

## Church @ Home For a Season

The Lord be with you...

These are not the days we were expecting. It is not how we planned to have Lent and Easter. It's early days, and this is only the second Sunday we have not been able to gather together for worship as we usually do. As we usually have done, for many years, and across our lives.

Already, like the rest of our community, we are experience strong emotions. Mixed and unclear messages have made us confused. We are uncertain about what will happen tomorrow as guidelines change more rapidly. We are angry at the supermarket shortages and the selfishness of others, but at the same time we are worried if maybe we need some more supplies ourselves - is it enough for a few weeks? Do I need enough for 6 months???? What if the transport links collapse?? And what if I get sick? Will I get a mild dose, will I be in hospital, will there be a bed? Will I recover? Is it possible to catch it twice?

And it's all very surreal. While we believe the gravity of the situation that we see unfolding overseas, and we know there have been cases of the virus in Victoria, that people have died, some days it really does seem like a bit of an overreaction to close schools, stay at home and wash our hands so often. Will we really be fined for breaking the rules??? And other days we are overcome with the fear of what might be around the corner for us and how long it will last.

Part of the anxiety comes from the access we have to information, reliable and speculative, local and global, and the rate at which we are absorbing it.

Part of the anxiety is due to the reality that the entire world is suffering from this pandemic at the same time. And then we consider the impact over the long term. This will, without doubt, change our lives, the way we see ourselves and each other, it will affect our local and national economies, our cost of living and our employment. After the pandemic has passed, things may have changed a little or a lot. We can see the signs already...borders, air and road are being closed, jobs are being lost, banks are offering suspensions on mortgage payments, landlords are easing rent for tenants, businesses are closing, some permanently.

And we cannot tell, neither will we be able to tell for some time, how long this journey is going to last. We just don't know yet. This makes us uncertain and also afraid, we feel powerless, and we are mindful of our lack of control of many things in our world, and our vulnerabilities.

This time is not just about a virus and health concerns, this situation is raising questions of security and mortality, poverty and financial crisis, about what we value and what matters, of our desire to act as individuals and our need to think of the community, it makes us take heed of our own safety but the importance of acting for the wellbeing of the most vulnerable amongst us.

While I do not believe God has sent this on us to condemn us or judge us, I do believe we have an opportunity to reflect on what is happening around us, and consider whether it might be a good idea to do some autumn cleaning in our lives and community. Some decluttering. To take a look at our foundations, to take a look at our foundations, and what we have built on them in our lives and faith, and to attend to things that need work. Perhaps some realigning with the

God's perspective is in order, perhaps the stumps need resetting, perhaps the structure is not what it should be, there might be some pruning that is long overdue.

Many of the questions this pandemic is raising are good ones. Many of the reasons for taking actions are very good ones - those about regard for the other, care of those at risk, provision for the needy, responsible action for the good of all and ourselves, good self care and kindness. We are not the only ones thinking about these things.

As Christians, one of the stresses we are facing is the restriction on gathering in our buildings for worship. It has happened quickly, and like the other factors we are getting used to, we don't know how long these limitations will be in place. For many of you, you cannot think of having church without being in your regular pew at St Luke's, Transfiguration or St Aidan's. For some of you will only have missed this gathering when you were sick or on holidays. And for most of us you have never been forbidden to enter your place of worship by the government. All of this is quite a shock, it's not surprising that you feel unsettled and unhappy about it.

It's a type of grief, really. There is sadness, and perhaps some indignation. You might consider gathering for worship an essential service. And this is not just because we carry on a long tradition of Anglicanism and local gathering in Torquay, Anglesea and Aireys Inlet, it's quite personal as well.

We do love our places of worship. They mean a lot to us. We treasure them, and well we should. They are symbols of our faith, our heritage, of the community of God in this place today and from years past. They are places for to meet in large numbers for meals and activities. They contain items of significance - gifts of beauty and love, well crafted furniture that has served us well, artistic work of spiritual events and theological truth. And they are places we gather to do significant acts - acts of remembrance, acts of commitment, acts of celebration and ones of sadness, acts in which we participate in faith and receive forgiveness and blessing.

The beautiful and meaningful buildings we have help us to worship the God we know and to fellowship with each other each week. We call these buildings church, it's a habit we've got into because these places are the regular locations in which we gather. But actually this is incorrect. These are our facilities, they are our resources, they are the things we own.

