

Dear all

Well, this will be the last Sunday when the service will be delivered under this format. As always, the [hymn words](#) and links are in the document attached. Again, a reminder that most of the links have got an advert first (it's how they make their money). Please be patient. You can usually skip ads after about 5 seconds (button bottom leftish). If not, they don't last long. They are just a bit irritating! The link to the recorded service is:

https://youtu.be/3YE17W_pxRA

Next Sunday (19th) we will be in church. We still intend to record the service for anyone not able to attend. We have completed a risk assessment, and briefed sidespeople. There will be much more detailed information in my next letter.

Today is the feast of St Benedict. Benedict of Nursia lived from c. 2 March 480 – c. 21 March 543 AD. It was Benedict who compiled the Rule from which the Benedictine Order was named. This rule is the basis of pretty well every monastic rule system throughout Western Christianity.

Benedictines are the monks we often think of by default – and appear for example in the Brother Cadfael stories. They are characterised particularly by a belief in stability, and therefore will remain largely in their monastery or abbey. Historically their two major purposes were prayer and study (resulting in the production of the wonderful illustrated books and manuscripts). In contrast, Franciscans (one of the groups of Friars, definitely not monks!) were to be seen amongst the people – preaching and working to alleviate suffering and sickness.

Both groups have professed members, and members of what is known as the Third Order. For Franciscans, these are called Tertiaries; for Benedictines, they are oblates. I am an oblate of Alton Abbey, which means I am attached to that place. I try to visit a few times each year, and aim to take retreats there. Our requirement is to best apply the spirit of the Rule of Benedict wherever our life takes us. As a vicar, that's not really a problem, as what is expected of an oblate is pretty much what is expected of a vicar.

Anyone can be an oblate, and (in normal circumstances) most abbeys are open for anyone to visit, even to stay. But many Christians would find that a rule of life that fits their life and circumstances is a very positive thing to develop – and I would heartily encourage it. Do have a word if you are interested further.

You may be interested to know that I referred to the Benedictine ideal of stability at my job interview here, when I was asked, in effect, whether I planned to hang around for a good while. You're stuck with me, I'm afraid!

The Bishop of London, *the Rt Revd Dame Sarah Mullally DBE, Bishop of London and former Chief Nursing Officer, has written an excellent piece about coronavirus and mental health.*

We Can't Go Back...So We Need to Take Care of Our Mental Health

'Coronavirus has our brains pinging on "future threat," driving global anxiety and shared fear, as we all live in this extreme state of uncertainty.' So wrote Jan Bruce in Forbes magazine on March 5th. And if shared fear was a reality then, how much more so now? After three months of daily death tolls, R values and

government appeals to stay at home, it is not surprising that a certain amount of anxiety might hang over the public's heads.

This week, the mental health charity Mind quantified the impact. In a survey of 16,000 people, they discovered that 65% of adults and 75% of 13-24 year olds with pre-existing mental health conditions said that their situations had worsened. More than a fifth of those aged 13 or older without prior mental health difficulties described their mental health as poor or very poor.

We needed the stats, the briefings and the message to stay at home. Coronavirus was and is a killer. Understanding the risks helped us to stay alert in a time of real danger. And I'm also acutely aware that many people have faced fearful burdens on top of the virus itself. Those who have lost their jobs or have been put under severe financial pressures. The elderly who were shielding and less able to socialise online. Those who struggle with loneliness at the best of times, finding their feelings exacerbated by circumstances. Others found themselves suddenly trapped at home with abusers. They faced fears not just from an unseen killer but from a visible threat.

But the general climate of fear that has been so successfully inculcated in us, leaves us with a conundrum. How do we encourage one another to wisely emerge from lockdown? How do we begin to navigate this brave new world of face masks and social distancing? A world in which we can meet with six others but cannot sing in church. Some can have a picnic in the park while others remain shut up at home. We have permission to roam but the newspapers warn of a second wave. We want to support the economy but can feel, more than anything, emotionally shattered.

Thankfully, before COVID-19 hit, we had been moving towards a greater awareness of the need to attend to our mental health. Notably the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge spoke out last year. I was grateful to be able to speak on these issues at Lambeth Palace alongside Dr Jacqui Dyer, President of the Mental Health Foundation and the Archbishop of Canterbury last year. The increased engagement with mental health awareness day is evidence of what Justin Welby wrote then: "it feels like something is beginning to shift." It is becoming okay to not be okay. And in this regard, the Christian story has an important contribution to make.

In the apostle Paul's second letter to the Corinthians he says:

"We have this treasure," [the treasure being the glory of God] "in jars of clay" [the jars being us] to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (2 Corinthians 4:7).

Paula Gooder, Canon Chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral, tells me that there were two types of jar in the first century. One was dark and thick used for display. The other used the thinnest material possible so that it would crack in the kiln. The cracks enabled light to diffuse out from within when a lamp was placed inside. The jar was purposely created to be vulnerable, so that the light would shine through it. This, says Paul is God's design. Our fragility, vulnerability and brokenness is *by design*, so that the light of the glory of Christ might shine brightly as we persevere in living for Jesus through it.

All of this means that as we emerge from lockdown, we do well to talk about our mental health. To talk to each other, to make it integral to our ministry life whatever context we find ourselves in, for mental health to be a subject for prayer in public as well as in private. In this way we can each find the comfort and support that we need.

I'm doing all I can to ensure that the NHS provides the mental health services that our nation will need through my role in the House of Lords. But in the first instance, Paul doesn't point us to specialised support groups but the shoulders to cry on that he provides in the church. The brothers and sisters that should be available to us all. The challenge to us as churches, is to continue to have a culture in which everyone feels safe to share their struggles and feel able to speak openly.

Our fear is not something that we need to hide. It is something that can be harnessed in our walk with God. So often it is when we are at our wit's end that we recognise our need to cry out to the Lord for help (Psalm 107:27). So often, in God's peculiar plan for this world, it is when we have received comfort from Him and his people, that we are best equipped to comfort others in return (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

Finally, a short reflection by Nadia Bolz-Weber:

*Grace is the cargo train that
distributes into my life all
the good and beautiful things*
THAT ARE UN-EARN-ABLE:

forgiveness,
MERCY,

endless second chances,
THE GOOD WILL OF THOSE WHO COULD WRITE ME OFF.

the sun rising each day,
A PERFECT PEACH IN SUMMER, AND LOVE.
-Nadia Bolz-Weber



Stay safe

Blessings and love

Mark