

Dear Friends,

As we continue to journey through lent towards Easter, we do so having travelled a year through the storm of covid-19. The pandemic persists and whilst we have the hope of restrictions being lightened with the government's road map, the need to remain vigilant is imperative.

When will churches reopen their buildings for acts of worship is a question for each local managing trustees of the respective churches to consider. Some leadership teams and church councils have been able to meet remotely already whilst some are yet to have this conversation and decide. The overriding feeling from these meetings so far has been to look to late May and June time for reopening buildings, taking into consideration the government road map. I commend these wise decisions and appreciate the duty of care being exercised for all concerned.

There is much to take into consideration and whilst legally places of worship may open for acts of worship, it is a may and not a must. In recent days we have received news reports around some of the potential delays with the vaccine roll out and this impacts the under 50's age group. Priority is being given to ensuring those who have been given their first vaccination get to receive their second. I believe we need to consider this time scale and play our part by acting appropriately.

Presently we do not know what guidance might be in place in the months ahead, but we do know that current laws greatly restrict and shape what we are able to do during an act of worship. As such, many have preferred engaging in worship via telephone conference calls, via zoom and via YouTube. One of the reasons for this preference is the ability to share in fellowship and interact in worship which the telephone and zoom affords. I recognise too that for some, the preferred way is still to gather in a building for worship even with all the restrictions in place.

Around the circuit we have a mixture of circumstances and everyone is valued. It is going to require of us all to continue to be the caring and loving circuit family of churches as we navigate the coming weeks and months ahead. When churches reopen their buildings, we will find that people are in different situations which will reflect in attendance.

Therefore, I encourage us all to seek a way forward that is accessible for all. Locally for churches with an internet connection this might be a hybrid service with people gathering in person and via zoom or telephone. As a circuit we seek to continue with providing worship at home resources.

Prior to any church reopening its building a reviewed and updated risk assessment must take place and all current rules followed to ensure we are always Covid secure. The availability of Ministers and local preachers for preaching appointments is limited due to shielding and personal circumstances, therefore the circuit cannot guarantee

being able to resource a service should a church decide to reopen before the next quarter of the preaching plan.

I am pleased to announce that on Easter Sunday there is going to be a 10.30am Circuit celebration service held via zoom. I would like to encourage everyone to join this service whether online or by telephone. Several people have experienced joining zoom by telephone and have expressed how they appreciated sharing in this way. The usual worship at home resources will be available for Easter Sunday too. Please look out for information about how to join the service when it is circulated in the coming week.

I conclude with a short reflection. Last year lent was interrupted and this year it feels like we entered a wilderness place early. During this season I have been reflecting on what difference my circumstances might make to how I seek to follow Jesus. I recall how when in my youth as a Christian there were times when my faith conflicted with the culture of my friendships. Sometimes this left me feeling alone in my faith and I recall my prayer times with God.

I remember talking with God in prayer and making a commitment to follow Jesus no matter what. That even if I were the only one who believed, who sought to follow the way of the cross that I would not forsake my relationship with God to fit in or simply go with the crowd. No matter how juvenile such an approach and prayer might appear, it was and is still today about being committed to following Jesus, my Lord, my Saviour, and my friend. The years bring change in all manner of ways, both good and bad, in our person and in our environment, the world we live. I am not unique in experiencing change throughout my lifetime, change happens, and no one is exempt. My experience has been that no matter what change I have been going through, God has been my constant and I have been able to depend upon God.

I don't think anyone could have imagined the year we have had and the changes we continue to go through. My thoughts and prayers are for all those who have experienced the loss of loved ones and those encountering great struggles. My prayer is for all to know God as their constant, a firm foundation to hold us all through this storm. This too is my prayer for the church, that we would seek to be dependent upon God to hold us, sustain us and shape us. We always have hope with God through our Lord Jesus Christ in all circumstances. In Romans chapter eight we are reminded that nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Therefore, may we all continue to in faith, with hope and the love of God.

Yours in Christ,

*Gareth*

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