

Friday 3rd July 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I wanted to write to you again firstly to assure you of my prayers for you, those you love and the whole city as we face further lockdown. In particular I continue to pray for those who are ill, mourning, facing a long struggle of recovery, and those who provide healthcare and support to them.

Secondly, I had hoped to be announcing the reopening of the church for public worship this coming Sunday (5th) following opening the building for private prayer on the last two Sundays and the intervening Wednesday. Many churches were still to open, but we had been able to do this with no apparent problems.

Now the lockdown means the church is building closed completely, including to myself, as it was in the early weeks of lockdown. However, we hope that when this local lockdown is lifted, we will be able to open for public worship in line with the rest of the country. The government and the Church of England have produced extended guidance to enable churches to do this safely. Although it has been made clear that no church should feel pressured to resume services, or indeed to open at all, it is my feeling, shared by the wardens and PCC, that if we can practically and safely do this, we should.

We have a large building, and are blessed with flexible seating (as opposed to fixed pews) and multiple entrances. Our experience in opening for private prayer means that I am confident we can resume worship as soon as we are permitted to do so. We very much hope that this will be for 10.30am on Sunday 26th July, when we celebrate our Patronal Festival.

This is of course conditional on the lockdown being lifted and no further changes being announced by the national Church or government. Furthermore, the service will be different in a number of ways from those we have previously experienced. As you have probably heard, both congregational and choral singing is still barred. We are further directed to conduct services “in the shortest reasonable time.” There will be no refreshments, no staying for a chat – indeed our interaction with each other will be absolutely minimal.

If you are over 70, or have a health condition that makes you vulnerable, you are advised not to attend, although we leave that decision to you. Similarly if you have any reservations about attending please do not feel under any pressure to come just because a service is taking place – we aim to record services and make them available on the website, facebook page and youtube – and God will hear your prayer whether you are in the building or not. Naturally if you or anyone you live with has any symptoms corresponding to the coronavirus you must not come, but seek testing.

All that said, there follows a rough outline of the practicalities and practice you can expect on the 26th, or whenever after that services resume. Although the carpark on St James Terrace will be available as normal, we will ask people not to enter near the hall, but walk about St James Road to the front of the building. This is to avoid the narrow stairs, doorway and handrail that produce a contamination risk. (Those with mobility issues will of course be able to park in the front of the vicarage as usual.) Entrance will be through the “North” doors and the servery – this has the advantage of washing facilities, and sanitizing hand gel will be available too. (In the event of a queue forming to enter the church, please maintain 2 metres distance – tape markings that may be familiar to you by now from shops will be on the flagstones outside!) It is essential that you wash your hands thoroughly or use hand gel before entering. Masks are not compulsory, but you are welcome to wear one if you deem it wise.

A sides-person will direct you to a seat, spaced two metres from its neighbours. Please go directly there, not stopping to chat to the sides-people or anyone else. (The votive candles are out of use, largely because of the fire risk associated with alcohol-based hand sanitiser). If you are leaving cash or envelopes, there will be baskets at the back to place your offering in as you go in (and I continue to commend supporting the church through standing order or other regular method!)

On your seat will be a single-use service sheet/weekly bulletin, a form and a pen. Please fill in the form with your contact details – this is to enable contact tracing in the event of any positive tests. The form will be

retained for three weeks, then destroyed. Please don't move any seats – if you want to sit with others from your household or “bubble” please ask a sides-person to arrange this.

The service will be said Holy Communion, although we hope to have live organ music and possibly some recorded hymns or anthems from our choir. The peace will not be shared. Whilst some of us may be delighted to be back worshipping together in church, we are all instructed not to utter the responses too loudly!

The priest taking the service will of course sanitize their hands, and the bread will be covered as the Eucharistic prayer is said.

Communion itself will follow a similar pattern to that we used in the last couple of weeks before lockdown – only bread will be given, and distribution will be done standing in the nave. As you line up please maintain distancing – the 2 metre spacing of the chairs should help you judge this. At the front of the nave there will be more hand gel – please use this before receiving. As you approach the priest please extend your arms and place your hands as flat as you are able to receive. The wafer will be dropped into your hand, and the priest will not say “The Body of Christ” at that point to avoid contamination. After receiving please return directly to your seat. (If you are uncomfortable communicating at this time, you are naturally free to remain in your seat. The priest can also bring the bread to the seat of those with mobility issues as usual.)

After the service please leave directly. We are all no doubt longing for a catch-up, to spend some time in reflection in the church, or to listen to the organ, but to minimize risk we should not linger. Please take your service sheet/weekly bulletin with you. Please put the contact details form in the marked box. Exit will be through the south doors (the ones usually used). Again, please use hand gel as you leave. The priest will have gone directly to the vestry, so will not be chatting (or shaking hands, perish the thought!) at the back.

I'm sure stated like this it all sounds rather intimidating, strange, and different from the worship we are used to. In particular the lack of sung music and the change to share fellowship in conversation will no doubt be missed. Having said that, I for one will rejoice to pray, share the scriptures and break bread with you (safely distanced!) It is worth noting that it is likely many other local churches without the flexibility of us will still be closed, so it is possible we will be joined by visitors. Please make them feel welcome with a smile or a wave, but do maintain social distancing.

Thank you for your ongoing prayers and support. I hope very much to see you all soon.

Yours with prayers,

Andrew