

On the 22nd March we will reach the first anniversary of our online services!

A whole year has passed since we were asked to stop attending services in churches, to protect people from the possible spread of Covid. Then, five days after our first online service a State of Disaster was declared and the whole country was asked/instructed to stay at home as the first Nationwide Lockdown began. The lockdown was for an initial period of three weeks, which was then extended.

How much water has passed under the bridge since then? I can remember the panic that spread as the whole of Norwood Mall was closed because someone who had been in the shop the previous day was diagnosed with Covid. How much misinformation was spread. And how our optimism waned.

The first lockdown was for three weeks, and I can remember clergy discussing whether churches would be open for Palm Sunday or only from Good Friday. Well, they could not have been further from the mark.

If we believe that our God is Almighty, and that he is outside of time, able to know the end from the beginning; and if we say with David in Psalm 31

‘But I trust in you, Lord;
I say, “You are my God.”
My times are in your hands’

then we must say that God has not been surprised or wrongfooted by what we have been through. He has actually been in control and has been working his purpose out through Covid and the lockdown.

Challenge

As we have no longer been able to do what was considered “normal” in the life of the church, God has forced us to rethink and reimagine what we do.

The fact that we have had certain services and done certain things in certain ways for the last 75 years as a parish, or for the last 350 years as a denomination, and even longer as a religion, has counted for nothing. We have had to stop doing them. Instead we have had to discover how to do ‘old things’ in new ways, and have had to consider whether those ‘old things’ are really worth doing at all.

And as the lockdown has slowly eased and we have been able to begin meeting in person once again, we have had to come to terms with restrictions and limits and regulations. We have had to change quite dramatically what we do and how.

As a result the parish has not been meeting in the church for services as the size and layout and ventilation (or lack thereof) would limit us to about 36 people. Instead we have moved to the hall – which has been beautifully refurbished and made ‘fit for purpose’ – and have been able to accommodate the 50 people allowed quite safely. As we are allowed to have 100 people present, we have been able to expand into the “supper room” and keep people safely separated and “aired”. (A note to remember as we move towards colder weather, we cannot close the windows, so people do need to dress warmly for church in the hall.)

While dealing with all the limits and implications it has been a real challenge to listen to God and sense what he is doing and what he is calling us to. We have been challenged to step back and look at what we do, why we do it, how we do it, and ask whether this is really what God wants us to do. We have also recognised that the situation has also presented us with a number of opportunities to attempt new things or new ways of doing old things. In the process we have discovered a whole lot of positive 'spinoffs' and unanticipated advantages.

So the process of reimagining that we do continues.

Holy Week and Easter

This year we will be able to meet in person for 'contact services' over this period, but still with limited numbers and keeping the meeting Covid Compliant. As a result we have had to think about what we do, what is the heart of the service, and how could we do things differently but still keep the service relevant and meeting the needs of the community and the call of God.

I would like to say that we had a vision and have come up with the perfect solution. But that didn't happen. Instead we have inklings and ideas, a sense of call and a vague vision of what could be. So our services are being shaped in new ways to meet new situations – while still keeping focussed on what the heart of Gospel entails.

The plans are:

Palm Sunday

On Palm Sunday we celebrate Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and look forward to his sacrifice on the cross. Since the people took branches from trees (interestingly 'palms' are only mentioned by John) we have normally handed out palm crosses. This year the cutting and folding and handing out of palm crosses is not advised as it will be difficult to adequately sanitise.

But if one looks at what the Bible says, the synoptic gospels all tell us that the people "spread their cloaks on the road" in front of Jesus and some used branches. (Luke only speaks of the cloaks, and no branches.) This is an aspect that is clear in the scripture but has not featured in our liturgy at all.

So this year we are asking people to do what the people in the Gospels did. Instead of handing out palm crosses, we are asking people who come to the service to bring an item of clothing that they are prepared to give away, and during the service we will "spread them" on the altar before the Lord. After the service these will be collected and given away to the needy.

The service will be in the Hall at 09h00 on Palm Sunday (28th March).

Holy week:

Monday

Sue Cock has kindly offered to conduct a Taizé Service. This will be in the church at 19h00.

Tuesday

We will have a reading of the Passion in Luke by David Suchet. This will be an 'online' event.

Wednesday

Our weekly online Bible Study at 19h00.

Maundy Thursday

A service bringing together the Passover Festival, the Last Supper and our Eucharist. In the hall at 19h00.

Good Friday

Since services should not be longer than an hour, a Three-Hour Service is not possible. So we will have a Good Friday Service of one hour that will take place in the Hall at 09h00. (This will aim to set the tone for the whole day, rather than be a truncated Three-Hour Service.)

As Good Friday has been a well-attended service in the past, we will ask people to please Pre-Register for this service as we will still be limited to 100 attending. (As previously, this can be done by calling the office (011 728 7015) between 09h00 and 16h00 Monday to Friday.)

Holy Saturday

There will be a musical Easter Celebration conducted by Richard Cock and featuring Hlengiwe Mkhwanazi held in the grounds of the church at 16h00 costing R100 per person (with funds going to help support the artists who have lost their income as Covid restrictions have stopped performances). To attend please book at 011 447 9264 or by email at RCMEBOOKINGS@gmail.com.

Easter Sunday

On Easter Day we will hold an outdoor celebration service in the gardens of the church at 09h00. Like with our St Luke's Day and Christmas services we ask everyone to bring a small glass for wine during communion, as well as a chair or blanket to sit on and hat to protect from the sun. (Sunscreen is also advised.)

Since we can have 200 at outdoor gatherings, please feel free to invite guests as well. Pre-registration is not necessary, but please come early in order to register before the service.

As we head towards our second "Covid Influenced Easter" we are doing things differently to what the 'norm' has been in past years and also differently to what we did last year. But as we do this, we are certain that God is with us, that the Good Shepherd is leading us (if we keep listening to his voice) and that he will bless us and grow his Kingdom. So please continue to pray for the parish leadership, as well as yourself: that we will hear our Master's voice and follow closely.

And I pray that despite our world and lives being so different, you will know God presence and his rich blessings in all your life.

Blessings!

Ian