

Reopening the church post COVID restrictions - 12.07.20

Sermon by Rev'd Steve McMahon

Well, the big day has at last dawned. After 114 days, we are finally able to gather once again in church to celebrate the holiest of all the sacraments: Holy Communion. Having finally marked the Resurrection of Christ with the lighting of the new Easter candle, we are able to take our places once more and gather at the Lord's table to receive him in a very particular way; in the sacrifice of the Eucharist. We will gather, still isolating and using excellent hygiene, in order to enter a state of transcendence. In just a few minutes, I will take bread, give thanks for it, break it and finally give it to each one who presents themselves for it. I will remind you what you are about to eat - not "a wafer of bread", nor "a symbol of Christ's love" but "The Body of Christ", to which you will individually - not corporately - respond Amen: "I believe", before consuming it reverently. We do all of this, in memory of him who died for us.

It would be very easy to pretend that things are pretty much back to normal. But that would actually be a lie. Things will never be exactly as they were, because we've all lived through this experience. We all now know what it's like to live through a pandemic. But we've also all changed in the interim.

We've changed because we've been forced to. For some, this has been a period of enforced holiday. So many Jigsaws have been completed and books read. Some have taken to learn a new skill, juggling or playing the cello, for example. Some have faced terrible periods of loneliness, cut off from their families and friends because of the need to self-isolate. We've had funerals at which few people have been able to pay their last respects. We've postponed weddings. The doors of the church have remained resolutely shut.

But we've also seen the effects this disease has had globally. The daily death toll in countries such as China, Italy, the United States, the United Kingdom, Brazil. We've seen the lamentable decisions made by some politicians and their advisors - from breaking isolation to advocating taking domestic bleach to cure the disease. And, conversely, we've seen the wisdom in some governments who locked down early and came through relatively unscathed, New Zealand and Singapore, for example.

We've watched in morbid fascination as we've measured Queensland's response against the other states and territories. We've heard the arguments in favour of and against the opening of state borders. And we have gradually forgotten that we were fighting a deadly disease as the concern for the economy has kicked in.

But worst of all, we've seen the deaths. We've seen the natural deaths caused by a disease that doesn't discriminate who it infects, but who are discriminated against because of their genetics, or age, or relative poverty, as the disease is far more likely to be fatal in certain

communities: the elderly, those who cannot afford expensive medical services, those who live in cramped social housing and so on.

The world has stood together in gratitude for the front-line workers and similarly the world has looked in horror at the violence which has erupted onto the streets of some major cities.

And what have we learned? Apart from those new skills I mentioned, what have we actually learned about ourselves?

And what have we learned about our dependence on the church?

Back in March, on the first Sunday of Lent, Gemma gave a really strong sermon in which she posed the question "If the church were to burn down, what would you take with you?" The answer, for her at least, was nothing, because the capacity to pray is within each one of us. And she is right, to an extent. But during the lock-down period she, I and others have talked about this and we've come to realise that there are two things that we do need; two things that the church provides on which we actually depend. We need both the structure of worship and the community of worshippers in order to really keep ourselves prayerfully alive.

Throughout this period, we've been supplying daily office liturgies and suggested Bible readings. From time to time there have been online services, though we have not concentrated our efforts on these because they are not so accessible for the majority of our parishioners. Nevertheless, the need for a structure to our prayer and our Bible reading has, for some, been vital. I've heard a few long-time parishioners comment that as a result they have been reading their Bible more than they ever did in their lives. When severe lock-down ended, I know of some small groups which sprung up to meet together and pray as the early church did. And now, the oft-repeated desire to meet again and worship together has, at last, become a reality.

We do depend on the church - but most importantly, we depend on each other. Human beings are social creatures. We thrive in response to each other. We need each other for support, comfort, encouragement.

And most importantly, we need the love of each other.

Love is the driving force in all of this. It underpins our faith for it was only love which impelled Jesus to take up his cross. We are commanded - not recommended, commanded to love one another. Without love, our faith is meaningless.

You may have had your differences with others in the past - I know I have. But we have a future together to look forward to. Let's put aside our petty squabbles and instead, work together in love towards really building a church for the future. Let's build a church that is really a vibrant centre of Christian Spirituality in the heart of the city. Let's build not in isolation, but on mutual cooperation, respect and love.