

PASTORAL LETTER 3

from Bishop Jonathan
to the parishes and clergy of the See of Ebbsfleet



2 June 2020

Dear brothers and sisters, Dear friends,

I am glad of this opportunity to send a message to you all via your parish priest or church wardens. I hope that you find these letters helpful: they certainly give me the opportunity to assure you all that, while I cannot visit you, I am celebrating the Eucharist and praying daily for you.

In the last few days we have all started becoming aware of just how complicated our return to ordinary freedom of movement will be: continuing to be careful and hygienic, maintaining distance, taking small but prudent risks, carrying with us (hopefully) new insights and good habits, shedding old thinking and bad habits. Yesterday Christians celebrated **a different, far greater, new beginning: Pentecost**, the day on which the age of Christian witness to Jesus began. These things feel as if they are linked, because as the churches emerge from the very difficult restrictions of the last few months, we must be ready in hope to live in a new way as witnesses to the Lord's risen life.

It seems a wonderful moment to announce a new appointment, which I hope will bring hope for the future of our Ebbsfleet communities. Yesterday I announced that Fr Gary Ecclestone, vicar of Hanslope and Castlethorpe, has accepted my invitation to become **Ebbsfleet Healthy Churches Mentor**. It's a full-time, 5-year role supported by the Dioceses of Coventry and Oxford and the CofE's Strategic Development Funding. It is the fulfilment of a vision that began at the Coventry Cathedral Lay Congress in 2016, to help Ebbsfleet parishes and our clergy to focus on growing the Church in our parishes. You can read more on the Ebbsfleet website, or ask your parish priest. As we look beyond the pandemic, it is becoming clear that whatever lies ahead in the design of God for his Church, Christian communities need to grow, in confidence and holiness as well as in number, from every age group. Remember St John Henry Newman's dictum: 'Growth is the only evidence of life.' (*Apologia*, 1864) I look forward to making the most of the time we have with Fr Gary in this role, and thank him for taking it on. May the Virgin Mary, celebrated yesterday as mother of the Church, accompany with her prayers the Church's mission to the people of our time.

Such thoughts perhaps make us wonder about the prospects for **the Church in the coming weeks** while schools and a whole range of 'non-essential' businesses and services are permitted carefully and sensibly to begin opening up. The churches, alongside the other historic religions, have collaborated effectively and responsibly with government and health authorities to stem the physical threat of the virus. But that quite proper collaboration has not been without cost, to ourselves but also those in need whom we would want to support. If it is safe for society to open up it must be possible for the churches, with the same care and responsibility, to begin to resume their life and service. The majority of Christians – lay Christians – have struggled living without the sacraments and the Eucharist. That should not in any way surprise us. Every action in the Eucharist *defines* the Church: from the very act of gathering around the altar, to the sending out 'to live and work to [the Lord's] praise and glory'. Freedom of religion, is also freedom to minister to the spiritual, emotional and social hardships that the virus and the lockdown have created.

But to do that, we must be ready, prepared. All the churches are preparing detailed guidance for that moment. It will not be simple, and we will have to manage the risks involved, as others are doing. Not every church will be able to open at first; and making churches available and usable will require volunteering and organization. Please pray for that process whenever it begins, for your clergy, and for any part you are able to take in it. And keep praying for all those who, for a while yet, will need to stay at home.

However, as much as we need to try and anticipate the future, we **also need to live in the present**. There isn't yet a clear way out, a definitive solution, even a reliable timetable. Young people in particular are facing greater and longer challenges than most of us older ones – a fearful wilderness in which all their expectations

of work and security are evaporating. Similarly, those whose working future looks dangerously uncertain are having to live with the sense that they can do nothing to protect themselves from the looming threat of unemployment when restrictions begin to be lifted.

