

JANUARY 6th MIDWEEK MESSAGE

Most people thought last summer that we were coming out of the pandemic and that by the start of 2021 we would be in a better place.

But as it now transpires, that very tragically is not the case. The virus and its variants are spreading more rapidly than ever, seem to be no respecter of tier restrictions and now we face a further national lockdown.

Reluctantly all agree it is necessary and we have no choice, but similarly we all affirm that the pressures upon us are extremely difficult to bear. The impact of this lockdown, coming after two previous lockdowns, will be deep and long lasting for individuals, communities and our national life.

Since the announcement of the current regulations, websites that offer advice on mental health have recorded the highest levels of viewings with very real concerns about isolation, poverty, and general wellbeing.

The consequences of the pandemic are felt across the board, whether that is people living on their own, families living in restricted accommodation, parents juggling work and home schooling, teenagers with cancelled exams, health professionals in our NHS, Care homes and social services at full stretch with high levels of exhaustion, teachers similarly wearied by last minute changes to their plans and having to keep schools open for the children of key workers and the most vulnerable and at the same time providing online learning, businesses trying to protect livelihoods and jobs, and clergy struggling with decisions about whether congregations can meet safely, whether services should be online, either prerecorded or live streamed, how to protect the most vulnerable and how to justify the decision that meetings for worship can continue, albeit safely, when so many other kinds of gatherings are prohibited. Put together and there are many other pressures I've not mentioned, here's a recipe for real strain on the fabric of our society.

Having said that, it would be wrong to forget the pressures experienced in other parts of the world. I gather the Archbishop of Capetown said this week that the situation in SA is far, far, far worse with the new much more transmissible variant than was the case with the first wave. We need to be very aware of and pray for the situation elsewhere, especially where there are far fewer and less effective facilities available.

Despite all these pressures, we have to find a way of carrying on and helping others to carry on and can I take this opportunity to thank again all lay and ordained leaders in churches and all key workers for the amazing way you have done this so far. It's a great story of Lancashire resilience. Thank you.

It's important that we offer a message that holds the balance between acknowledging the pain of what we are all going through, and to do so by expressions of lament and grief, and holding on to faith and hope, and to do so by proclaiming the Gospel. On the one hand we weep and mourn with those who have experienced loss, through bereavement, ongoing health complications with long Covid, postponement of important surgery, redundancies, inability to be with family and friends and the fear of what all this means for the future. On the other hand we rejoice that the promise of Jesus' presence to be with us always to the close of the age has not been broken, that He is indeed Emmanuel, God with us and that He gives the Christian community a peace and a purpose to not despair and give up, but to carry on.

Lockdown has not shut or cancelled the ministry of the church. It is just that we have to do it differently. And while much has and probably will change, we carry on because we believe certain things have not and cannot change.

The writer to the Hebrews puts it most clearly. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and for ever. Hebrews 13.5. That's why I love the words that we use as a refrain and conclusion to our reading of the Psalms, but probably do not stop to ponder their significance, that the glory of God, Father, Son and Spirit, is now as it was in the beginning and shall be for ever. No earthly circumstance can change the supreme authority or glorious character of God. As the theologians put it, He is immutable. I the Lord do not change, a word spoken through the mouth of the prophet Malachi in 3.6.

Immutable is a strange word today but it sounds a bit like the zoom experience of being mute and in that sense, God is immutable and unmutable, ever speaking, not least in our recent celebration of the incarnation. As Hebrews begins, In these last days He has spoken by a Son.....

And He continues to speak through the message of the Gospel which hasn't changed. Like Paul we are unashamed of the Gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. Romans 1.16. In Christ alone our hope is found. This message about a Saviour for the world, about a light for the world, about a way to the Father,

about grace and truth found in knowing the risen Jesus Christ, is what makes sense of our lives and has not changed over the centuries. To whom shall we go? said Peter, You have the words of eternal life. John 6.68. As disciples today we say the same.

And His commission hasn't changed. We are still to go and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them all that Jesus has commanded. I believe that in the current uncertainties there's a greater openness to the Gospel, a hunger for truth and for answers to the big questions of life about meaning, purpose and identity. Today is a day of salvation....

So we carry on because though much is different at this time, there is much that is the same and I hope and pray as a diocese we shall emerge from this crisis stronger, rather than weaker, more focused on what really matters, more mature as disciples of Jesus Christ, more effective as His witnesses, more faithful as His leaders, and more committed to inspiring children and young people in the things of God. May He make us a healthy church that has a transformative impact on the wider community. May the glory He had at the beginning and will have at the end be revealed and made known in Lancashire in our time. Let's make that our big prayer.

Bishop Julian