

A message to the people of the Diocese of Gloucester from Bishop Rachel and Bishop Robert regarding COVID-19

Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory.¹¹ and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first ... But you have kept the good wine until now."¹⁰ When the steward tasted the water that had become wine and did not know where it came from .. the steward called the bridegroom⁹ He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it.⁸ Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim.⁷ Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification ..⁶

The wedding at Cana: John 2:1-11

At a time when we are being encouraged to move away from large social gatherings, it might seem strange to begin this letter with Jesus' presence at a wedding. Yet, at this party, Jesus took what was ordinary and transformed it into something extraordinary and generous, such that people tasted God's goodness, whether or not they recognised God's glory. It is pertinent that in this miracle of water being turned into wine, the jars were most likely there for the Jewish ritual washing of hands and utensils. We also know that there were similar rituals of purification for those who were deemed unclean and with whom Jesus' interaction was radical and full of care and compassion.

Of course, there are no direct parallels to be drawn here with our current situation as we face the rapid spread of COVID-19, but there are resonances with our desire to be people of transformation and our longing that people would taste the goodness of God as we choose to participate in sharing Jesus' radical love and compassion.

As more and more people have to live in isolation, and indeed experience bereavement, it is likely that anxiety will continue to grow, which in itself may well provoke people to react from a place of inner fear leading to a sense of panic and action which is in direct contrast to the generous love of neighbour to which the abundant love of God calls us.

It is therefore crucial that amid the painful disruption of the coming weeks and months, while we rightly pay attention to the many practical issues and questions coming our way and the actions we must take, we place an even greater focus on how we care for one another and for our local communities. This is a time to share Christ's love and hope with renewed confidence as we join in with the work of the kingdom of God.

Such a renewed emphasis on acts of love and kindness towards our neighbour goes hand in hand with our established focus this Lent on the climate crisis and our care of creation. We are created to live in relationship with God and neighbour and all of creation, as we seek to 'Love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind and with all our strength; and to love our neighbour as oneself'. (Mark 12:30)

We are already seeing the many ways worshipping communities across the Diocese are promoting emotional contact and connection at a time of increased physical separation. Thank you for all you are doing. The phone, FaceTime, Skype etc are increasingly going to be a gift to us and we want to encourage every worshipping community to think about how best to reach out as widely as we can in local communities. It is essential that we ensure that those who are vulnerable and isolated are receiving what they need. We also need to think about how we reach out to those who may not naturally speak their fears but who will be severely anxious about the impact of COVID-19 on the economy and their livelihoods. Some of us will have to self-isolate, none of us should have to live in isolation.

We must also be particularly aware of the need to be showing care and concern for our health workers, our schools and colleges and those who work in institutions such as prisons. They and those they serve need the assurance of our prayer and support at this time.

Clergy (and churchwardens where there is currently no incumbent) are being kept updated with major developments, particularly around gathered worship. However, it is important that people continue to look at the regularly updated advice on the Church of England website www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-churches. In the coming months, we all need to be making sensible decisions at a local level whilst never operating from a place of fear.

Please be assured that members of the senior staff team will be meeting weekly and will communicate any decisions or information which need dissemination. Archdeacons Hilary and Phil will continue to be a key point of contact for worshipping communities.

Being people of hope is not about being cheerful optimists, it is about a living hope rooted in the love of God in Jesus Christ, revealed in a place of utter agony and death. This is our God who died out of love for us and who will never abandon us. The God of resurrection who will walk with us through the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23) with the promise that even death itself will not have the final word. There is a banquet of goodness which awaits us and we long for people to taste that goodness even now. We are people of confident hope.

This comes with our continued love, thanks and prayers.

Bishop Rachel