

St Margarets, Margaretting Magazine letter June 2020

Dear friends

There seems to be a new expectation in the country of a release of restrictions from Covid-19 lockdown. This has been an historic time, a time of seeming unprecedented restriction and many people in the country just can't wait to get out and meet their friends. We are after all, social people.



The Church of England seems to be taking a more cautious view. Our churches will remain closed, for quite a while it seems. I think the reasons for this are that firstly, we have a good number of older and more vulnerable members who will have to self-isolate for a lot longer. That is unavoidable because we don't have a vaccine and the virus is clearly still around and will come back. (The Spanish flu outbreak of 1918-19 had three waves, summer 1918 (mild), November, and January 1919 (both much worse). Overall 228,000 in Britain died of Spanish flu.

Secondly, our bishops are not driven by politics; they don't have to yield to the needs of day-to-day announcements of seeming good news (followed by more lockdowns).

In spite of this we hear the church nationally has mostly responded well. Many have met in 'virtual church' or are arranging shopping and phone calls for each other. It's not ideal but the church still exists and will still be there after lockdown.

It's a time to ponder. We recently celebrated the anniversary of VE Day. When WWII came to an end, the Attlee government faced very difficult post-war conditions. But behind the scenes during the war, people had done a lot of thinking. They were able to bring in, in very short order, the National Health Service, new education acts and the whole modern welfare state. We do have the luxury of time now, to do some reflecting.

The church that emerges from this lockdown will face a series of challenges. Robin Greenwood, in a book called 'Sharing God's blessing' describes these challenges for the church in Britain.

- The faith we profess is mocked as credulous and irrelevant.
- Our churches are having to find a new place in society –on the edge.

- Churches are experiencing losses of membership, especially among the young.
- We don't talk much about, or expect much of God.
- There's an increasing sense that religion does not have a role in shaping how society works.
- Clergy and other leaders are stressed through trying to 'keep the show on the road'.
- A long overdue storm is brewing for churches.

You can probably compile your own list. Clearly things have changed. And there is clearly a storm brewing about finance in our diocese.

But something else is emerging. Just as at the first Pentecost, when the disciples didn't expect very much, God is actually doing something surprising.

First, churches up and down the land are discovering that community matters more than buildings. The first church was simply as a group of people who loved God, and each other. In this pandemic, people are missing not just hugs but a sense of community. Paraphrasing John Donne, can I say, no man or woman is meant to be an island, cut off from community? In this time I am discovering that community is a vital expression of what church is all about. We'll be thinking more about that in our services in the next few weeks.

Secondly, there's a spiritual and mental health crisis in this country. People need more than encouragement, they need spiritual meaning: old comedy repeats, cookery and sewing programmes don't really reach our deepest longings.

At this time I take encouragement from Psalm 37- worth meditating on.

- *Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him (v7).*
- *Take delight in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart (v4).*
- *Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will act. (v5).*

What should we be doing? It would be tempting to try and think of ten new ideas straight away for our post-lockdown church. But new ideas, born in enthusiasm, quickly executed, often fail and can lead to bigger disappointments. We have time to think and to ponder. Can we try and listen to God? - listen to the people of Margaretting? What does the village need? We have a Quiet Day on 13th June on 'zoom' - I will be sending out more details soon. If you can join me then, I am sure that will be a blessing. In any case, let us use this 'pondering time' well. Wishing you all God's blessings, Timothy Lee