

A New Beginning or a Curate's Egg?

A local and national reflection on the Church of England during the time of Coronavirus



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Anglican ecclesiology (his MPhil dissertation was on Archbishop Michael Ramsey) along with Anglican distinctiveness and theological tradition.

As it now has for many, ministry has transformed during the coronavirus lockdown for me. The Eucharist is said alone in the church building once a week. The heart of our former spiritual nourishment has been transplanted. My first Easter as a priest became something of a week-long vigil. The Daily Offices are seeing a renaissance in our parishioners' lives – both the live-streamed variety and offices said alone at home at the same time as everyone else. The length of one-to-one conversation in any given week with most parishioners is up. I am asked to pray more. I am in touch with various groups in the community (the council, charities, schools, etc) far more than ever. I am praying more – and I have finally gotten around to creating that prayer space in the study. I am reading and – unsurprisingly – writing more. I am involved in my own small way with the efforts to connect volunteers to those who cannot get out of the house for essential food and medicine. I am seeing parishioners where able and permitted, getting involved in all of the relief efforts and sharing spiritual resources and prayer: the gospel lived out in action and word down a telephone line or digitally just as often as in the flesh.

And, we aren't going to go back to normal.

On this micro level, the accessibility of our worship, prayer and fellowship time alone is something that we cannot regress on even when physical gathering resumes. Too many have commented on how they are able to 'do more' praying, attend more and are comforted as a result. For our parish, this shows us perhaps some things we needed to be doing before. There may well be a novelty factor attached to some of this, but the impact feels real.

On the macro level, the national Church too has been largely affected. Attendance at worship appears to have spiked¹ and many are being interviewed about why people are attending more at home. The visibility of the Church in terms of its social justice endeavours is up too through the local press and necessity for Councils and agencies to partner with each other. The presence of so much worship and content now on the internet and on social media is making large ripples and many who were not interested before are seeing the Church in a new light. There are viral worship song videos; Archbishops in hospital wards and the faith is being witnessed as sustaining, attractive and powerful.

The national Church also has to face the many cracks appearing across its surface, unveiled by these times of pandemic. The interior debates around the usage of buildings; the theology of the Eucharist; the pros and cons of moving into the digital realm as Church and the policies on hospital

¹ For example, see <https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-big-audiences-for-online-church-services-amid-uk-lockdown-11971643>

visiting are a few popular examples consuming much space on the Twittersphere. The Church of England also had an imminent financial struggle approaching prior to this crisis and it seems that these events will also progress discussions around church closures; parish amalgamations; parish and diocesan finances and potentially the parish system as a whole.²

Partisanship has also revealed its ugly head during this time when in some of the above discussions the 'party lines' of churchmanship and ecclesiology appear to be all the firmer and bolder. This is perhaps indicative of the larger problem – one indeed too large to do justice to here – that is the Church of England's own sense of theological identity and the place of authority within that. The Church may excel at moving forward bearing its wide and varied members together in tension but it does not seem to be in any fit state at the moment to be able to articulate *why* that is and *how* we do it especially when we disagree. It is easy to see why some think of the Church of England as often burying its head in the sand over difficult questions, sacrificing theology and orthodoxy for politeness. The Church is unified in its head – Jesus Christ – and it is perhaps in keeping our eyes fixed there that the beginnings of a greater unity amongst our household of faith could be excavated by the Holy Spirit as we are called on in the next months and years.

More than anything else ministry at this time has shown me that people need and want Jesus. We know that people turn to their faiths and the big questions more in times of crisis but the interactions I have had at a parish level and those I have heard about from many colleagues indicate much more than the need to being told that 'everything is going be alright'. People want to know how to pray and they want to know what they are for and what they can be and do. They want a relationship with God. I have begun one-to-one discipleship relationships during this time that wouldn't have happened if our church hadn't been reaching out to where people were – in this case – online. That this crisis – wide-reaching and devastating as it is – has driven us as church communities to a wider sense of our parochial ministry is one of the best gifts God has snatched out of the mouth of this beast. That we are a church for the people around us – both in terms of sharing the Good News and serving them – is not news to us, and yet we were not doing all that we could before. In one sense, we can never do it all, but we have found an appetite for faith that we could have been meeting. We have also begun to discover some more of the fullness of our vocation as a church community. I know this is not just our experience.