We also talk about doing church, by which we mean, worship, singing, listening to the scriptures read and explained, sharing the eucharist, praying and fellowshiping. This is what we do as we gather, and more besides, but it's still not really true that this is church.

We are missing something vital when we describe church in these ways. The building is where we gather as church. These activities are what we do as church. But friends **WE** are the body of Christ, **WE** are the Church, and God's Spirit is with **US**.

I want you to hold onto this important truth today. Our buildings are off limits. But church is not closed, we are still active and open. We are still gathering though there is distance between us. We are needing to get creative about being church in these times, everything that we are used to we cannot do. So we have to do new things, find new ways to be who we are. It might take some getting used to. But I believe God is wanting us to rediscover things we have forgotten, I believe he has good things in store for us in what seems to be an absolute disaster. I am

looking for what he is doing amidst the chaos and uncertainty. I am sure he is at work, for he as promised us he always will be.

Friends, **WE** are the body of Christ, **WE** are the Church, and God's Spirit is with **US**. We are his church wherever and however we gather, and as we do whatever we are doing for the glory of God, in step with his Spirit and in relationship with his Son, as we practice spiritual habits or wash the dishes, we remain his church each day.

Actually we are following in a long tradition as we gather in our homes in small numbers. It's how the church started, it met at Peter's place, and his mother in law looked after them; Lydia hosted a meeting in her home; Priscilla and Aquila lead a church in theirs as well; many still do so today. Sometimes it is for financial and practical reasons...the church cannot afford to own or rent a building or it is young and small; sometimes it is by choice...to retain a family environment for faith to develop; and sometimes it is for safety...we are thinking of several months of gathering in this way but churches across the world meet in homes always, every day, every year, and sometimes in secret.

It is with sadness that we close the doors of our buildings, we will miss them in the coming weeks and enjoy them all the more when we return. But let us remember and learn again Jesus promise that where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them. (Matthew 18:20).

Let me pray for you all as you learn what it means to be church @ home, in fellowship with God and each other, in love for our neighbour and our world with a bit more space between us.

*Lord Jesus Christ, healer and friend, come and care for all of us  
through the danger and uncertainty of the coronavirus epidemic.*

*To people who are sick, bring healing. To people who are displaced, isolated,  
or cut off from family, friends or work, bring comfort and companionship.*

*Work with medical staff as they care for the sick, and protect them from harm.*

*Give skill and fruitful research to scientists as they search for treatments,  
prevention and a cure.*

*To public health authorities, give wisdom to decide the best ways to manage  
both this crisis and our anxieties.*

*When communities are fearful, give a calm spirit,  
and kindness to neighbours and strangers.*

*Through this testing time, and through all the risks we face together,  
teach us once again how we can love one another as you have loved us.*

*Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*

*As you have promised to dwell amongst your people, we ask that you would indeed be with us in our homes in this time of separation.*

*Meet with us, guide us, speak to us, listen to us, minister to us, help us to follow you and find you in new paths.*

*Bless each of our homes we ask*

*in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen*

One of the biggest losses this year is that the church across Australia will not be able to celebrate Holy Week as we are accustomed to. This will be hard. But we will still find ways to participate in the season meaningfully. I will be placing symbolic items at each centre that can be seen from the road or footpath as a reminder of the season. Other resources will be made available to help us reflect on Good Friday and Easter Day. Let us consider this unusual Easter time an extended Lenten period.

I will be organising material for us to participate in Thy Kingdom Come's program between Ascension and Pentecost - Shine the Light as a way of connecting to the worldwide Anglican church and to encourage us to use our time well. More to come on this. Finally, we anticipate organising some sort of celebratory gathering when the period of isolation ends.

I also encourage you to use Songs of Praise program on the ABC Sunday at 11:30am, and other online resources we have made available on our website. It is being updated regularly.

The Council and I are working together to formulate a Pastoral Partners Plan so that we can remain connected in our time apart. A Pastoral Partner will contact you soon and will be your main contact with the parish network to provide care and assistance. We encourage you to call your Partner if you need a visit or practical help, are feeling anxious or stressed, need a chat or are uncertain about what is happening.

I encourage you to read through this week's News Sheet, to make use of the Readings Sheet for your personal time. In the days to come I will make other resources available.

May the Lord bless and keep you and make his face shine upon you in these days.

Let's go home.