

31st December 2020

Dear all

Well, here we are, at the turning of the year. It is traditionally a time of reflection – looking back over the past year, good times and bad – and celebrating the possibilities of the New Year.

This time last year, we were celebrating a new decade, alive with all sorts of possibilities. Who would have thought what would happen in less than 3 months' time? This year our reflection is full of what ifs and if onlys. And our looking forward is very much in the dark, full of uncertainty.

This is the time that we make resolutions – hopefully ones that will last beyond the first fortnight. I wonder if, this year, our resolutions might have a different character. Perhaps our priorities have had a shake up this past year, and we have realised more than ever what is truly important... truly of value.

One thing we were discussing in the 'Advent Course' this afternoon (yes, I know Advent has finished, but we are continuing to the end of the book!) was the importance of keeping in touch with people – by phone call, letter, email, Skype, FaceTime... whatever is our method of choice. These can be a real life-line for some – and we will all be enriched as we connect outside of our little bubble. Now that we are in tier 4, this is especially valuable.

My apologies that my unclear wording in my last letter gave the wrong message to at least one person. When I included my 'virtual' Christmas card, I had meant to say that I was not doing real cards this year as not all of us would be able to get to church, but at least one person read it that there would not be Christmas services this year. My apologies if that is how you interpreted it, and missed any services – I can see how it was not clear. And apologies too that the broadcast of the Midnight Mass didn't happen. We had no problem with the Crib Service, or on Christmas Day. However, on Christmas Eve we just couldn't keep a connection. The same happened on Sunday, but based on that experience, I tried the failsafe IT problem solution (turned it off and on again!) and it worked!

I would like to take this opportunity to explain where we are regarding church services in tier 4. We are allowed to continue to hold church services as before. It is a moot point whether church services are a high risk or not. As far as I am aware there are no known cases of transmission, where sensible precautions have been taken, and where there is adequate ventilation (as is the case at the Priory Church). Here is a summary of what we can and can't do:

- You may continue to attend public worship, but you are advised to note that attendance cannot be guaranteed totally risk-free, and those over-70, or otherwise vulnerable (e.g. for medical reasons) are advised not to attend. The decision is, ultimately, yours – it is advice, not rule.
- You will need to register for track & trace purposes (the list will be kept by myself, and destroyed after 21 days).
- You can continue to receive the communion bread, intincted by the minister distributing. You must sanitise your hands before receiving, and keep your mask on until you reach the Lady Chapel, where you can eat the bread. Whoever is distributing will have prepared and sanitised very thoroughly.
- You must wear a mask if you are aged 11 or over, unless you are exempt for medical reasons. 3-10 year-olds are advised to wear masks. It is deemed inappropriate for under-3s to wear a mask.
- You are not allowed to interact with others inside church. Sorry to be a kill-joy, but that does mean no chatting (you will have to phone to catch up with folk!). The rationale of this is that, when talking in a church, with others around, and with masks, you will either need to get too close to communicate, or you will be speaking louder, which presents more of a risk. Now that we are in tier 4, we cannot socialise in the churchyard either. The exceptions are sidespeople communicating with you, or Sonia or myself.
- Singing is still not allowed, except by the choir, suitably spaced out.

Sorry it has to be like this, but you will appreciate we have to be as careful as possible.

Church services will follow the usual pattern:

10.00am Sundays – Holy Communion, with choir. The 1st and 3rd Sundays will be more geared towards all-age.

6.00pm, 1st Sunday – Choral Evensong (reduced with a small choir)
6.00pm, 3rd Sunday – an alternative Evening Prayer (e.g. Celtic, Taizé etc).

9.30am, Thursdays – Holy Communion

I would like to share a prayer in an email from the Arthur Rank Centre:

Prayer

Modified from a prayer by Carol Penner (leadinginworship.com)

We're still here, God,
another year come and gone.
Some parts are clear and memorable,
other parts blurry, having rushed by too fast.
Some things happened that didn't make sense,
but we trusted that even amidst our questions,
you are still on the throne and all power belongs to you.

This year has found us experiencing hurt as well as loss,
life in lockdown, with all its particularities, pain, and restrictions.
We have cried out to our God of Hope –
and you have heard our cry.
Thank you for a Saviour who can join with us
declaring that all lives matter,
that the least are the most important,
and who lives to show us the way through.
Thank you for every smile and look of reassurance,
for every encouragement
and every surprise of your blessing.
Hear our prayer now for the year ahead.
Holy Spirit, help us believe in rainbows and sunshine
after the bleakest storms.
Help us believe, against all odds, in love,
and to look forward in faith.

This time next year, we want to be telling you
about another trip around the sun,
and how it's been glorious.
Amen.

This week, Nick Fawcett has been posting extracts of his book *Seize the Day: A Mindful Guide to Fuller Living*. Here is today's extract, which is very appropriate as we think about the New Year.

When you fret about the future
*There are more things to alarm us than to harm us,
and we suffer more often in apprehension than reality.*

Marcus Annaeus Seneca

*If the fight is tomorrow,
then why should you clench your fist today?*

Cameroon proverb

*Our anxiety does not empty tomorrow of its sorrow,
but only empties today of its strength.*

Charles Haddon Spurgeon

When you fret about the future,
questioning your ability to cope;
when you worry about work,
money,
health,
relationships,
fearful they may unravel;
when you brood about challenges you may face,
wondering whether you're strong enough to meet
the difficulties life might bring;
when you consider the demands
that could be placed on you,
the responsibilities you may be asked to take on,
uncertain whether you have what it takes to bear them;
when you agonise over the state of the world,
and the inadequacy of anything you can do
to make things better;
when worry sits forever on your shoulder,
relentless in its pursuit of you,
disturbing even your hours of sleep –
then it's time to stop and take stock:
to forget about tomorrow
and focus instead on today.
For why fear what *may* be,
when, equally well, it may not?
Why fight a battle in a war that may never happen?
If what you dread transpires,
that is the time to tackle it,
but you cannot change anything until it does.
Focus, rather, on what you can address now –
on what,
here in this present moment,
you can do to make a difference.
Do not ask yourself 'what *if*?'
Consider, instead, what *is*.
And let that be sufficient for the day.

Wishing you all a very blessed and peaceful New Year.



Stay safe
Blessings and love

Mark