The pain of these kinds of insecurity is very real. So at the moment heroism is found mainly in the little things: the daily rhythm, the small differences you can make, at home, online, on the phone, wherever. These are the small kindnesses, the small assurances to others that they are not alone. ‘Stay kind, stay attentive, stay willing’ wouldn’t make a great slogan; but it amounts for each of us to a grace we might all very reasonably *pray for*. And when we see quiet unfussy generosity and self-sacrifice in our neighbours, it’s a gift we might well *give thanks for*.

When we started to get used to physical distancing, I tried to remind as many as would listen that ‘God is not distant; God is nearer to us than our inner most parts.’ For two weeks now in the church’s calendar we’ve been celebrating Jesus himself saying as much: ‘**I am with you always, to the very end of the age.**’ In every moment, every encounter, when you are bored, angry or anxious, Jesus is present and offering himself to us, saying, ‘This moment matters: it is a moment in which you can grow a bit – or unwind a bit – as a human being. It is a moment in which my love is there for you, and my invitation is before you. Your precious humanity is in my hands, and I am ready to give you what is needed to assure you of your dignity and beauty and worth.’ Of course, believing this becomes challenging when the sky is overcast, the temperature is low, and the future obscure. But ‘All times belong to him’ as we say when we bless the Easter candle. In truth, the living Jesus is present and active wherever we turn. If we recall that fact in the course of our daily life, however briefly, we shall have recognised that the times we’re living through are accompanied by our Creator and Redeemer. When you’re tempted to think about the worries and muddles of the public situation, or the divisions and dramas of the church, *remember instead* that the Body of Christ is rooted much deeper, in a divine presence that never keeps his distance, and that ‘our times are in his hand.’ (Ps.31.15)

Sarah joins me in sending
the assurance of prayer
for you and yours, every day



DAILY GOSPEL PASSAGES FOR JUNE

These are the daily Gospels for the Eucharist, which you can make the centre of your daily prayer.

1 M	Mary Mother of the Church	John 19.25–34	16 T	Matthew 5.43–end
2 T	Mark 12.13–17		17 W	Matthew 6.1–6, 16–18
3 W	Mark 12.18–27 [and possibly 28–34]		18 T	Matthew 6.7–15 [and possibly 19–23]
4 T	Christ the High Priest	Matt 26.36–42	19 F	Sacred Heart of Jesus Matthew 11.25–30
5 F	Mark 12.35–7		20 S	Matthew 6.24–end
6 S	Mark 12.38–44		21 Sun	2nd after Trinity Matthew 10.26–33
7 Sun	Trinity Sunday	John 3.16–18	22 M	Matthew 7.1–5
8 M	Matthew 5.1–12		23 T	Matthew 7.6, 12–14
9 T	Matthew 5.13–16		24 W	Birth of the Baptist Luke 1.57–66, 80
10 W	Matthew 5.17–19		25 T	Matthew 7.21–9
11 T	Matthew 5.20–26		26 F	Matthew 8.1–4
12 F	Matthew 5.27–32		27 S	Matthew 8.5–17
13 S	Matthew 5.33–37		28 Sun	3rd after Trinity Matthew 10.37–42
14 Sun	Corpus Christi	John 6.51–58	29 M	Sts Peter and Paul Matthew 16.13–19
15 M	Matthew 5.38–42		30 T	Matthew 8.23–27

Alternatively, during this month, following Pentecost, you might focus each day on just a single ‘word’ from the Lord’s final teaching. They are words for all Christians. Perhaps begin each day with a time of quiet and prayer (say 15 minutes) contemplating just one verse. Open your mind and your heart; ask the Spirit to open Jesus’s words to you, and to suggest ways of acting upon it in your daily living.

Sunday	‘I am with you always, to the end of time.’
Monday	‘You will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.’
Tuesday	‘You are not to know times and dates decided by the Father.’
Wednesday	‘You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.’
Thursday	‘You will be my witnesses to the end of the earth.’
Friday	‘You are to go and make disciples, baptising in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.’
Saturday	‘You are to teach them to observe all my commandments.’