

*Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,*

*To God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood:*

*Grace and peace be yours in abundance.*

Thus Peter begins his first letter (well, the first one that we have; he may well have written others that are lost, but this one is the first that in God's providence survives in our scriptures), writing to Christians scattered around the Roman world. Which I think is apposite today – writing to a congregation 'scattered' in their homes and no longer meeting.

He says that the readers have been "chosen" by God, through the Spirit, to follow Jesus Christ. To think of ourselves as "chosen" speaks of the undeserved love and grace of God, it says that each of us is important to God. This is worth holding dear, it is a great encouragement.

### **Looking Back**

Yesterday we passed the 6 month mark of Lockdown in South Africa. First announced on Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> and beginning on Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> March. If one thinks back to the confusion and panic and how many rolls of toilet paper some people thought they needed, it does seem like a distant memory. And I suppose half a year is quite a long time. Things have progressed and we are now at Level 1 – which has made the situation a whole lot easier and much of life is getting back to what it once was.

Though as one reflects on where we are as a congregation and what we have been through, we have learned some valuable lessons in the process:

Church Buildings – people have often said that "the church is not the buildings", and in the last while we have learned just how true that is.

Worship – our understanding on how we worship God has changed and continues to be shaped in new ways.

Fellowship – we, or certainly I, always thought you had to be physically present for fellowship; but we have discovered is that remote, "online" fellowship can also be fulfilling and enriching.

Not everything has been smooth, and we are also confronting some challenges to our thinking:

Communion – always wine and a wafer, has had to become bread rolls and (at times) fruit juice. And does it count more in a church than in our homes?

Times – services were at certain times, and now people have been able to join the service when it suited them! How will people adapt to going back to certain 'fixed' times?

Neighbour – an interesting comment one of the ministers made during our (online) fellowship meeting was that we have been subtly told that our "neighbour" should be seen as a "virus carrier". This is a challenge as we fulfil Jesus' command to "love your neighbour"! (And to recognise that we ourselves, could indeed be the "virus carrier"!)

What is evident is that the journey we have been on through the last 6 months has changed our world and has changed us as well. We may not realise it, but I believe it is true.

### **We Cannot Go Back to Church**

The Anglican Diocese of Johannesburg has been a lot more cautious in how we deal with the pandemic than the government regulations permit or than some other churches in their response. As a result, we delayed opening churches, realising that the situation was still too risky. However, the diocesan leadership have decided that with the nation moving to lockdown level 1, and with certain restrictions, churches can reopen from the beginning of October.

However, I do not believe that we can go “back” to church.

Rather we need to go “on” to church.

The reality is that we cannot just do what we did 7 months ago, and when we start services at the church again, they will be very different to what was done before. This is unavoidable and may well be a good thing.

I was reminded of the chorus from way back: “I have decided to follow Jesus . . . no turning back, praise the Lord, no turning back”. That needs to be our refrain at the moment.

While we now can begin “contact / in person / face-to-face” (the terms vary) services again, there are still restrictions. We can only have 50 people present (Anglican caution), people have to register beforehand, temperatures need to be taken, everyone must wear masks, the congregation may not sing, we have to keep “social distancing”, no shaking hands when greeting, there cannot be tea and fellowship after the service, communion will be “in one kind” (only the bread), services have to be under one hour (a bit of a challenge for some of us preachers). The parish Covid Committee has noted that the church building is too small for proper social distancing (it can only safely accommodate 36 people) and has poor ventilation, so we will rather begin services in the hall.

As you can imagine – with all those restrictions and demands to be met – when we meet again, it will be very little like the services we remember from before lockdown.

While this may be unsettling, I believe it is a wonderful opportunity to discover new and creative ways of worshipping. As Janette pointed out – the early church meetings were nothing like what we have traditionally done; and yet they were blessed by God, changed people’s lives, changed society, and ultimately changed the world. The way we have done church was strongly shaped in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Century, the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, which has shaped our prayer book, was first published in 1549 and was revised at various times until 1662. The prayer book of 1662, with minor changes, has continued as the standard liturgy of most Anglican churches. So the way we worship may need a fair amount of “tweaking” to hold onto our historical roots, while making it fit the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (which is already one fifth gone!)

### **How Far We’ve Come**

If one thinks about what has developed in the last 6 months it is quite remarkable. Back in March we were thrown into confusion and disarray as we confronted a situation no-one was prepared for. We couldn't imagine how we would do church, and whether we could survive. It seemed impossible.

Now, the online services we are able to offer have developed an admirable standard – both technically and in terms of content. Meetings on Zoom, or other online fora, have become commonplace – and many people prefer them to “contact” meetings. We have been able to do a successful Bible Study online, some Home Groups have been able to have virtual meetings, and we are in the middle of a rewarding “Online Alpha” course.

The gains we have made cannot be lost by “going back”. Indeed, the Parish Council has agreed that we need to continue offering worship online each week. This is imperative since the numbers able to attend “contact” services will be limited, and for various reasons a number of people would prefer not to come back to physical meetings just yet. We are also aware of a number of people who are unable to come to “contact” services. It is important that we keep ministering to all.

### **Where Do We Go?**

The parish will continue producing “online services” available on the YouTube channel and Facebook, but will also begin “contact services” on the 4<sup>th</sup> October. Though, as this is uncharted territory, we recognise that there will no doubt be problems to manage and glitches to sort out. So we are planning fairly “low key” services on the 4<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> as we work through some of the challenges and learn how to manage this new strange situation.

The 18<sup>th</sup> October is St Luke's Day, and we are planning a Celebration Service, though it will have to be quite different to all previous St Luke's Day services. We are encouraging as many as are able and feel that they will not compromise their own health, to come and join us on 18<sup>th</sup>. We hope that we will be able to hold the service outside in the beautiful gardens. If this is not possible, we may need to hold two services in the hall. (The office will send out the detail of this and the other services in the weeks ahead – so keep an eye on your emails.)

Once we have managed our regular Sunday services we will look at what other services we could offer. These will probably include a mid-week, Thursday (?), service and possibly a Sunday evening service. But every one of the services will be quite unlike similar services in the past.

At a meeting of the Parish Council, clergy and worship leaders, we acknowledged that God is leading us into new territory – rather like the Israelites heading from Egypt to the Promised Land. God led them from place to place, and provided for them in every situation. He did not give them all they needed at the start of the journey. Indeed, when he provided manna, they were to collect only enough for that day, and he provided again the following day. They also did not know exactly where they were going. Similarly God is leading us step by step to a new and better place. The call is that we follow him day by day, week by week, one step at a time.

Please continue to pray for everyone who is part of the parish, especially the leadership and yourself, that we will hear God, and be faithful to follow where he leads.

The promise Peter gave his readers, is our ongoing prayers for every person that is part of St Luke's: "*Grace and peace be yours in abundance.*"