Some of the reflections coming out at this time consider the parish system as being shown up as outdated and irrelevant. I would disagree with Rachel Mann (whilst agreeing with much else in her blog post!) that the parish system will be shown up as 'humbug' because of this crisis.³ It seems to me that our ministry of presence and the relevance of a Church that serves everyone in its land outweigh any potential diocesan and parish reshaping. This is not to say that these geographical transformations will not occur – Rachel is almost certainly right about that – but that rather we would not make such a drastic transformation when our local presence has just seemed key. I am reminded of the lady at the council who called me up to ask what the parish church was doing because we *must* be doing something, as we are the parish church! If we are brave enough to step up to the plate, just as we have adapted during this time, then I think the notion of geographical parish is full of missional potential moving forward.

Now are we moving in to a time of much less focus on our building when we can clearly live, minister, worship, pray and serve in small groups and online? I do not think so. I think we are moving

² For parish finances before lockdown see for example, <http://www.hrballiance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/churches-funding-gap-final.pdf>

³ <https://therachelmannblogspot.blogspot.com/2020/05/where-do-we-go-from-here-towards.html?spref=tw>

into an integrated time when we recognise both the importance of meeting, gathering, breaking bread and being a physical community together whilst recognising the importance of direct discipleship, home groups and digital worship, meeting and resourcing. I think this because for every new lesson we have learned and new digital space we have expanded to, we are also recognising what we lack and what we miss. These lacked and missed elements are not merely so due to our emotional responses but rather are key parts to worship and the mission of the Church as found in scripture. Again there is not space here to fully debate whether we can be 'together' in all of the prayerful, sacramental or liturgical ways online as we can in the flesh. It shall suffice to say that it seems that a blend will emerge as the report *Everybody Welcome Online (2020)* concludes⁴ and that we cannot neglect the fact that there are many people that we are being called to reach who for many reasons would only interact with some of these ways of being Church. Not only that, but we also have a responsibility to recognise that some of these means of being community and worshipping that we are only trying out now have been the only ways that many could access worship from before this crisis. We owe much to those people who cannot leave their homes; those who cannot access or interact with our traditional and neurotypical ways of being church and who find physical gathering seriously difficult for many reasons. What has been an experiment, temporary or 'settling' for some of us, may be a lifeline to others and since we are called to participate in Christ's ministry of gathering the flock and reaching those on the edge this aspect cannot be forgotten. It also cannot be forgotten that these are not just people that we 'do for' but rather people we 'be with' and there is much to be learned from those who have been engaging in these ministry, prayer and worship spaces before we have all had to.

There are those God is sending us – and in some cases calling back to us – through these means and there are those *we can only* reach, serve and love through these means. Both are different and both are important.

So there are opportunities here. I do not mean for one second that we are to be grateful – or frankly to even sound grateful publicly – for this awful pandemic that has resulted in such a loss of life and livelihood for so many. What I do mean is that God hasn't stood by during this time of trial and *not* seized his chance to tell us to buck our ideas up. God is using us as his hands and feet in the world.

We have a gospel to proclaim and to live and if we cannot see the cracks in the veneer now – when so many need God in so many ways – will we ever see them? If we would rather not feel shown up by this and are happy to attempt to force a return to normal afterwards, desperately clinging on to it until we retire (or die) then this will be the biggest, most rotten curate's egg in living memory. One that we would rather say smelt sweetly than confront the truth about.

The Church should not just be what we want it to be. It cannot be unchanging when the Holy Spirit is at work, further revealing Christ in our midst and in the lives of those around us. We cannot be blown by the winds of the age but we also cannot believe that this is the platonic form of Church on earth. Uncertainty and tension is supposed to be something that Anglicanism is good at handling; may we continue to find that that is the case! All of this discourse now is fleeting: it is a snapshot of our experiences and feelings and it may be completely wrong in a month let alone in a year. We cannot know the full outcome of this but that does not mean we should not try to reflect on this and consider just what is going to happen and what we are called to do in response.

Hopefully we can humbly take on board what we have learnt – where it fits with our ideas and where it challenges them – and think about better serving our little corner of the Kingdom all the

⁴ https://www.cpas.org.uk/uploaded_media/web_upload/Everybody%20Welcome%20Online-1587722747.pdf

better. Whether in five years we are living in a church with fewer dioceses; more pioneers, minster-models and chaplaincies; fewer parish priests; reduced resources and fewer buildings *or not*, we will be a part of the Body of Christ who is the same yesterday, today and forever. He will still be calling us on, to live his Way and proclaim his salvation to the world.

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