

25<sup>th</sup> June 2012

Dear Friends

This is the fourteenth pastoral letter that has been written since the beginning of lockdown. We have all shared in the challenges of living through this crisis. We have all been learning during this time. I wonder what you have learned?

I have learned how much I love meeting people face to face. Although I have welcomed new things like zoom, it's not the same as meeting people in a real place. There have been days when I have yearned for the easy company of people I like and I'm sure that many people have felt the same. For a while it will feel quite special when we are able simply to be with and welcome people to our homes without fear.

I have learned again, how much being able to grieve and remember in traditional ways matters. I have had the privilege of conducting some simple funerals with small numbers of people. These were good events, but we were all aware of how different it was from what we usually do.

Later this year there will be a service for people who would like to remember someone they loved who has died, at New North Road. There will be an opportunity for people to be named in the presence of God and we shall give thanks and recognise our loss is real.

I have learned that we as a nation are capable of uniting with a remarkable sense of common purpose. Our society has become more polarised over recent years but perhaps this is a moment that shows us what the late Jo Cox said is true.

'We are more united and have more in common with each-other than that which divides us.'

During this time, many small acts of kindness have happened. New initiatives have flourished as people have stepped up to make a difference. These initiatives may not be big but 'small' can be is 'beautiful'. Sometimes a small initiative grows from an acorn to an oak like Captain Tom Moore's fundraising walk, an example, others have cheerfully copied.

This is a sign of something else that we have all learned, we have wanted to celebrate ordinary heroes and heroines. The clap for carers was a highlight of my week. Even Vogue magazine has celebrated what ordinary people are doing, featuring a shop floor worker, Anisa Omar, photographed at work in her uniform, on the front cover.

Another group of people we may appreciate more after the pandemic are teachers. Parents faced with home-schooling their children may have discovered a new appreciation and respect for their children's teachers, their patience and their skills.

Of course, some of the things we have learned have been unwelcome. The crisis has exposed inequalities in our society and made us notice people who are more easily missed. We learned that people in care homes and their carers needed much greater protection than they were given at the beginning. We learned that people living in small houses or flats, especially people without gardens found the lockdown more difficult. It's a great thing when there are green spaces in your neighbourhood. We learned about the vulnerability of people facing domestic abuse, trapped at home with partners they couldn't leave. We have also learned that people from black and ethnic minorities are more vulnerable during this pandemic.

I have learned that when there is a crisis our government can respond with resolution and incredible speed. Many of us will have noticed the earth breathing during this crisis; carbon emissions have fallen, wildflowers and animals have appeared in unexpected places and staring up at the sky the vapour trails have disappeared. I wonder; can they respond with a similar urgency to the challenges of climate change?

We have also learned about things that received more exposure because other things were not happening. One of these things was the need for racial justice as Black Lives Matter protests swept through many nations following the death of George Floyd. Racism is a scourge but with courage and resolution it can be overcome.

I have learned there is still a hunger for God. Even though we have not been able to meet together, many people have accessed services and spiritual resources online. As a community of God's people, we can create an environment in which that spiritual hunger can be met with the goodness of God. More than anything I am looking

forward to the day when we will be able to share bread and wine about the table of our Lord remembering that Jesus said, 'I am the bread of life.'

God is still God whatever happens. As we enter a 'new normal' we can live with confident hope that God's love is unchanging, and his word never returns to him empty. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has never put it out.

Your friend and pastor

Mark