

Morning Prayer 6th September 2020 Julie Barham

Psm 119: 33-40, Romans 13:8-end, Matthew 18: 15-20

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

When I was first starting out as a Baptist and Methodist preacher, if the deacon (a bit like a churchwarden) came into the vestry before the service and prayed, “where two or three are gathered together...” you knew it would be a small, or even a tiny congregation. It was not a Billy Graham rally! Not that this is a comment on today’s congregation, though I am really out of practice at all this, so I apologise for any mistakes now.

Because of course we live in strange times, when there are lots of ways to worship, all valid and genuine. We worship here, though it’s different, with no hymns, and despite my best attempts, a shorter service. Tempting though it is to preach for thirty five minutes, well, I told you I was out of practice and I don’t think you would thank me anyway. And of course we cannot meet for coffee afterwards in the hall, and put the world to rights, which obviously needs doing.

Another way is what some of you are doing reading this, looking at the talk, watching the films of hymns Peter has put links to online. For some, watching Songs of Praise on television, listening to services on the radio is their way of worship. If they are more technically able, watching a live service online from a variety of churches. Whatever people do, however people worship, it’s difficult to come together, enjoy that corporate sense of joining in together. If we were lucky during the most limiting period of lockdown there were two or three of us gathered together, but if there wasn’t we could still worship. It’s not been easy, and the uncertainty goes on, but we are together in so many ways now, and that is good. It’s great, in fact. Whether it is two or three, or more, Jesus, God is there - as he promised in Matthew’s gospel.

After all, where have we looked before for guidance? Before the current time, when things have gone wrong, I could always rely on shops, clubs,

choirs going on. Maybe I had stepped out for a while, even months, but life would go on. Because what has been happening is quite historic.

The most recent time all the churches in Britain were closed before this year was the 1200s, when bad king John was making some bad choices and falling out with the Pope. Yes, bad King John and Robin Hood ... as in Friar Tuck outside. I am asked to point out that any similarity between Friar Tuck and the incumbent of this church is purely coincidental.

Even when Henry VIII and his offspring were debating who was in charge of the churches in England and Wales, even when the Civil War was raging, the churches stayed open. So, ladies and gentleman, whatever else we have done, we have witnessed something which never happened for dozens of generations before us. The churches being locked on a Sunday morning, even Easter Sunday. Something to forget, or something to remember.

The Psalmist said "Teach Me O Lord the way of your statutes". Lead me in the path of your commandments. So, if we cannot come to church as easily as we have been used to, where can we learn of God's will for us? Bible study groups, prayer groups, Lent studies. In the past a lot of us have been able to find friendship and more in other groups, like lunch club, or even book group. Whatever you call it - friendship, fellowship, teaching and learning - it is tricky to learn together if you cannot meet together.

For some the internet has been a help, as even the Bible Reading notes have been online, and there are those who have studied the Bible page by page. Had we known the restrictions were going to last as long as they did, well maybe reading the entire thing - or at least the New Testament - would have been a realistic challenge. It's not too late - if you can find a readable version with comfortably sized print, going back to the text is often the best way of learning after all. Mind you, I have tried learning Hebrew and I was advised to give up, so maybe there are limitations to reading the original in the original language for some of us. I am advised that David Suchet - Poirot himself - has recorded it as a audio version for those who prefer listening to reading.

The Commandments, as Paul says in the reading from the letter to the Romans today, can be challenging. Happily, as he echoes Jesus in Luke's Gospel in pointing out, the Commandments can be summed up as "Love your neighbour as yourself".

For some of us the word neighbour has taken on a new meaning recently, as those neighbours may well have helped us by bringing shopping or at least having a chat when more of us have been at home during the day. We know that neighbours are more than those who live next to us, and there have been groups which have sprung up to help with essential supplies all over the country, including Derby. They have been essential to those who have struggled to get out or when families and friends have been unable to travel to us. A lot to be thankful for, those people who have tried to help and just be there.

So, let's face it, 2020 has been challenging up until now, and will continue to be tricky for the foreseeable future. We have heard three promises from the Bible today that may help - when two or three are gathered, Jesus will be there, that loving your neighbour as yourself is vital, and that God teaches through the Bible even if we are reading it for ourselves. The future may be uncertain, but God is eternal, and we can find him if we ask. Amen.