

Service for Churchwardens – virtual

Ezekiel 34.11-16; Matthew 6.25-33

The office of Churchwarden is the oldest democratically elected office in continual unbroken existence. It dates from the 13th century. In the Church it is one of the earliest forms of official lay ministry.

You might guess from the word itself, “warden” implies custody, stewardship, and responsibility. Responsibility for what? Historically the Churchwardens had the responsibility of caring for the sacred vessels, books, registers, and the fabric, the buildings and furniture of the church. So you could say that the Churchwardens have to mind their “keys and pews”!

In the course of time other duties were added. The Canon law of the Church of England states that the Churchwardens must “use their best endeavours by example and precept to encourage the parishioners in the practice of true religion and to promote unity and peace among them”. (E1.4). The Book of Common Prayer moreover stipulates that Churchwardens must make provision for Morning or Evening prayer, in the absence of the Minister. Thus it is not really correct to say that the Churchwardens are responsible for “temporalities” of the Church, the bricks and mortar, while the “spiritualities” are the responsibility of the clergy. Encouraging true religion, promoting unity and peace, and making sure the prayer life of the Church is in place, are clearly *spiritual* not temporal duties.

So, Churchwardens our gathering today is to honour you in particular, and to thank you for your spiritual leadership during what has been a memorable Lent, Passiontide, Eastertide in the life of the Church. It has been a holy season unlike anything we could have imagined. But you along with your clergy and Readers, and other key laity, have been creative, committed and inspiring in leading the Church’s life in lockdown. We commend you Churchwardens for your part in exercising spiritual leadership, and as foremost among the laity, in encouraging your sisters and brothers in their discipleship.

It is not the first time that the leadership of Churchwardens has been *essential* at a time of emergency. In 1665 London was hit with the great plague. 30,000 died. It was the Churchwardens who told parishioners who were staying with those infected, not to come to church until several weeks after recovery or death! So the tradition of managing the parish safely during a time of difficulty for the community, is a long and venerable one!

You likely know that there is a whole field of social science called *crisis studies*. And, no, “crisis studies” is not about parish life! The social scientists are concerned about is how *major* crises shape *history*. They assert that when a crisis hits a community, or a nation, or the world, what people *value* and what people *fear* become really apparent. During such times of anxiety, the negative reactions can range from confusion and dread, to anger and depression. Other reactions are more positive, more optimistic, and people can look at crises, not just in terms of what is *lost*, but also *what might be gained*.

In the light of the coronavirus emergency, look at what has surprised the world: So many people are looking afresh at *spiritual* traditions to help them cope with the pandemic. We observe this across our diocese; our clergy report that attendance at virtual services has been strong and very often far beyond the numbers who would come to physical services. The pandemic, it turns out, is not a fruitful time for militant atheists to proclaim their doctrine. The crisis has shown us is that people, yes even our modern 21st century, scientifically astute and sophisticated people, are *hungry* for *faith*. This crisis, and the lockdown, for many has opened up a hole through which people are seeking to glimpse at things, at truths, that they never thought about before. The growth and response to virtual services of the Church is a testimony to this.

But here, friends, is the big question that we all face, bishops, clergy, lay leaders: *How do respond to that hunger in people, in the new normal we are entering?*

We Christians know that the Church is a physical reality. The Body of Christ is a physical thing. The Easter Gospel stories point to this: Thomas wanted to touch the wounds in the side of the Body of Christ; Peter and the sons of Zebedee had a breakfast of fish with the Risen Jesus on the shores of Lake Tiberius. You have to be a physical body to eat fish. We are formed into the Body of Christ by physical things – water, bread, wine.

Nevertheless, while we Christians know for certain that the Holy Spirit works through the sacraments of the Church, we also know that the Spirit's activity is not *limited* to the Church. Maybe God has a purpose for us who have spent these past weeks in this sacramental desert, away from our physical Church and physical assembly as Christ's Body. ...Perhaps God, who is with us in this wilderness, wants us to pause, to pray, to listen to and perceive what God is saying to us. Maybe God wants us in this time of exile to prepare for the new normal; to prepare us to minister in the world which will have new contours, to prepare us to respond even more faithfully to the deep hunger which has now been revealed in people's hearts.

One of my contemporary heroes of the faith is Cardinal Bo of Rangoon. He is a hero, not just because he is Burmese, like me, but because of his prophetic insight into our modern world and his challenge to the Church. Cardinal Bo said the other week, "Take advantage of this time to find and live the rhythms and relationships that you want *to characterise our future*. Take time to pray and try to understand how this world works. Imagine and prepare for a changed world." Wow, wise words.

So friends, here is our big challenge right now: we have a chance to reform and make our church and its witness and work in the world even better. In the gospel today, our Lord is saying "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or drink or wear. Strive first for the kingdom of God, and God's righteousness". During the coronavirus pandemic, I don't know about you, but I have discovered that as a rich person in global terms, I can live on less. It has made apparent to me that I can consume less, that I can choose less environmentally damaging products, I don't need quite so many clothes, I can avoid unnecessary, polluting transport. I am not sure there will ever be a complete return to business as usual, in fact, it ought not to be such. For business as usual, let's be honest, has not been good for the planet; it has not been good for the billions living in poverty; it has not been good for victims of war, famine, and disease. So our lives as a human community after the pandemic should not resume as if the normal we have left was all good. The church needs now to proclaim that this crisis is a doorway, through which we can pass from an old way to a new and *better* way of being a community of human beings.

We leaders of the Church, bishops, priests, deacons, Licensed Lay Ministers, and of course Churchwardens, need to prepare to help the Church pass through this doorway. And the Gospel teaches us that Christian leaders do this by activating the antibodies against fear, anxiety and worry, and injecting the values of the kingdom of God, which are values of justice, love and peace into the world. In our Chaplaincies we can prepare for the new world by examining our life in the light of Christ's call to keep *the Kingdom of God before us as primary*.

We can begin by reflecting on our lockdown experience of Church. We can note what we have discovered to be *good* that we can *continue into the future*. We can acknowledge that some things were good for this present period but we can dispense with them, as we move ahead. And we can identify what we have *lost* and that we must recover. And no doubt we will find some things about our church life that we have lost and which we do not need to worry about,

we can live without, as we move to the future. But as we examine our church life as we move ahead, let us keep the values of the kingdom first.

Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea in the early 4th century, wrote in his Ecclesiastical History, that it was because of the church's compassion for those in need during times of crisis, that "the deeds of Christians were on the lips of everyone." It has been the care and compassion that Christians have shown to the poor and the marginalised, in short, our service to building the kingdom of God, that has inspired others, and led them to be part of our movement.

So in some mysterious way, perhaps this crisis is re-focussing our calling as Church, bringing us back to our roots, which is, as Christ's co-workers, to help usher in the Kingdom of God. It is an opportunity to show who we are Church and the *values* that we affirm as a people. It is a time to live the Easter Faith – that Christ is alive, and his love for all of creation and his plan to bring his righteousness, his justice to every living soul, is the driving force of his Body, the Church.

May God bless each one of us in our role in the Church. May God grant us strength, resilience, faith and hope as we prepare for the days ahead.