

**The Bishop of Blackburn**  
*The Rt Revd Julian T Henderson*

**To all Licensed and PTO Clergy in the Diocese of Blackburn**

Monday January 18<sup>th</sup> 2021

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This letter contains no advice, no instructions, no information, no requests and no advertising material. It is simply to let you know that, as your three Bishops, we are praying for you.

It is hard to think of a time in living memory when sustaining Christian life has been quite so challenging as today. Covid-19 has impacted every single area of Christian ministry. It has stripped us of much of what feeds us as priests, for example pastoral visiting, ministry to children and schools, nurture and prayer groups and the day to day warmth of real human contact. It has caused constant disruption to patterns and routines of worship, culminating in the difficult dilemmas we have had in recent days about public worship when confronted with contradictory advice. The decision that many of you have had to make to deprive your people of the joy of corporate worship is an extremely painful one.

Moreover as we endure this third wave, most of you are now dealing directly with those effected by Covid-19 and so are carrying with you the personal cost of such challenging ministry, because those who are called to speak the hope of the cross must also bear its weight.

And then on personal level, repeated lockdowns and seemingly endless restrictions have undermined so many of the networks that usually support us in ministry. We are deeply conscious that, whilst we are under the same lock down, we are living under very different stresses. Some of you may find be finding yourselves incredibly lonely, some finding relationships strained, some have lives too full of home schooling, some run down by adjusting to constant changes and making difficult decisions.

We are so grateful to God for our clergy and for all that you have done to adapt to such extraordinary circumstances. Your work in reaching out in loving service to the hungry, the lonely and those in poverty has been remarkable and stands as an extraordinary testimony to the generosity of God. Many churches have built a new fringe by taking worship online and are doing so with quality and confidence. Thanks to your efforts, the Diocese is in a far better state financially than we dared hope possible last Summer, and the Call to Pray and Give initiative has raised nearly £250,000 for Parish funds. This is all eloquent testimony to the faithfulness, energy and dedication of our clergy and lay leaders. But of course we

recognise that even this can be exhausting, and just at the stage when we thought we would be rebuilding, the crisis still seems to stretch out into the future.

In the Second Letter to the Corinthians Paul writes with raw honesty: *"We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead."*

It is a wonderful truth of the Christian life that the times when we are confronted with our own weaknesses and limitations are also the times of growth and change, for when we cannot depend on ourselves we trust all the more in Jesus Christ. We would be crazy to think we can live through these times alone or minister in a time of pandemic through our own gifts. But God who has power to raise the dead is at work in us, and the more we trust, the more room we make for his grace to flow.

So thank you for all you continue to do in hard times, especially for those quiet, unseen acts of ministry that mean so much to those who receive them. In these lonely days it can be easy to forget it, but your ministry is profoundly important and richly appreciated. If the challenges are feeling too great, please get in touch sooner rather than later with any one of us for a conversation.

And above all be assured of our prayers. Our Diocesan Prayer Diary has felt more important than ever over this last year, and as Bishops and Archdeacons we have been meeting two or three times a week on Zoom to pray for our diocese, its parishes, its chaplaincies and its schools. Even when we cannot physically meet up, we become a close-knit family in the warmth and intimacy of prayer.

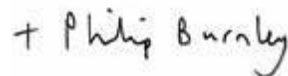
May the God of all grace give you perseverance, compassion and courage to do his will. And may you know both his strength and his peace.

Yours,

+Julian Blackburn

+Philip Burnley

+Jill Lancaster

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "+ Julian". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a single horizontal stroke.A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "+ Philip Burnley". The signature is written in a cursive style.A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "+ Jill Lancaster". The signature is written in a cursive style.