

Thursday Reflection

Gifts in Lockdown

There are gifts in unexpected places!

I remember vividly the start of lockdown. I was driving home from St Edward's after leading the third session of our Lent courses this year. Suddenly my mobile rang so I parked the car and took the call. It was our Head of Staff from work and he advised me that we should not go into the office on the next day but from then on we would be working remotely at home. At that point I thought 'how on earth will we cope and how will we sustain our communities both at work and in the parish through this?'

And yet with God's grace and some remarkable planning by Richard and other colleagues at church and by our Head of Staff and others at work, our communities have not only survived lockdown but have seen new and unexpected signs of growth. Although it has been and continues to be tough, not least as we are cut off from many family members and friends, good things have happened. There have been gifts amidst the hardship, signs of new hope amidst sorrow and grieving.

As lockdown is gradually loosened, we will start to return to our former ways of relating together at work, in the parish and in the many other areas of our lives and this will be a source of relief and joy. However, there is a risk that we forget some of the insights that this extraordinary experience of living under the Covid-19 pandemic has taught us and these are gifts to us. So, I'd like to share today those things which have really struck me and I do not want to lose as we move forward and to invite you to think about your impressions too.

So, what has stood out for me? First of all, the contact system which Richard set up ensuring that everyone in the parish is contacted regularly by someone in their area to chat and to ensure that they are OK. This has been a really good way of keeping in touch with each other, helping us to be alert and responsive to each other's needs as members of the body of Christ. It has made me wonder how we might develop this after lockdown. It has also inspired me to get in touch and keep contact with family, friends and acquaintances in a more intentional and regular way and to recognise the gift of these relationships which I often take for granted.

The second highlight for me has been our worship which was streamed initially from church, then through the vicarage and now at church again. As Richard has led worship wonderfully supported by members of his family, and others have led our family services, we have been able to relate together in a new and perhaps unexpected way. The stripping away of so much that we associate with 'church', although it has been hard, has perhaps helped us to see more clearly our prime calling as Christians to love and worship and to live out that love in our care and support for each other and those in our communities. It has been great to see in the 'chat' box, messages of welcome, peace and blessing from members of the congregation to each other - a powerful reminder how we are linked together in Christ. I hope that we will be able to continue in some way, the mutual sharing we

are currently enjoying, particular with those who may find it physically difficult to get to church.

And third really striking aspect of this time which has struck me through this time has been a flowering of acts of kindness and generosity, many of which I have experienced personally. This has always been a characteristic of our parish but it feels as if the Covid-19 pandemic has heightened our awareness and sense of responsibility and care for one another in a deeper way. We have seen it in whole range of ways, from people doing shopping for those who are self-isolating, arranging nightly phone and zoom calls to encourage each other, bringing Sunday lunches as a source of encouragement and providing music livestreamed from home- each act of care making the love of Christ visible in our midst.

I've also found that the experience of lockdown has taught me to cherish things which I was in danger of taking for granted. It's taught me to appreciate the things I have particularly when it has been hard to find them (will any of us ever take toilet paper for granted again?). To appreciate the joys of birdsong and the flowering of the plants in the garden which all too often I rush past and neglect. To appreciate the enforced slowing down that lockdown has imposed and its disciplines, which have forced me to focus on what matters, to be less distracted and to hallow time itself as a gift given to us by God.

So, I would invite you to spend a few minutes this week thinking about what you might recognise as 'gifts' received during this time of lockdown, what they've meant to you and how you might wish to take them forward in the future. And let's look with hope to what lies ahead.

*'The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
The desert shall rejoice and blossom;
Like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
And rejoice with joy and singing.
The glory of the Lebanon shall be given to it,
The majesty of Carmel; and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the Lord,
The majesty of our God.
Strengthen the weak hands,
And make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of fearful heart,
'Be strong, do not fear'. (Isaiah 35;1-4)*