

Dear Church,

We are going through a season of unpredictable and challenging circumstances as the world faces the Coronavirus. My thoughts and prayers are with you all as you adapt to cope with new patterns of living. I am particularly aware of those of you who have been asked to self-isolate or self-distance, either because of age or because you have additional health complications - you must be feeling vulnerable at this time. I also want to acknowledge the fear that this situation creates for us all. May this be a time where we learn to live in the sure and certain hope of our faith. I know that Jesus does give His peace. Take comfort that He will draw close to you and give you strength and peace. I would also like you to be assured of my prayers at this time.

This afternoon, the Church of England published its guidelines in accordance with the Government's strategy to deal with the virus. We have been advised that we can **no longer meet as a gathered church**, which includes our Sunday services. As such, all church gatherings will cease until we are advised that we can meet again.

Please understand that these measures are in place to protect the health and wellbeing of the general public, particularly those who are considered most vulnerable, and therefore it is vital that we all play our part as citizens to protect and safeguard those around us.

Whilst church buildings will not be offering public worship, we must not forget that the church is not the building, instead **we are the church**. Wherever we are, whether in self-isolation or continuing work, through our prayers and service we are the church, the body of Christ.

- Please remember that **you are not alone**, you have a church family around you, please do keep in contact with one another; pray for each other, make phone calls, send emails.
- It would be great if we at St Mary's are able to offer **practical support** to our neighbours, especially those who are in at-risk groups or self-isolating. Alongside your neighbours, if you are able to offer practical support to others please contact Rachel Whitehouse (834873) or Neil Biles (07867785836) and let them know.
- I am compiling a list of **online resources** that you can access from home to support your spiritual wellbeing while we are absent from church on a Sunday, so watch this space.
- Can I encourage us to join together for **Midday Prayers from Home!** Why not set an alarm to remind you to pray the Lord's Prayer at midday, this way we pray together even though we cannot be together in person.
- Each week either myself or someone from the Emmanuel & St Mary's Team will write a **short reflection** to help us integrate what is going on in the world around us with our confidence in God, who 'will never leave or forsake us.' This will be emailed out. It would be helpful to know who does not have access to email, so I can ensure that this is posted to them.
- We have a church **Facebook** page, so if you use Facebook please do keep an eye on that.
- A national '**Day of Prayer**' has been announced by Churches Together in England for this Sunday 22nd March. They write; 'At such a time as this, when so many are fearful and there is great uncertainty, we are reminded of our dependence on our Heavenly Father and the future that he holds. At 7pm this Sunday, light a candle in the windows of your homes as a visible symbol of the light of life, Jesus Christ, our source and hope in prayer.' It would be great if we as a community could join the church across the nation to pray.

I am aware that many of the congregation at St Mary's do not have access to email so it would be really helpful if this can be circulated widely.

Finally please do take care of yourselves. Make the most of the support networks you have, and above all hold fast to the Lord, who is with us in every situation, as Psalm 46 reminds us.

Blessings

Jo

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