

Revd. James Shakespeare
Priest in Charge
St. John's Vicarage
9 Luard Road
Cambridge
CB2 8PJ
01223 241815
jshakespeare@btinternet.com

Pastoral Letter to St John's Congregation
in the wake of the Coronavirus

19th March 2020

Dear Brothers & Sisters

"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place... to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed." (1 Peter 4.12)

Further to my video message, I want to write to you personally, in the wake of the latest restrictions, introduced to curb the spread of COVID-19.

We all face profound disruptions to our normal lives and familiar landmarks, and many are experiencing significant levels of anxiety and uncertainty. It is going to take some time to discern how to adjust positively to this new reality, what our Christian faith looks like, and how to 'be' the church in the present context.

The purpose of this letter is threefold. Firstly, to invite you to be part of a conversation about how we can 'do' church in a relevant way at this time. Secondly, to express my solidarity, prayer and support for everyone, including groups affected in significant ways. And thirdly, to remind you of initial steps that we are taking, as a church community, to exercise our mission and ministry, in these 'in between' times.

1. I think we will all agree that the church is all of us, the whole people of God, a living community of brother and sisters in Christ. The church is not the vicar, or PCC, or parish office or church building. It is a living body, rooted in Christ and in God's presence with us. Therefore I suggest we all need to pray about the way forward, and feel empowered – if ideas come to mind – to contribute to the way ahead. Everyone, up and down the country, and across the Diocese, is trying to make sense of our situation, and take steps forward. All clergy received a letter from the Archbishop of Canterbury, and alongside some specific suggestions and prohibitions – including no public worship gatherings, baptisms, weddings (with more than five people), confirmations, ordinations or traditional funerals (beyond the immediate family) – Justin writes, "We must be a radically different church for now, one that's hopeful, prayerful and committed to serving others." Please do contribute any ideas you have to me or our ministry team. There are lots of possibilities becoming evident, but we need to discern the right shape for our particular setting, doing a few things well. The clergy also need enough capacity and energy to respond to the many pastoral demands that will inevitably come our way.

2. I need to express my heartfelt solidarity, and we all need to find ways of expressing support, prayer and love for one another. The latest announcement that all schools will be closed from tomorrow, for an indefinite period has huge implications. Like others, our children, Edward and Hannah, were due to sit GCSEs and A Levels this summer; the culmination of years of hard work. My heart goes out to all our families in this unprecedented situation. However all families are affected, not least those with younger children, single parent families, and those juggling work and childcare. I feel for all teachers in the congregation, as well as school governors and support staff. As Bursar at the Perse School, Alison has a daunting prospect, as have all senior management teams, academics and university staff. So too, students, and our ordinands, who will not now be with us until September, as all College life goes on hold. The summer term period is going to be most unusual.

Inevitably our Health Service needs our particular prayer, and I wish to express support, solidarity and prayer for all our doctors, nurses, scientists, and hospital staff, as well as primary health care workers, emergency services and care providers. One cannot imagine the pressure they are under, let alone the fears about resourcing, capacity and personal safety. Please know that we are with you in prayer, and here to support you all.

However we also think of our business community, those in the arts or hospitality sector, and – fundamentally – those with underlying health problems, and the over 70s, who are being instructed to self-isolate (whatever this means) from this weekend. And alongside all of the above, there are those who may - and I pray that this doesn't happen - contract the virus.

3. In terms of our initial steps forward, as St John the Evangelist, there are a number of things happening. Interestingly, the common feeling of our South Cambridge Clergy Chapter is that we – as spiritual leaders – must not rush or panic, but live prayerfully and calmly, seeking an appropriate pastoral and community response. Let me explain, therefore, our early steps to 'being' church during this health crisis:-
 - St John's remains open for prayer every day, and indeed we encourage people to come and pray. Why not see St John's as a 'House of Prayer', for now, rather than a place of corporate worship? There are, and will be, lots of prayer resources, to help people. Please remember to sit or pray at a safe distance from others.
 - Otherwise I hope that St John's will remain a spiritual and community hub. We may not be able to hold official gatherings, but there is no reason currently why people can't come in, talk to one another – especially in the Cloister Garden or outside generally - at a safe distance. Work will continue on our gardens, and Chris & I will be joining in Morning Prayer every Monday to Thursday at 9am, as well as offering Holy Communion privately on a Sunday, on behalf of the whole congregation.

Revd. James Shakespeare
Priest in Charge
St. John's Vicarage
9 Luard Road
Cambridge
CB2 8PJ
01223 241815
jshakespeare@btinternet.com

- In terms of teaching, study and worship materials, each Sunday there will be a short service and some teaching posted online. From 23rd March there will be a daily 'thought for the day' online, by members of the Ministry Team. And we anticipate enabling each other to 'walk' through Holy Week and Easter, with plenty of worship material, involved different voices. We won't necessarily live stream our worship, not least because the Archbishop of Canterbury, Ely Cathedral, Great St Mary's, and a number of other larger local churches are already doing this. Please access whatever worship material most keeps your spiritual life healthy. And there are plenty of inspiring theological books or books on prayer to read, some of them at St John's. We will of course aim to distribute hard copies of our worship materials to those not online who would find them helpful.
- In addition to the above worship material, I also plan to publish some more specific devotional material on prayer and spirituality, relevant to our lives at this uncertain time.
- In terms of pastoral care, we are setting up a telephone links scheme, for those who would like to opt into that. Ideally members of our congregation as a whole, or within specific networks and groups, will be looking after each other. But the clergy, pastoral team and other volunteers will also be available for phone contact, perhaps on a weekly basis, for those for whom this is a reassurance (which may actually be all of us!). As one would expect, the clergy will also be 'out and about' in the parish, as long as we are able, talking to local residents, and offering reassurance and practical help.
- Finally, a great deal of community organising is going on, not least through our 'Happy to Help' scheme, an initiative encouraged under the umbrella of the Queen Edith's Community Forum and with other local partners. This scheme is being featured on the local rolling TV news channel, this evening, 19th March. All houses are being leafleted with a letter from me, encouraging local self-help and support to neighbours... whether this be a food shop, collecting a prescription or keeping in touch by phone. There are still a few bundles to go out from St John's, if anyone can help us. I believe we have a real opportunity to provide a gateway into our local community, to enable the sharing of time, care and resources, more widely in the population; as well as providing a spiritual response to this unprecedented event. Please feel able to visit the Queen Edith's Forum website, even if you're not resident in the parish, and sign-up to their regular email list. The Forum provides excellent local information, both in terms of help through this crisis, and more general events and services. Their website is: <https://queen-ediths.info/> As local community leaders, we are also being approached by lots of businesses offering help to vulnerable residents, including fresh vegetable deliveries, and home cooked meals. Please let me know if you feel this would be helpful for you or a neighbour.



Rev. James Shakespeare
Priest in Charge
St. John's Vicarage
9 Luard Road
Cambridge
CB2 8PJ
01223 241815

jshakespeare@btinternet.com

In summary, I would value your ideas and participation, in terms of discerning ways of being church in this uncertain time. I assure you all of my heartfelt solidarity and prayer (It's very hard refraining from worship gatherings, meetings or home groups, as well as pastoral visits, when this is our default setting, and usually defines what Christian community is...). And lastly, I invite you all to be fully part of what is going on, at St John's – as a place of private prayer, as well as a community hub – pastorally, and online. Please pray for Chris & I, for our whole congregation, for vulnerable groups, and especially for those working in our NHS and other frontline services. The Lord be with you all.

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.” (2 Corinthians 13.13)

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'James Shakespeare'.