

SAINT JOHN'S  ANGELICAN CHURCH
WITH
ST AGNES[†]

EAST MALVERN & GLEN HUNTLY

From the Vicar

28th March 2020

A Reflection on Online Worship in the time of COVID-19

I am not a Luddite! Although it doesn't help that we have been without an internet connection in the parish and vicarage now for a month – the delights of the NBN and 'progress'! It is also unclear when this will be resolved, with some forecasts estimating at least another month. What little internet connection we have is being streamed by my phone – which at least has allowed me to reconnect with Facebook to take over the long-overdue administration of the St John's Facebook page as well as set up another for St Agnes'. Along with email access, this is about the limit of our online connectivity in the parish at the moment.

While there are some practical impediments, then, to setting up streaming of services and other online activities, I have also been reflecting on whether this is indeed the most sustaining form of worship for us in these unprecedented circumstances. I must admit I find myself taking a quite different approach to my colleagues, and what you may see happening elsewhere. The 'lockdown' and inability to gather for public worship in our churches may well last for anywhere between three and six months, and I am most concerned with how this disruption – and what we put in its place across such an extended period – will mould and shape new habits of prayer and worship.

Rather, then, than the 'delivery' of a suite of online worship available for people to tune in and out of, my approach is to encourage and facilitate acts of prayer, praise and study of the Scriptures within people's homes either alone or with their household. Of course, this is not to say that the broadcasting of online services cannot help enable this worship in our

homes and in our hearts – or that online resources can't supplement it – but it is a fine line between a 'spectator' or even 'consumer' of online content and a practitioner of prayer. Invariably the language is of 'watching' services – and I have already heard comments such as 'I tried to tune in to Fr X at St X's last week, but they were having technical difficulties, so I switched over to St Y's which was very slick... but gosh Fr Y goes on a bit doesn't he! Next week I might try St Z's...' In this age of Netflix and on-demand streaming – what habits of worship and patterns of prayer is this likely to form in us in the long term?

As well as this there are some other more minor considerations which have made me slow to jump on to the broadcasting bandwagon. There is a question of what would we broadcast? Government restrictions are getting more and more restrictive regarding how churches may be used and who may be in them – it would be impossible to broadcast anything which resembled our usual Sunday worship, and so something much simpler would be necessary using very limited means of production which I cannot guarantee would be edifying to all!

While it may be true that we can make a 'Spiritual Communion' through the broadcast of a Eucharistic service, there is also something to be said in these extraordinary circumstances for feeling its absence as we hunger and thirst for the Lord!

Recognising these extraordinary circumstances, too, is another reason not to rush too quickly in trying to shift everything onto an 'online platform' and carry on as usual. Schools, businesses and other areas of public activity are having to rapidly do this simply to survive and continue to provide the services they offer. This is not so for churches – the service, 'Divine Service', we offer to God and our fellowship is not contingent on one model, whether online or not, but rather is secured in the heavenly worship and the Communion of Saints which transcends temporal and spatial constraints.

As a church, then, we have an opportunity to heed, in a public way, these extraordinary times and to hold the sense of public disruption, anxiety, fear and fallout which have resulted in our society from both the virus and – increasingly more so – measures aimed at its containment.

I fear that our efforts to shift old patterns of worship crudely into online formats plays into a ‘carry on as usual’ mentality which misses a critical opportunity for the church to speak uniquely and distinctively into these circumstances, marking out the true impact it is having in our society, and carrying the concerns, anxieties and fears which deserve to be held, before we are able to – one day again – bring them before God’s altar and offer them up to him in prayer and worship, supplication and song. This is part of the Church’s vocation – and we are in danger of missing it.

There is also a final point about how focused on ‘clergy’ online worship inevitably becomes – particularly if eventually (as in the UK) it is only clergy who are allowed to enter churches for the purpose of broadcasting. You may be relieved to know that I have no great desire to beam my virtual presence into all of your living rooms! You can be assured, though, that I continue to hold you all – and this world – before God in prayer each day, as it is my duty to do, and I thank you too for the many assurances of your own prayers for me and my family at this time.

What I am most interested in, though, and where I think there is some opportunity in this peculiar predicament we find ourselves in, is that we are able to develop strong and resilient habits of prayer and worship at home which allows us to continue to follow the rhythm of the church’s liturgical observances as well as being adaptable to your own circumstances and also the ‘changes and chances of this world.’

It is for this reason, informed by the prayerful reflections I’ve outlined above, that I have put my energies not into developing a great deal of online content but – instead – the pack of materials and resources which have been sent out to all parishioners and which will continue to be made available and adapted. I urge you to set aside time and space at least each week to enter into the pattern of prayer provided so that together as a parish we may keep some sense of corporate worship and ‘common prayer’ while also forming a discipline of private prayer in our respective households.

I am convinced that this will be far more sustaining in the months to come than ‘tuning in’ online – although it will certainly, at least initially, be much harder work!

Online content does, of course, have its place – and if you would like to engage with worship online as a further resource, I recommend perhaps one of the many offerings where the production quality is high and most able to provide an interactive experience. St Paul’s Cathedral in Melbourne provides such a broadcast, and it is appropriate that they might be a focus for us all as Anglicans in expressing our common witness and identity in this city. There are others too, and I am happy to provide a list.

Another area where I will certainly be exploring greater use of technology is in facilitating and maintaining our sense of community and fellowship, running Bible studies and discussion groups, continuing our work with new Christians and those exploring the faith in preparation for Baptism, Confirmation or a Reaffirmation of Faith, making available resources for spiritual inspiration and particularly the making and hearing of inspiring music to elevate our hearts and minds to God, as well as communication. It is in all these ways that online technology has a great role to play and I will continue to work this out and make it available in the coming weeks. This reflection I intend to confine only to our worship and prayer.

I may of course be entirely wrong – as I so often am! – and am entirely prepared to revise and revisit this strategy. If nothing else, these uncertain times demand spontaneity, flexibility and creativity. Nevertheless, as we seek to discern together where God is calling us to as a parish through this crisis I hope we can use it as an opportunity to rekindle the gift of God that is within us through deep, authentic and immersive patterns of prayer and worship that will sustain us in the months to come and, indeed, long afterwards.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alee'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'A' and a long, sweeping tail that ends in a small loop.