

Dear all

Talk about being overtaken by events. No sooner do I write

*I have been reading the speculation (and, as yet, it is no more than that) around when and how we might return to church as lockdown eases. I have no more information, other than the earliest date that is mooted for anything is currently 4<sup>th</sup> July... but this could change at a moment's notice...*

than it changes at a moment's notice!

I am delighted that there might be a possibility that we can open for private prayer from tomorrow week (15<sup>th</sup>). I know so many are anxious to get inside the building, and once again to spend some quiet time and prayer in this place where prayer has been offered for almost 900 years. There has been much discussion on the place of our church buildings. Many have emphasised that 'the church is the people, not the building', and have talked about the wider reach of online services etc.. Some have put this in the context of the considerable cost of maintaining and running such buildings.

And yet I believe this misses the point. Yes, the church is the people... yes, you can worship God anywhere... but our buildings are the places where prayer and worship have been offered regularly (daily even) for decades, if not centuries. They are hallowed by this devotion and dedication. They are places where our great family events – both happy and sad – have been celebrated, where community festivals and remembrances have taken place... They are an oasis of peace, a place for quiet and meditation for all faiths and none. (In my previous parish I met a Muslim who regularly visited the church). Our church can be seen for miles around, especially illuminated at night, a reminder of the presence and light of the Good News in a world that has much darkness and fear. It is truly holy ground!

This is one of the great blessings of the Church of England – the church is not just the possession of the few, it is the blessing and the gift of God to all the people of the parish, and all who visit from outside.

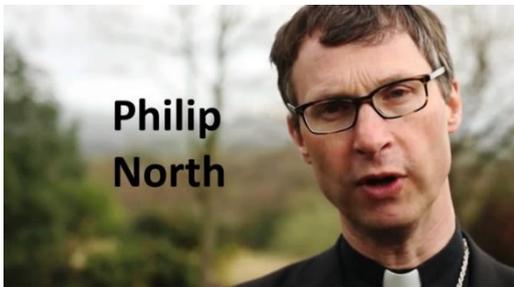
Meanwhile, my offer still stands - if anyone would like me to light a candle on their behalf in the church, please do let me know. And this offer continues even after we are all able to return to the building.

And without wishing to put a damper on things, please do be aware that the 15<sup>th</sup> date is only provisional, and dependent upon many things, most particularly the continued general containment of the coronavirus.

Today is the anniversary of the birth of Pope Gregory – not Gregory the Great, originator (allegedly) of Gregorian Chant, and instigator of the mission to 'Angle-land'. Rather it is Gregory 'the not so great, but still quite great!' – Gregory XIII (1572-1585). Born Ugo Buoncompagni in Bologna, in 1502, he was the Gregory who issued the Gregorian calendar (which we still use), supported the Inquisition (possibly not quite so great!), promoted the Counter-Reformation (greater than it's often given credit for), and encouraged missions (variable – some dedicated and generous, others indivisible and indistinguishable from violent and bloody colonialism). (Incidentally, for those interested in history, he was not the pope who issued the Papal Bull against Elizabeth I, which bastardised her, and encouraged Roman Catholics to rise up against her. That was his immediate predecessor, Pius V)

As always in history, when we judge people, we must look to them in their context. That is not to excuse them, but it should lead to a more nuanced understanding of them and their legacy. And hopefully also to a more reflective and nuanced appreciation of what makes the world the way it is today.

I have just come across an excellent article by the Rt **Revd Philip North, Bishop** of Burnley. Bishop Philip is one of the more challenging and outspoken of our bishops – often taken to task for his more traditionalist



views, and for his challenges to both church and government policies in areas of poverty and justice. I quote the article here in full as I think it is so good!

The article was posted on the ViaMedia.News website (*Rediscovering the Middle Ground*). If you wish to find out more, follow the link <https://viamedia.news/>

## We Can't Go Back... to Breathlessness

Posted on June 7, 2020 by Jayne Ozanne

by the Rt Revd Philip North, Bishop of Burnley

*'I can't breathe.'*

Following the lynch-mob style killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis Police, his dying words have become the cry of dispossessed and impoverished BAME communities first in the States and then across the globe. Long decades in which they have suffered on a daily basis from structural racism, inequality of opportunity and the denial of their personhood has exploded into a mighty welling up of anger which has left the Trump administration floundering and governments around the world struggling to keep up.

