

One more step along the world we go.

Jesus says:

‘Fear not: it is I!’; ‘Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.’; ‘Peace be with you!’; ‘My peace I give you, my peace I leave with you: not as the world gives, do I give to you.’; ‘In the world you have tribulation, but be of good courage – I have overcome the world!’

Perhaps we are filled with relief and excitement at the freeing up of our lives after so many months of restrictions. Perhaps we just can’t wait to do more things, go to more places, be with more people. Or, perhaps we feel uncertainty about how to live now, or what actually lies ahead.

However we feel at this moment of change, let’s keep close to Jesus. Let’s listen to his words of hope and encouragement to us. Let’s invite his peace and his love deep into our lives. His good news is more precious than rubies, in a world where much of the talk we hear is of fear, gloom and division. He is the only one who can impart that unifying ‘peace which passes all understanding’, by his defeat of evil and death. He is the one who can replace our anxieties with assurance.

Change is coming to our worship, and this time it’s in the direction of ‘normality’. From Wednesday 21 July we’ll be able to worship in ways which more closely resemble what we used to do up until March 2020. It won’t be identical, but many of the limitations and constraints we’ve experienced will have disappeared or lessened.

So, if you want to sit next to, or close to, someone from outside your household, you can. If you want to worship without wearing a face covering, you are allowed. If you want to join in singing hymns, you can obey God’s command to praise him in this way. If you mutually agree to shake hands, or give a holy kiss at the sharing of the peace, there is nothing to restrain you. It’s my hope and prayer that returning to a more open, more human and humane mode of worshipping will bring us blessing and a more abundant life.

But I know some of us will feel reticent about doing all this straight away. Some will want to continue to wear a mask in public places. Some will wish to interact at distance for some time to come. Some will be wary about singing, for now.

And some will be reticent about touch. It's important that we are sensitive and respectful to all.

Practically, in terms of worship, we will be re-introducing the pew cushions throughout the central sections of the church. Worshippers are asked to sit here, please, if you are content to be next to or near people you don't live with. We will keep the alternate pew seating arrangements in the pews in the side aisles, for those who wish to retain some distancing. There will be some distanced chairs at the side and at the back of church as well.

This will take some getting used to. We'll need to review what we do in the light of how people respond. And this will require us to be sensitive and attentive to one another. To look, listen, read body language, and pray and speak about where we are in all this, and how we are seeking to live.

Some people, especially the frail and vulnerable, will continue to rely on remote access to worship, I know. As we journey forward, we'll continue with Zoom up until the September meeting of PCC, and see how things look and feel after that. There is still a way to go in this journey. And how we administer and engage with Holy Communion, in particular, will confront us with further questions for prayer, reflection and discernment.

Some people have said, 'Wouldn't it be easier if the Government just told us what we can and can't do, rather than letting us puzzle over our choices?', or words to that effect. Well, maybe. But would that allow us to be free, to be self-responsible, to grow to full maturity in Christ? I think it would perpetuate a crippling oppression which imprisons us.

There is actually opportunity in this next chapter of our life together. To embrace God-given, restored freedoms joyfully as we feel called, but to love and respect brothers and sisters who don't feel able fully to do so yet. This will take some compassion, sensitivity, patience, attentive love, honesty and listening, whatever our own perspectives may be. Demanding attitudes, sometimes, but thoroughly Christian too.

And if we are centred in Jesus as we go forward, he promises his grace to help in time of need. He tells us not to fear. So: may he be with us all and bless us daily, and bring life, joy and peace to us, as we worship and praise him.

With my prayers and love, Derwyn.