of the Church *in its fullness* to continue, and it will still be the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. It is the Spirit that will guide us; it is the Spirit who guides the Church in all things; and we believe that the Spirit may even make all things new!

The Holy Spirit also makes things new *in the world*, not only in the Church. The scale of global human tragedy brought about by the coronavirus is heart-breaking, and it is far from being over yet. But despite this great disruption, there are seeds of hope in the world at large. People are finding more time to connect, even if virtually, with friends and family. Here in London, and in every place across our diocese in Europe, we see a beautiful community spirit being resurrected, with the emergence of neighbourly support groups and countless acts of kindness, such as leaving groceries on a doorstep, or telephoning an elderly lonely person. There is a new respect for key workers, those who remove our rubbish, who stock our supermarket shelves, who drive our buses, as well as those who heroically serve the infected in hospitals. Who knows, as this event is affecting everything, maybe even a reform of the global order might emerge, with a greater responsibility for our common life, in our common home, planet earth. Already the planet is breathing a little bit better, as we are polluting less. We Christians always look for signs of the kingdom, and if we see green shoots of the kingdom, our job is to get alongside them and protect them and nurture them!

Brothers and sisters, we who are leaders in the Church know that from time to time we need to refresh our ministries and learn new ways to serve our communities. The crucible of this period can help us learn some new skills. As we renew our vows today, we can ask ourselves, “What does God need from us now?”

The gospel today describes Jesus’ pastoral concern for those he found as he went from village to village. He was filled with compassion for those he found that were “like sheep without a shepherd”. (Ironically at this time of lockdown we may feel more like shepherds without sheep!). We are learning some new things about being pastors. While we long to offer the comforting presence of Christ in the sacrament, we are renewed with the possibility of revealing the presence of Christ in the word of God. And if we cannot be out and about on our pastoral duties, we learn how every phone call, every zoom meeting, every email, every way of keeping in touch, every prayer resource written and shared, these are also pastoral works of kindness, and ways that we convey the presence and love of Christ to our people.

This is the heart of our pastoral calling – demonstrating the love and presence of Christ. The world is in pain at present, the pain of separation, of economic hardship, of loneliness, of disease, of mourning. We priests and pastors know that such pain can only be addressed by love. *The capacity to love in the midst of the depths of pain, vulnerability, despair, and even evil, is in fact what we reflect on in this Holy Week.*

In this time of lockdown we should have more time to pray and to think. In more normal times we can be so busy being organisers and managers that we can forget that silence and prayer is the stuff of our soul, so now we have a chance to take more time to listen to God’s call. Our corporate prayer at this time is taken from the lips of Samuel in the first lesson – “Speak Lord, your servants are listening”. We pray today that God will give us clarity for the focus of our ministry in the time ahead, to know what will be most needed from us. The future may require our very best pastoral skills; emerging from this tunnel we may encounter people have not been able to say a final farewell to their loved ones, or pray at their funeral, or embrace them in their suffering. When these restrictions are over, God will call upon us to convey His love to them.

And just a last word from one pastor to sister and brother pastors: Let us not forget to care for our own wellbeing. In the busy-ness of trying to keep our community together in the midst of this crisis, we can easily forget to attend to our own fragility and vulnerability. We may be confined to our homes, but the demands of our ministry continue and in these unprecedented times those demands are stressful, and stress has a cumulative effect. We still need our day off, our evening or afternoon when we do not look at emails, a steady rhythm of prayer and study, our time of recollection and quietness, so that, in the midst of the crisis we can still recharge our batteries, to be ready to respond to God's call.

So friends, we join today from across the diocese through this miracle of technology. Bishop Robert and I are grateful for your prayerful participation in this new way of gathering in this Holy Week. We are deeply moved and we thank you for demonstrating great creativity in the ways you seek to remain close to your communities and those in your care during this emergency. Our public liturgical life might have stopped but the spirit of common prayer and sharing faith and pastoral care has not stopped. You are renewing together with your people the ancient ways that nurture the Church, the daily office, lectio divina, family prayer, and these not only sustain us as we sojourn in this desert but will make us a stronger praying Church when we will have crossed the Jordan.

We bishops regard it a privilege to serve alongside you. We give thanks to God for you and for all that you do, in faithfulness to our Lord Jesus Christ. We are humbled and grateful for your prayers, for your affection, for the ways you help us with our own ministry and forgive us when we make mistakes, as Bishop Robert and I hope we do for you.

And now as we move towards the renewal of our vows, in the midst of this time of disorientation, let us hold fast to the faith of the Church. Let us hear in the depths of our hearts the comforting words of the author of Revelation: *I am the alpha and the omega, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty*. God's love is unfailing, unconditional, for all time and for ever. This week we celebrate the most powerful demonstration of that love: in the passion, death and raising of his Son Jesus. Our service to this ever-loving God as deacons, priests, bishops, and lay ministers, is because God loves us first, calls us to his service, and is with us until the very end.

+David Hamid

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