



MESSAGE FROM THE TEAM RECTOR

MARCH 2021

Open Doors

When the PCC met in February, it decided not to seek to extend the exemption from Open Public Worship in the parish when it expires on Palm Sunday, unless the current situation regarding Covid-19 infections deteriorates.

I realise that might not sound terribly interesting! But what it means in practice is that we are hoping we can give people the opportunity to celebrate Easter at a service in one of our church buildings, as well as at an online service. We are also very much hoping that while of course previous restrictions will remain necessary, we can continue to have regular services in our church buildings from that point on, and in due course some of those restrictions can begin to be eased.

That decision means we have some practical thinking to do. How can we best offer in person *and* online services together across the parish, not just for a few months but perhaps for the foreseeable future, as online availability may be something we don't want to lose?

It might also be a good moment, though, to reflect on the spiritual value of our buildings. Most of our congregations worship in spaces that were built for that purpose many centuries ago – Singleton being the striking exception here. What have we missed while we've not had access to them?

Well, it's not as if the church has been closed. The church is the communion of those who believe in Jesus Christ. The church is, first and foremost, who we *are* – his body – not a place that we visit. We are still the church, with or without a building. We are the church when we're at home, or at school, or at work, or out and about in the neighbourhood, and not just on Sundays.

But because we are one in Christ, it's natural that we want to meet in his name. And when we meet, we want to do those same things, more or less, that the church did after Peter's Pentecost sermon in Acts 2: listen to the apostles' teaching, enjoy the fellowship we have in the gospel, celebrate the eucharist, and offer our prayers and praises (Acts 2.42–47). It helps to have a place where we can do that regularly – though of course, as Singleton can testify, it could be a 'secular' space that we just rent for the day.

So why should we keep our church buildings? Surely we could save a great deal of money if we just locked them all up and met only in school halls and community centres – as well as online?

The value of having our own buildings, it seems to me, is to have a place where we as the church can be at home. In terms of the interior, we can set things up so that the visual focus is on those things that are of primary importance for us: word (represented by the pulpit and lectern) and sacraments (represented by the font and the altar table). In terms of the exterior, our church buildings say to the local community: the church lives here – the church is at home in this place.

The great thing about having a home is that you can be hospitable: you can invite people in. Do our buildings have, literally and metaphorically, open doors? Are they busy places, with people coming and going? Do they say, 'This is the home of a community that's here for you', or 'This is the home of a community that's happy to keep to itself'?

Of course, Covid-19 has made hospitality a hazardous business, not only for churches, while the opportunities and the challenges here are quite different across the parish as a whole. But can we dare to dream about what it might really mean to open our church buildings, and not just on Sunday mornings?

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