

Dear Friends,

We promised last week that there would be no further briefings this year, but we could not have anticipated the sheer pace of events over the past seven days and the deep unease that has been caused by the new variant of the Coronavirus. As we write, the news headlines are especially hard to read with closed borders, ever tightening restrictions, deep concerns from our schools and growing levels of anxiety.

At Evensong tonight many of us will pray before and after the Magnificat: *“O King of the nations, and their desire, the cornerstone making both one: Come and save the human race, which you fashioned from clay.”* We are approaching the end of a year in which we have been irresistibly reminded of the vulnerability of the human race which, despite all our cleverness and ingenuity, is fashioned from clay. At the same time Christmas promises us the hope of a Saviour, a King who takes the frail stuff of our mortal lives and crafts us anew into that glorious Building of which he is the cornerstone.

The coming of the Child is the world’s only hope. Even in these strange and anxious times, don’t be afraid to proclaim that hope with joy this Christmas.

Worship over Christmas

The news headlines and various pronouncements have led to a degree of nervousness in some quarters about plans for worship over Christmas.

Please note that nothing in Lancashire has changed. We are still in Tier 3 and even in Tier 4 public worship can continue. It is important of course to act safely and to follow the guidance closely. But times like this remind us of the critical importance of worship which is not a leisure activity to be switched on and off, but the way in which we access the grace of God in Jesus Christ through Word and Sacrament. The Incarnation of Jesus Christ will be made manifest in the worship of churches across Lancashire this year, and at a time when so many people are seeking hope and comfort, there is no richer contribution that we can make to our communities or to our national life.

If there are changes in the days after Christmas, we will rush out a briefing as swiftly as possible.

Christmas Day

The social plans of many of us have been subject to constant change in recent days as the regulations around who can mix where and with whom over Christmas have been changed. Under tier three, three households can meet but only for one day on December 25th. Part of the aim of this is to discourage people from making long journeys on Christmas Day.

Many will be deeply saddened not to see family members this Christmas and there will be particular pressures on clergy and others who live alone.

Please be aware of the needs of single people from your Deanery Chapter or Parish as there may be families around who can welcome another guest for Christmas Dinner, whilst still complying with the Christmas Day three-household bubble rule.

Call to Pray and Give

Despite the pandemic playing havoc with our plans, the response to the Call to Pray and Give initiative has been powerfully encouraging. With responses still coming in, so far we know that **£212,000** has been donated in one off gifts to Parishes across the Diocese. This is a very precious sign of the how much people value the ministry of the local church.

If you were unable to share in the initiative in November and December there is nothing to stop individual parishes doing something similar in the New Year.

A Reflection from Archdeacon Mark

“On this day when so many people are feeling perplexed and disappointed by the Government’s last minute changes to the rules for Christmas, and anxious about rising infection rates, it would be so easy to give in to fear. Yet the glimmer of hope is that public worship can continue, which is a belated recognition of how brilliantly local churches have worked to keep people safe – with all the hygiene protocols in place I am sure going to church has never been safer in 2,000 years.

At a time when so many Christmas plans have been cancelled, it is all the more important that we are able to offer public worship this Christmas, and to enable people to receive into their hands the bread of life. The opportunity to meet together for worship and receive the sacrament – and even perhaps to sing a carol out of doors after the service – will be a lifeline for the spiritual and mental wellbeing of so many, especially those who face a lonely Christmas.

Last Sunday I was feeling pretty fed up that I would not be able to see my family this week as planned. But then I was very struck by how in the readings set for the eucharist both David and Mary had their cherished plans disrupted. In 1 Samuel 7 David had been looking forward to building a temple for God, had made lots of plans, and had even checked and got the prophet Nathan’s approval, only to be told at the last minute to abort his plans.

In Luke 1.29 we read that Mary was ‘much perplexed’ by the words of the angel – not surprisingly since the angel’s announcement disrupted all her plans for her wedding, and was also very costly, as she had to face the social ostracism (or worse) of her culture for bearing a child before marriage, and the fear of how her betrothed Joseph would react to the news. Mary was to discover that being highly favoured by God would also break her heart. As Simeon later prophesied in the temple, ‘A sword shall pierce your heart also.’

And yet with all this disruption to her plans as a young bride-to-be and a highly uncertain future, does Mary give in to self-pity or fear? No, instead she responds with faith and with willing obedience – ‘Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.’

It would be so easy for us today to give in to self-pity and fear. We have all had much longed-for plans cancelled, and there is much that can genuinely make us afraid as infection rates climb. But Mary’s example challenges me to try to respond to this news with faith and with willing obedience – praying that the virus will soon be under control, trusting that ‘nothing will be impossible with God’, and trying to obey (rather than bend) the rules. In so doing I will be able to do my little bit to keep safe, save lives and protect the NHS.”

Coronavirus Email Address

We’ll be monitoring the email address throughout Christmas and New Year.

coronavirus@blackburn.anglican.org. It is important that clergy who are self-isolating send us a note to this address.

Eternal God,
in the stillness of night
you sent your almighty Word
to pierce the world's darkness with the light of salvation:
give to the earth the peace that we long for
and fill our hearts with the joy of heaven
through our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Amen

Yours,

The Coronavirus Task Group