

PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE PRIEST-IN-CHARGE

VERY REV DR FRANCES WARD

Dear friends across the communities of St Michael's and St John's Churches

Keep us, good Lord,
under the shadow of your mercy.
Sustain and support the anxious,
be with those who care for the sick,
and lift up all who are brought low;
that we may find comfort
knowing that nothing can separate us from your love
in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This April magazine sees us all facing into extremely worrying times as Covid-19, the Coronavirus, takes hold and our lives are turned upside down. Many of us will be self-isolating, cut off from contact with family, friends and neighbours. All of us will be anxious about loved ones, particularly those who are vulnerable. For the first time for centuries our Churches are closed for services – so the support and comfort of worship and fellowship is no longer available to us, although the possibility of live-streaming is hopefully going to work from St Michael's and St John's alternatively each week. (Please consult the churches' websites and Facebook pages for further details). What are we to do, as we contemplate the weeks, possibly months ahead?

I commend three things. Firstly, that we remain as cheerful as we can. Esther Rantzen has reminded us that Shakespeare wrote some of his finest plays whilst in lock down. A friend of mine is setting up 'Corona Art' – encouraging folk to be creative – to write, to embroider, to paint, to garden. If we are well enough, there are opportunities to spend the hours as productively as possible. Reading a good novel can take us into another world and help us to forget the present troubles for a while. The second thing we can do is to be as courteous to each other as we can be. When we're anxious it can be easy to snap at someone else, or to be judgemental, or forget the normal manners that keep us human. When someone else is rude or angry to us, let's be forgiving and understanding - we don't know what worries they might be coping with. And third, let's stay connected. Use social media – set up a WhatsApp group of friends, or lift the phone to someone who comes into your mind. Write a letter. Use Facebook to stay connected. There is a group across the parishes that is mindful of the those who need our prayers – do let Peter or me know if you are worried about someone and we'll ensure that someone contacts them.

Another way we can stay connected is by prayer. Throughout this time Peter and I will be stopping at 12 noon every day to say the Litany together – that ancient set of prayers that take us through the whole range of troubles and difficulties. You can read it elsewhere in this magazine, replacing the social calendar of events which, for obvious reasons, count as non-essential and therefore are cancelled or postponed. Do join Peter and me as we pray the Litany. Light a candle and remember loved ones, commending the whole world to God's mercy. Don't forget our wonderful Radio Cumbria either, who saw us through the Foot and Mouth and the Floods, with virtual worship broadcast into our homes.

Then let's keep hope alive for the time when this whole pandemic is over. In the last few weeks of March an orchard of 20 apple and damson trees was planted around St Michael's Church. By the autumn they will have their first crop of apples – God willing. By that time, we can reasonably hope, we will have resumed normality. The German reformer Martin Luther once said, "If I knew the world would end tomorrow, I would still plant my apple tree." That impulse is a good and true one: that even in the face of loss, disaster and tragedy, we can still do things as if there is a tomorrow, trusting, hopeful in God's love. Planting an apple tree (or better, an orchard) offers a hosting environment for myriad other creatures to exist – it also helps us to know that the natural order around us heals us and helps us. Do get exercise – go for a walk – come and visit the orchard.

Those who were at the Dessert Island Discs on Shrove Tuesday heard me say that one of my favourite pieces of music is the Easter carol Jesus Christ the Apple Tree. As we journey in our own ways towards Easter, through the dark night of the soul that is Good Friday, we keep our hope alive that there is a love that is stronger than death. Love regenerates; hope is never in vain. So here are the words – and the music is easy to find on the internet. Why not think of your own favourite hymn or carol and hum it to yourself when you feel down? Easter is still real, even if we can't meet to worship. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead – in the world and in our hearts. Of this we can be sure – more sure than of anything else.

The tree of life my soul hath seen,
Laden with fruit, and always green:
The trees of nature fruitless be
Compared with Christ the apple tree.

His beauty doth all things excel:
By faith I know, but ne'er can tell
The glory which I now can see
In Jesus Christ the apple tree.

I'm weary with my former toil,
Here I will sit and rest awhile:
Under the shadow I will be
of Jesus Christ the apple tree.

This fruit doth make my soul to thrive,
It keeps my dying faith alive;
Which makes my soul in haste to be
With Jesus Christ the apple tree.

(Words from 'Divine Hymns or Spiritual Songs', 1784)

Your friend in Jesus Christ – with all prayers and blessings for this extraordinary Holy Week and Easter

Frankie