

Strengthen your nets – Bishop Jill – 1.7.20

This Sunday, churches are allowed to open their doors again for public worship for the first time in over three months. I surprised myself by how excited I was to be invited back to church “for real” on Sunday. I had been booked to speak at a particular church 18 months previously. I phoned the vicar to offer a video message, and I caught my breath when he said: “Well you could come and deliver it for real!” Yes of course I could.

If nothing else, lockdown has made me more grateful. I am looking forward to the simple pleasure of seeing colleagues and friends face to face, rather than as pixelated, staccato 2D images on a Zoom screen. For all its advantages, online communication has a nasty habit of becoming slurred and muted. There is a new liturgy in our team meetings: “Could you please unmute yourself... it’s the button in the bottom left hand corner”. And also with you!

And one thing I am especially grateful for in this time of lockdown is the sheer creativity of our churches. People have been unmuting themselves and more. Resurrection and Pentecost haven’t just been festivals, they’ve been realities. Lyrics & Lunch online for dementia sufferers and their carers at Christ Church Thornton, Jelly tots on line at St John’s Ellel, services by phone in Hornby, Whittington, Arkholme and Gressingham, community blessing at St Michael’s Over Wyre, vicar prayer walking the streets by FB in Slyne with Hest, extreme sports at Higham St John, worship leaders online to bless Lancaster. This is to mention just a few. One vicar said to me: “Bishop, if I’d told you I’d be getting twenty people regularly for morning and evening prayer, you’d never have believed me”. And this is not to mention the food parcels delivered, hot meals cooked and vulnerable people visited. Massive shout out to our chaplains, our teachers and headteachers serving at the front line.

One resurrection story has been especially important to me this year. In the crucifixions of lockdown, perhaps you feel exhausted and dejected – you’ve been fishing all night and caught nothing. In John 21, the disciples have been fishing all night and caught nothing, they are returning to shore when Jesus, who they don’t recognise, calls to them from the beach: “Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some”. When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish”.

During lock down, it’s as if the spiritual airwaves have been clearer. People have been sensing a call to pray, a call to come home. Without our usual routines, we’ve followed Jesus’s promptings to cast out nets over the right side of the boat.

As we start to emerge from lock down. Let’s keep fishing. Keep offering alternatives on line. Strengthening the nets of those relationships. May we keep following the prompting of Jesus to cast down our nets. And even when we’re at our weakest, our energy is all but spent...

May we hear the voice of the risen Jesus, waiting for us on the beach, calling us for a rich breakfast.

Talking of rich breakfasts ... after this message comes an advert... for a special new venture that’s happening this Sunday, where the nets are truly being cast far & wide!