**Bishop John reflects on Holy Week and Christian Ministry**

**in a time of Isolation**

I’m sorry we won’t be meeting up at the Chrism Mass this year so let me pass on my good wishes anyway and reflect for a few moments on the nature of our Christian ministry, as we always do at the Chrism Mass. And this year to do so in the light of astonishing circumstances.

Firstly, may I encourage you to enjoy Holy Week? I remember the best Holy Week I ever experienced was at Theological College. Admittedly, this was probably because other people were doing all the work – but it was also because, as a student, I had the luxury of time simply to immerse myself in the story and to live the story, knowing that because of the events of that week everything is changed. Holy Week became not a time primarily of sorrow or penitence but of quiet joy.

Since then, of course, Holy Weeks for me have often been hard work. Arranging services, writing addresses, late nights, early mornings, puzzlement at how few people want to join in, and – after the high octane intensity of Easter Day – utter exhaustion.

This year, I suggest, we have an opportunity to take our foot off the pedal and to allow ourselves to be carried through the week by the momentum of the story. We may have devised a means of sharing in worship with others online, or we may not; we may be skilled enough to produce something distinctive for our people, or we may be referring them to online resources provided by others. But what I’m trying to say is that the pressure off – no one has any expectations because they don’t know what to expect at the moment. So, let’s take the expectations off ourselves. Pay attention to the story; be disciplined in prayer, and enjoy it. Chances are, if we’re enjoying it others will too.

Secondly, and similarly, I encourage you to pay attention to what we’re living through and look for the things of God within it. This means not worrying about what we can’t do but making the most of what we can, and it means claiming this present experience as an opportunity to be formed by God rather than as a trial to be endured before we get back to ‘normal’. Let’s be clear about this, when the restrictions eventually end the world we inhabit will be changed and so will the church we belong to.

I see this as a tremendously fertile time for us to understand and to reclaim the fundamentals of Christian ministry. We’re learning, on the one hand, what it means to be those who gather in the flock even when a building to gather in is denied us. We’re finding opportunities really to connect with one another even via that ancient technological device, the telephone.

And, on the other hand, faced by the real and pressing needs of the community at large – sickness, death, hunger and deprivation, loneliness and fear, the potential collapse of the very charities we most desperately need at the moment – we’re learning what it is to reach outwards, social distancing notwithstanding, to form partnerships with others – of faith and no faith – who like us want to make a difference to social and mental well-being.

We also have the opportunity to learn once and for all that the church is not a building – that belonging to the Body of Christ really means something even when the physical presence of that body isn’t available to us in the Eucharist – and that the people we had always regarded as un-responsive to and even lukewarm about the details of faith – are far more devout than we had imagined.

We hear a lot at the moment about ‘intentional discipleship’. Well, one thing I’ve learned over the past week or so is that our church is full of resilient disciples for whom their journey in Christ matters deeply and who are demonstrating in their actions love for God and for neighbour.

In times of crisis there are always those who shine. Mostly, I suspect, and rightly so in this time of emergency, it’ll be those working so hard in our hospitals who are given centre-stage. But there will be others whose leadership guides us or whose humour lifts our spirits. Those of us in ministry, however, know that our calling isn’t to look to shine or to draw the spotlight, but to encourage the light of Christ to shine in others and to illuminate those dark places where Christ is already at work – so that the work of God may be celebrated. In times of crisis or not, that has always been the call of ministry, and in this time of crisis we have the opportunity to learn things about God, about ourselves and about others that may astonish us. So, let’s take that opportunity.

Once these restrictions are lifted, I imagine that there will be great celebrations, not least the celebrations that will take place in our open churches with their open tables. Weddings and baptisms will happen once more and, more poignantly, we shall be able to gather to cherish the memories of those who died and who meant so much to us.

And I wonder what else we shall celebrate, what else we shall bring with us from our isolation. What will we have learned that will shape our future and enable us to be God’s people for the changed world we find ourselves in? In what ways shall we find we have been reshaped and renewed precisely because we’ve lived through this time of challenge and opportunity?

*God of mercy and love, new birth by water and the Spirit is your gift, a gift that none can take away: Grant that we, your servants, may grow into the fullness of the stature of Christ. Fill us with the joy of your presence. Increase in us the fruit of your Spirit: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of love, patience and gentleness, the spirit of wonder and true holiness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*