*'I can't breathe.'*

That is also the cry of COVID patients, a condition which fills the lungs with fluid such that the breath is forced out of a person. At first we were told this pandemic would be a crisis for everyone. Already it is revealing itself to be a crisis for the poor. Those from urban areas and BAME communities are dying in hugely disproportionate numbers. And as the massive economic impact of lockdown reveals itself, it will inevitably be the poor who pay an unfair share of the cost, for the impact of crisis is always delegated to those who are already deprived.

*'I can't breathe.'*

Unspoken, spoken then hashtagged, this is becoming the cry of all who feel constricted and suffocated by poverty or injustice.

*'I can't breathe.'*

Those are not recorded amongst the last words spoken by Jesus from the cross, but they might have been, for crucifixion, like COVID, works by forcing the air out of a person's lungs. Every breath becomes such unspeakable agony that eventually the body has to give up trying. On the cross, Jesus identifies himself with all who cry out, 'I can't breathe.'

Yet his breathlessness has purpose, *'It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you,'* Jesus says at the table of the Last Supper (*John 16, 7*). By undergoing breathlessness, Jesus unleashes for us the irresistible, life-giving breath of the Spirit who renews all creation.

The Spirit's breath, released at Pentecost, is the gift that Jesus gives to his Church. So in a post-COVID world Christians must be utterly single-minded in breathing that breath over a world that cries out, 'I can't breathe.' Nothing else will matter.

First, over the breathless, we must breathe out the **Spirit's breath of life**. During crisis, through generous service and imaginative use of the online environment, we have made contact with a new fringe. What we need now is a new evangelism in which we live and speak the Gospel with joy, an evangelism motivated not by institutional survival but by the passionate desire that people might breathe.

And this new evangelism must begin amongst the poor, because that is the place from where renewal always springs. Dioceses are going to have difficult decisions to make about deployment and pastoral organisation in the years ahead, but such decisions must honour our commitment to inner city, outer estate

and post-industrial communities. If now becomes the time when we disproportionately withdraw people or buildings from places of poverty, then God is dishonoured and the Gospel is fatally undermined.

The lesson of history is clear and consistent. An evangelism that prioritises the powerful does not work and cannot last. Instead we need to hear the voice of the breathless. We need to speak good news to the poor. Our best leaders, our richest resources, our finest theologians, our most engaging preachers must be offered to the places where life is hardest. Only then we will re-engage a nation with the person of Jesus.

Next, over the breathless, we must breathe out the **Spirit's breath of justice**. The COVID pandemic has laid bare the harsh levels of social and economic inequality which so damage our common life, which deny opportunity, which take away hope and which lead to countless costly social ills from poor health to spiralling prison populations.

The action of local churches in addressing inequality through acts of charity has been heroic in this pandemic. But charity can be a fool without justice. Foodbanks, for example, merely prop up innately unjust structures unless we campaign to change those factors which have rendered them necessary: low pay, unfair benefits, family breakdown. As UK churches, our voice in naming injustice and calling for political and economic reform has for too long been inconsistent and disjointed. We need a united Christian voice: perhaps a new ecumenical body, which can campaign consistently and vigorously.

But if we are to address injustice nationally we must name it within our own structures. The vast wealth disparities between dioceses cannot be acceptable in the future as some dioceses go to the wall whilst others fall back on eye-watering levels of historic wealth. Harder still will be naming and addressing the deep-seated racism that still exists within our own common life and which prevents so many BAME Christians from breathing. We have no authority to name injustice nationally if we are so wantonly failing to put our own house in order.

And third, over the breathless, we must breathe out the **Spirit's breath of peace**. The fallout of this crisis is likely to be deep and sustained economic depression with concomitant pressures on relationships at every level. The church, filled with the Spirit, is called to model the new humanity. We are challenged to live differently under the bonds of love, valuing every human person as a child of God. That is the peace that the Spirit breathes.

If we are to do that effectively, we urgently need to do better at living with difference. We must find ways to conduct debates such that they do not destroy relationships and leave us too exhausted to engage with the world. A nation that is crying out for breath cannot afford the luxury of a divided and quarrelsome church, obsessed only with its own internal wrangles. Those who look to us seeking the breath life should find a community of peace. Without that all our words and prayers will be hollow hypocrisy.

*'I can't breathe.'*

It is the ultimate cry of despair. As those filled with the Spirit's breath, if we can hear and respond, then perhaps this terrible crisis can be the dawn of a new age of faith.



Stay safe

Blessings and love

Mark