

DIOCESE IN EUROPE

THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND

Bishop in Europe:
The Right Reverend Dr. Robert Innes



The Suffragan Bishop in Europe
The Right Reverend Dr. David Hamid

14th September 2020

To the Clergy, Readers and Churchwardens of the Diocese

Letter for Creationtide

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

We give our warm greetings to you, near the start of a new academic year. We do hope that, one way or another, you are finding time for rest and relaxation at some point during the summer. We are holding all our chaplaincies in our prayers as you begin the work and worship of a new term.

We live in unprecedented times. A virus which is both dangerous and highly infectious has spread to every continent. To control the virus, we are having to adopt major changes to the ways we live and gather. We are aware that these restrictions are particularly difficult for those living in foreign countries away from homes and families.

In the past, people have often interpreted plagues as a punishment sent by God. Viruses themselves are a part of God's good creation; they are essential in the global cycle of life and only a tiny percentage cause human disease. Moreover, according to most in the scientific community, including the World Health Organisation, Covid-19, like other coronaviruses before it simply spread to humans via a natural event, in what is referred to as zoonotic transmission, when a pathogen jumps from a non-human animal to human. (Zoonotic diseases are in fact quite common and include avian flu and salmonella.) But *the rapid global spread of the Covid-19 infection*, bringing suffering and death and causing a world-wide economic crisis, is the result of human activity, serious human negligence and lack of responsibility for the well-being of others. Earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanoes might fall under the category of natural disasters, but the difficult truth is that the *global spread* of this contagion is mainly a disaster of humanity's own making.

Thus it is equally down to us humans to control it. The Church must be at the forefront of this, showing maximum care for the well-being of our sisters and brothers. That means observing the detailed hygiene and physical distancing rules that are starting to become second nature to us. We sent guidance to you in May this year on the conduct of public worship. Whilst there was some relief for many of us with falling infection rates in June and July, rates are again increasing in many or most European countries. Moreover, over recent months, the Church of England has been issuing extensive guidance to churches in England. We are therefore issuing revised guidance that takes account of the national guidance, responds to queries that have been raised with us, and takes account of the continuing serious situation. The revised guidance is attached, and we ask you to read it carefully.

Rue Capitaine Crespel 47 box 49, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: +3222137480; E-Mail: bishop.europe@churchofengland.org,

Diocesan web site: www.europe.anglican.org/

It is encouraging to hear news of churches that are re-opening for worship. Many of our clergy are running hybrid worship – both physical worship for those who can attend and broadcasts for those who can't. We are well aware of the additional demands that Covid-19 is placing on clergy and lay officers as you enable people to gather in different ways and endeavour to ensure that no-one is left behind. Thank you for all that you are doing!

This is the time of the year when people are moving to new jobs and new places of education. So we do encourage you to pay particular attention to the ministry of welcome over these weeks. Are there clearly identifiable folk who offer welcome to visitors? How can newcomers to church make contact with clergy? How can those who lurk on the edge of Zoom-based worship be drawn into the fellowship? In 2020, the ministry of welcome requires extra imagination – but it is of vital importance as people look for the human contact that is made so much harder by virus control measures.

It was said by some at the start of the pandemic that this virus was 'the great leveller': we now know that the reverse is true – the disease has affected the poor and those of black and Asian ethnicity disproportionately severely. In that context, I am very pleased to say that the last two bishops' appeals have generated £25,000 to be donated to: (1) the Anglican Communion Fund for its work with women in developing countries, and (2) the building of a new classroom for a school in Kenya. I am deeply grateful (as are the recipients) to all who donated to these appeals, and for the ability of our diocese to respond to world needs at a time when we could so easily be preoccupied by our own need.

Covid-19 control measures are, of course, affecting international travel. Planning ordinations in 2020 has been particularly challenging. But we are pleased to say that we are now planning on ordinations of deacons and priests going ahead on Saturday 26th September (Michaelmas), in Ghent and Rome. Please do pray that these very significant events will be able to go ahead and that the environment of tightening restrictions won't prevent our ordinands from travelling to them.

Over recent months, our occasional diocesan-wide Zoom-based worship events have been very popular. The next such event is later this week, on Friday 18th September at 17:45 CET. We are celebrating God's Creation – 'Jubilee for the Earth' and our guest preacher will be the Bishop of Salisbury, the Church of England's lead bishop for the environment.

The widespread dissemination amongst humans of a virus which ought to have remained with bats, reminds us that much is wrong in our relationship with the natural world. And yet the massive behaviour changes on a global scale we have seen these last months give cause for hope. Maybe humanity can, after all, find within itself the motivation, will and resources to make the even bigger adjustments needed to address the huge issues of environmental destruction and climate change.

During the summer, the Sunday lectionary has been taking us through St. Paul's letter to the Romans. Many have found new spiritual resources in the 8th chapter of this letter, which is one of the high points of St. Paul's writing, drawing together his most important theological ideas. In verse 23, a verse beloved of Christian environmentalists, he writes about the 'groaning' of the whole creation, as it awaits the liberation of the children of God. Paul then goes on to describe how the Holy Spirit is at work in creation bringing everything to fulness. And he concludes, triumphantly, that 'neither death, nor life, nor rulers, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come...nor height, nor depth, nor anything in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.' This coming autumn and winter are likely to be tough, and Romans 8 may provide you with the rich spiritual food you need to survive and thrive over these coming months.

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In these times of isolation, uncertainty and stress, we hope that each of us can trace the purposes of God and know his presence with us, even when the physical presence of others whom we love is not possible.

With the assurance of our continuing prayers for grace and strength for you in your ministry,

Yours in Christ,

+ Robert Gibraltar in Europe

+ David

+Robert Innes

+David Hamid

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