Pastoral Epistle from the Dean of Christ Church  
24 March 2020

Dear Friends and Colleagues

John 14:27

27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

It hardly needs saying that we live in strange times. We are living through an unprecedented global crisis. Extraordinary times demand extraordinary measures by our Government - and the outworking of all this is bewildering, disorientating and frightening by turns.

As a Church we clearly have to play our part in following Government guidelines. This means that last week the Archbishops of Canterbury and York announced the highly unusual suspension of public worship. It feels entirely counter-intuitive to ask people to stay away from their spiritual community at a time of great need, but churches must, of course, behave responsibly in helping to prevent the spread of the virus.

This week, our churches and Cathedrals have been asked to close their doors even to those seeking private prayer during the day. We are asked to end the practice of meeting behind closed doors for worship in small groups.

On Mothering Sunday (22 March) it was a privilege to be able lead worship with Bishop Steven in the knowledge that the service was being live-streamed. There could hardly be a more significant Sunday in the year in which to embody our role as ‘Mother Church’ to the Diocese.

New government guidelines have led to even stricter measures this week, with the result that we are having to radically rethink our approach to our mission and ministry. Our doors are now closed to the outside world for the coming weeks. Moreover, the limitations on staff movement means we are unlikely to stream future Sunday services.

But we still want to care for and resource people spiritually and pastorally during this time. We will be publishing Sunday sermons online; and posting a series of spiritual reflections on a daily and weekly basis on our website which we hope can support you spiritually in this very challenging period.

We will send a booklet of prayer resources by email or post; and we’re also sharing links of other resources you may find helpful in isolation (see www.chch.ox.ac.uk/cathedralblog and www.ch.ch.ox.ac.uk/cathedral/covid). We plan to record and broadcast a very simple Sunday service, and details on this will be posted later this week.

Our prayers for you continue and we will be in touch to ask how we can support you pastorally during the next months. We are inviting you to keep in touch and send any prayer
requests by email (subdean@chch.ox.ac.uk) and if you have any other needs or are aware of particular needs in the community to contact us via cathedral@chch.ox.ac.uk.

And what will continue, of course, is the uninterrupted rhythm of daily prayer in the House of God. As Dean, I will continue to lead Morning Prayer on behalf of the community here. If for any reason I become unable to do so, one of my colleagues who lives on site will take over.

As Dean of Christ Church, I have often remarked on the calling to make “the House” a home – a place of hospitality, welcome and incorporation. We shall be doing our utmost to fulfil our calling in this respect, and modelling the Cathedral as “household of faith” in the days and weeks ahead. As the hymn, has it:

‘As o’er each continent and island
The dawn leads on another day,
The voice of pray’r is never silent,
Nor dies the strain of praise away.’

Our times may be uncertain. But God’s love is certain. And God’s life is not temporal, but eternal, and this love comes to us wherever we are. In these difficult days ahead, please be assured of my ongoing prayers for our congregations, city, counties and the mission and ministry of this Cathedral and Diocese.

My Chapter and Cathedral colleagues join me in this. May the Lord be with you.

Martyn