

My name is Julian Henderson and I am the Bishop of Blackburn. This message is being sent to encourage and support the family of the diocese in facing the ongoing and increasing challenges of the current coronavirus pandemic.

Another national four week lock down that begins this week is designed to curb the spread of the virus, to prevent the NHS from being overwhelmed and to save lives. But it comes at a massive cost, as businesses are forced to close, some perhaps never to reopen, jobs are lost and unemployment grows, personal debts begin to mount, isolation increases levels of loneliness, and anxiety leads to significant mental health problems. Added to which there's the uncertainty of not knowing when it will all end and when we can start to make plans without the fear of having to rearrange or cancel them.

For the Christian community the closure of church buildings for acts of public worship removes a lifeline of corporate worship, spiritual nourishment and fellowship. Yes, we can stream services via zoom and YouTube, and we must be thankful for that technology as it enables some, though not all, to engage with the Christian story and for worship, witness and service to continue, none of that stops in a lock down, but it is not the same as meeting face to face and we look forward to the day when we can gather once more in Christ's name.

As many will know we have planned a two week period of November to be a focus on prayer, concluding with a gift day on Advent Sunday, for a one off sacrificial gift towards parish funds in this crisis. As we now cannot meet on that Sunday, November 29th, we ask that during the period of prayer, we pray for God's blessing and direction in our giving, setting aside our gift in a specially prepared envelope, which will be delivered to parishes and which everyone will then be encouraged to bring to the church building on the first Sunday when the current restrictions are lifted. It will feel like a thank offering to mark that the lockdown has concluded. That revised plan coincides well with the initiative of the Archbishops, who are calling for November to be a month of prayer.

November helpfully begins with All Saints Day, reminding us that we do not travel alone, that many have passed this way before as followers of Jesus Christ and have done so with faith and trust in God. They are that glorious communion of the Saints, down through the centuries and all around the globe, who as the great cloud of witnesses are cheering us along from the sidelines, encouraging us to keep strong in faith and hope and love and calling us to fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him, endured the cross, scorning its shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. The writer to the Hebrews then says, Consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and fainthearted.

So as I thank you for all you are doing to bring the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ to your communities, through word and deed, it is my prayer that you will be sustained and upheld in the days that lie ahead, discovering new opportunities for mission and ministry. Our faithful resilience around the diocese will bring much glory to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, remembering that as His glory was in the beginning, so it is now and shall be for ever. What comfort and assurance that gives in a time of grief, challenge and anxiety. May the Lord God grant the diocese and this County His mercy, His favour and His blessing.

Rt Rev Julian Henderson
Bishop of Blackburn