

Dear members of St Marys

Palm Sunday, Holy Week, Good Friday, Easter Day. The annual climax of the Christian year. For centuries, believers all over the world have made a point of being together at this time. To tell 'the old, old story, of Jesus and his love.' To give thanks. To share bread and wine. To open our eyes and hearts to the awesome price Jesus paid for our redemption. And to rejoice together in the glory of his resurrection.

But not in 2020. In most of the world, believers are unable to meet. Over the next ten days, we will feel our separation very sharply. Of course we will be in touch over all sorts of media - through the post, over the phone, on the web. But the resurrection of Jesus proclaims that bodies matter. Meeting physically, visibly matters. It is at the heart of what it means to belong to the body of Christ. All over the New Testament we read of the yearning of believers to meet together, and of the heartache of separation.

So there will be something missing this Holy Week and Easter. But perhaps it will help us begin to answer the discipleship question, 'how should I respond to the Coronavirus crisis in a way that brings glory to God?' By making us more thankful for every opportunity we have had in the past to share life in person. By praying for patience to endure our own separation, for the heart to support others in theirs, and for the Lord to bring this pandemic to an end and graciously restore us to one another. By treasuring our fellowship with believers we have never met - down the years and across the globe. And by living in the certain hope that one day 'we will be with the Lord for ever' (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

I must now apologise that there is rather a lot of detail in what follows!

This Sunday, 5th April: Palm Sunday - on YouTube and by phone

Our recorded morning service will be available on St Marys YouTube channel from 8am on Sunday morning. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZvCU7xTRXeo4l4L5U10cxQ>

Shaun Atkins will be preaching from John's account of Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem (John 12:12-16). It has been encouraging to see the numbers joining us every Sunday like this - thank you to those who have emailed to let us know what you've appreciated about these services.

For those who do not have internet access, you can hear the sermon over the phone. Just dial 01234 866195; after the short message beginning 'you have a trial account . . .', press any key on your phone and after two rings you'll be connected to the sermon track. At the end, just hang up. (Please pass this information on the people who may need it.)

For safety reasons we are not able to distribute Palm Crosses. Why not make one at home from paper with easy-to-follow instructions from St Albans Cathedral:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ok8lVvZ4DUA&feature=youtu.be>

Services this week

Palm Sunday Prayer Gathering - 5th April 7.15pm

We will be trialling a simple prayer gathering using Zoom technology this Sunday evening. If you are able to join us, the following link should open the right page in your web browser: <https://us04web.zoom.us/j/851128656>. It will be great to see one another's faces!

Good Friday All Age Service - 10th April

A recorded short all age service will be available on St Marys YouTube channel from 8am on Friday morning. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZvCU7xTRXeo4l4L5U10cxQ>

Good Friday Readings, Prayers & Music - 10th April

An afternoon online service at 2pm. More details on the website and by email when we have worked out the best way to make this available.

Easter Day, 12th April

A recorded morning service will be available on the YouTube Channel from 8am.

We would love to hear and see some personal stories as part of this Easter Day celebration! If you are able to record a short (max 45 second) clip saying something about you and your household are doing and what you are learning about following Jesus in the Coronavirus crisis, please send it to me. We hope to include as many as time allows in our Easter Day service.

Sadly, because of social distancing guidelines, we are not able to hold a sunrise service this year.

Resources for us all

New on the church website COVID-19 page are links to many helpful resources: websites, Bible apps, podcasts, blogs, etc. To help us support one another in living in faith love and hope over the coming weeks. Many Christian organisations are making resources freely available, so now could well be the time to give something a try! Also included are links to the amazing 'Church at Home' material which Emma Hearn - with Sarah Joy's support - is preparing week by week for young people and their families, based on the Mustard Seed resources used by our Sunday groups.

Pastoral support

Please don't hesitate to ring or email myself or Phillip Young if you (or someone you know) are in need of support - we will be delighted to speak with you, pray with you, and put you in touch if appropriate with other sources of help (practical as well as spiritual). Over the next few days Growth Group leaders and members will be sharing with the staff and other leaders the task of supporting individuals.

The Parochial Church Council, Annual Parochial Church Meeting, and Church Finances

As PCC members already know, we are not able to hold any physical meetings at present. The Annual Meeting which was due to be held on 19 April is being postponed until the autumn. New PCC and Deanery Synod members won't be elected until then; members who were due to step down at the APCM are continuing on the PCC until the autumn. The annual election of churchwardens is also postponed until the autumn.

The PCC Standing Committee is meeting regularly to conduct routine business, while PCC decisions where needed are being made by correspondence/email.

One area of church life we are keeping an eye on is our finances. Although we will be making some savings (e.g on heating church and hall), most of our costs relate to pastoral and admin staff - who are all working at full stretch from home. We continue to rely mainly on the generous giving of the congregation to function as a church. But we know for some people finances are now tight. If this is likely to affect your giving, please speak to the Treasurer, Phil Wainwright, in confidence.

On the practical side, if you regularly make a cash offering on Sundays, we suggest saving it up at home until we can meet in church again (or switch to online giving if you can).

Prayer

Prayer o'clock It's been great to hear of households and individuals pausing to pray daily at 8pm - or as near as they can manage - for each other, for our community and for the world.

Prayer Diary Also on this page is a daily prayer diary for the coming fortnight - equipping us to pray for church, community, families and the world. Thanks to Norma Smith and Diane Murray for putting this together.

Please pray for . . .

Finally, please pray especially for longstanding church member Kirsty Edwards, following her transfer to a psychiatric care unit on Tuesday. While coronavirus means visits are not possible, please pray for good communications, for the healing process to continue, and that Kirsty would be very aware of the love and presence of Jesus.

In 2 Corinthians 4, the apostle Paul, who knew what it was to face life-threatening hardship, wrote these words, infused with resurrection hope:

'Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.'