

Paul, . . .

To the churches in Galatia:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Alpha

On Friday and Saturday this week I had the privilege of joining the Alpha Course Conference – online. The well-known course of evangelism and teaching has been forced to “move online”. Some churches were taken by surprise – having started an Alpha Course, only to be disrupted 3 weeks in. Instead of stopping, they moved online – and it worked. More and more churches tried it – and now over 100 online courses have been run.

It was clearly not without challenges. But challenges can be met, and they were. There were not only challenges, but opportunities as well. Some of the churches which could host 50 people in their hall have been able to host 300 in the online environment.

Nicky Gumbel, speaking at the conference, said that he had thought it would not work if people were not meeting together, but he found that it did. As a small group leader he found that they had people in the group who would never have attended at the church – they were either unable to get there due to transport problems or having young children to look after, or would have been embarrassed to go into the church. It even provided an opportunity for some Muslims to attend and explore the claims of Christianity – something that would have been socially impossible in the “real” world.

The challenge we face is to see the opportunities and to grab them with both hands and ‘make the running’. It will not be perfect – but an imperfect attempt is always better than nothing. This will apply not only to the Alpha Course, but to everything that makes up the life of the church. And will not only apply to the church, but to virtually all areas of life. So, watch this space as we begin looking at how we can reach out with the Good News of God’s love to a waiting world, using an online Alpha Course.

The Real World

The world we now find ourselves in is our new normal – no matter how uncomfortable we may find it. I requote the extract that I used from the Daily Maverick in my last letter:

“Understand that we may be in for a long haul, adjusting our lives for at least the next few years. Some of these changes may be permanent.”

(See the full article at: <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-06-26-distance-dose-dispersion-an-experts-guide-on-covid-19-risks-in-south-africa-and-how-to-manage-them/>)

There were a number of people talking about their experience of moving from the physical world of church buildings and halls and coffee stands to the “virtual” world. And someone pointed out that if something happens in the ‘virtual world’, it does not mean that it is “not real”. Speak to anyone who has been at the

sharp end on 'online bullying' – and you will realise that it is very real. The number of people using 'online dating sites' to meet people is rising. And many relationships have started there, and were real enough to move into the 'physical' world and end up with a wedding ceremony in a church.

So, we see more and more people holding church services and Alpha Courses and Bible Studies and Home Group meetings and prayer meetings "online" – and we are among them. The fact we are in the "virtual" world does not mean that the truths we discover in the scripture are in some way lesser or compromised because we are not physically present with one another. What we do and learn and discover and enjoy and wrestle with is as real as if we were in the hall or a pew in the church.

Change

It was also pointed out that we are facing nothing that is totally new. Even the Coronavirus is part of a family of viruses that we have been living with for decades. The 'annual flu' is caused by a coronavirus.

Most of us had already begun the move into the 'digital world'. Almost everyone was already using WhatsApp and Facebook. Email is part of daily life. And when last did you do any banking in a branch with a real person across the desk from you?

So what the virus has done is really accelerate a process that we had already begun. The pace picked up, but most of what we have to do is not entirely new. We have had to change our approach to situations and problems and have had to change how we do things, but we were already changing slowly but surely anyway.

One of the speakers, quoted Jesus' statement "My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?" (John 14:2), and pointed out that at the Ascension Jesus "went home" – and has been "working from home" ever since!

We never like starting new things, and the old and known are much more comfortable. But often the old slowly wears out, and something new is needed. Change can be challenging, but it is also full of opportunity and new possibilities. A new recipe we try for the first time. Or going to a new restaurant, or a new holiday destination. There is usually a question mark at the back of our minds, but also a sense of anticipation as to what we are about to experience. The 'question mark' should guard us and help us to move forward safely, not stop us moving.

The invitation we were given was to accept that the world is changing more rapidly than we would like – but instead of digging our heels in we should move with the moment.

The leadership in the parish recognises this and is trying new things and working out new ways of doing what has been done before. You will have noticed that the 'look' and 'sound' of our services are different as we begin using new equipment and get the people that are able to, to do their parts of the service in the church. We are looking at how we can start counselling sessions in a way that protects everyone involved from possible infection. The office is running again – somewhat strangely with Maria (our Covid Compliance Officer) recording our temperature and directing people to the meeting-room door rather than the office door (because it is a lot easier to keep the meeting room properly clean and sanitised).

The reality is that what we do today is very different to what we did 6 months ago and is probably different to what we will be doing in 6 months' time. Is this challenging? Yes it is. Is it a problem? Not really. Is it positive? Yes – it is alive with possibility and discovery and opportunity.

Challenge

Inevitably there are challenges. We are never promised a smooth and easy life. But God does promise that he will send the Holy Spirit who will be with us and help us at all times. So we can face each day with confidence, knowing we are not alone.

Sharing Love:

This is a standard challenge to all Christians – Jesus tells us to “love one another” (which includes everyone). Thank you to everyone who is making this practical by helping with the feeding scheme, cooking soup with the “Citchin Cookup” (or in your home), knitting gloves and beanies, donating to our Covid Fund. All this helps us to make a difference in the lives of others.

If you are able to cook a meal (like curry and rice or lasagne etc) for 2 or 4 people and drop it off at the office with Maria it will help us to show some practical love to families at a time of need.

As life has moved online, there have not only been positive aspects. The online environment is as full of dangers as the physical world. Some of the counsellors have drawn our attention to the problem of online pornography (which I encountered all too often at a boys' school – and was very aware of the dangers inherent in it) – but as in all things, there is help available. (See the note sent with the bulletin dealing with this issue.)

If you are finding that the 'lockdown' is dragging on for too long and you feel you are reaching the end of your tether – please contact our counselling team or one of the clergy (this can be done through the office if you do not have the relevant contact details.)

Also with lockdown continuing and the economy taking a battering, we are aware that this will affect many people's livelihood. If you find that you are struggling – let us know. We are putting together Food Hampers which we can give families to help stave off hunger; and if other forms of help are needed our Mission and Mercy Fund can help in some instances. So – if you are being challenged with feeding your family or with other needs, please let us know so that we can help.

In the opening I quoted from Paul's letter to the Galatians, and we need to remember that our God is a God of love who sent his Son, Jesus who “*gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age*”. No matter what we face – we are never alone! Indeed, we are “*more than conquerors through him who loved us.*”

Blessings!

Ian