



The Order of St James Newsletter

February 2021



Funerals in lock down.

The legal requirements for funerals under the current conditions have been largely catastrophic in terms of dealing with grief and separation.

The church's ability to offer pastoral and sacramental services in times of need has been hard hit. The familiar, tried and tested pathways have essentially been closed and new routes through the tangled brambles have had to be sought.

It hasn't been easy. It is amazing how much we have taken for granted, and what a shock it has been to have much of it denied to us because of the pandemic.

Take pastoral visiting to make arrangements for a funeral: (source HMGov). This applies if it can't be undertaken over the phone or by e-mail.

If you are required to meet with the bereaved but will not make direct contact with the deceased PPE is not required. However, you should:

- *maintain a safe distance (at least 2 metres) from other members of the household*

- *on entry to the home, wash your hands with soap and water for 20 seconds – where facilities to wash hands are not available, hand sanitiser should be used, and you should carry this with you at all times*
- *you should avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth and wash your hands again when leaving the property*

This advice should be followed for all deaths in the community, including if the household is self-isolating or if someone in the household is symptomatic.

It seems a logical reaction, but being physically distant can reinforce the feeling of isolation for the bereaved. That is the opposite of what we want to achieve.

Similarly, Funeral directors have new legislation and HSE advice to follow and some simple things like bereaved visiting the body of the deceased or providing clothes for the deceased to be dressed in become problematic. More distancing.

Personal care of deceased people

[Guidance for care of the deceased with suspected or confirmed coronavirus \(COVID-19\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/care-of-the-deceased-with-suspected-or-confirmed-coronavirus-covid-19)

You are advised not to take part in rituals or practices that bring you into close contact with the deceased. If your faith requires you to have close contact with the deceased, you need to wear Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) under the supervision of someone who is trained in the appropriate use of PPE.

Detailed [guidance on care of the deceased](#) should be followed, regardless of the setting in which personal care of the deceased is provided.

If you are clinically vulnerable or clinically extremely vulnerable you are strongly advised to avoid contact with the body of the deceased, even if you can wear PPE.

This includes washing, preparing or dressing the body.

Similarly, HSE guidance states the following:

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/priced/hsg283.pdf>

Religious or ritual preparations

235 There are considerable variations between people of different faiths, ethnic backgrounds and national origins in their approach to, and practices for, death and dying, as regards preparation for burial or cremation.

236 At the time of death, these practices may require involvement in last or first offices. If there is a requirement for involvement, you should inform people carrying out washing, dressing etc. of any risks and advise them of the control measures to be used. The responsible person should advise families if there could be a health risk from touching or kissing the body. If these risks are significant, discourage the family members from doing so and explain about the possible consequences for their health. This should be done tactfully and ideally by a trained member of staff.

Viewing

237 When families and others wish to view the deceased, you should advise them whether there is a risk of infection if they touch or kiss the deceased, as well as any controls they should take after contact, eg washing of hands.

238 Certain infectious diseases (see Appendix 1 for details) will present a significant risk, so you should inform the family about the risks involved and provide them with PPE if appropriate. Alternatively, viewing could take place either at a distance or by use of a viewing panel in the coffin. Another option is to use a viewing room with a glass screen.

This has resulted in some Funeral Directors not allowing viewing of the deceased and not dressing the bereaved in clothes provided by the bereaved families. They have a mandatory duty to protect their staff from unnecessary risks and determine what actions they need to take for their staff and premises to be 'Covid safe'. Needless to say, this response can add greatly to the bereaved family's stress and grief.

Funerals may still take place but there are limitations. Under HMGov legislation, up to 30 people can legally attend funerals if the premises are considered to be 'Covid safe'. However, building managers can set their own lower limits. As an example, my local crematorium has set the maximum at 20.

Services are also limited in time. Service times locally are now set to be around 20 minutes in an attempt to limit the spreading of the virus and chapels to be cleaned/aired between uses. That is a tough call with so much to be achieved.

The reality is that there is no hope of properly remembering and celebrating a life time of love and achievement in that time and under those conditions, let alone offer consolation in a time of grief and provide a means of gently helping people let go of the earthly remains of someone they have loved very deeply.

Nevertheless, it is the only opportunity we are going to get and have to do our very best in the circumstances. We mustn't forget we can do all things in God, and that prayer can achieve far more than we expect. As St James stated in his epistle (paraphrased), 'if we have faith, we can move mountains'.

Whilst the Covid-19 restrictions we find ourselves bound by are temporary arrangements, there is no doubt that there is damage being done to those who grieving has been left incomplete. The wounds caused by the restrictions will both run deep and take a long time to heal so I don't think we can be complacent.

I hear of people talking about 'services of remembrance' to be held sometime in the future when things have got back to normal. It offers some worthwhile hope.

It is something to be considered and to be prepared for, but in the meantime there has to be something better we can offer. I am not sure what though.

Current social distancing rules make pastoral visits to the grieving almost impossible. Phone calls and zoom meetings over the internet may give some support to the bereaved but are poor seconds when that face to face and personal physical contact is needed. Physical barriers like 2 metres social distancing, face masks and hand sanitizer, may be necessary in the fight against Covid-19 but are no help to healing grief or easing the pain of loss and emptiness.

They are just different and subtle forms of distancing that reinforce the sense of isolation. They are not the only forms either.

The traditional funeral liturgy has also proved to be an obstacle in many cases. It can be quite prescriptive and a canonical obligation to use it 'as is' may be enforced on the celebrant in spite of the bereaved's needs, isolating them further.

For people of faith the traditional funeral liturgy may hold great comfort and reassurance, but for those of little or no faith it can often appear distant, archaic, clinical and largely irrelevant. That is neither desirable nor acceptable.

The traditional liturgy has in many ways distanced the celebrant too from those he is meant to serve, and is a good means of 'keeping them in their place'. It has resulted in a kind of 'SAS' Christianity, 'get in, do the job, and get out as quickly as possible', that lacks sensitivity, a sense of connection and sharing of the burden. When there are no choices to make and everything is prescribed it ends up being a mechanical process which is neither good for the celebrant or the recipients.

It also can become overly rushed when crammed into the allowed 20 minutes under the current restrictions, or worse, over-run and cause following services to run late.

The end results are both unacceptable and unprofessional.

‘The church’s’ attitude of ‘this is what we have always done, are doing, and will continue to do in the future’ may warm the heart’s cockles when it comes to preserving the traditions of the church, but it somewhat misses the point.

We are not meant to be serving the needs of ‘the church’ (the man-made institution/organisation) but serving and compassionately meeting the spiritual needs of the people, and not just the ones that regularly sit in the pews. There other sheep who need our loving care and attention who need a different kind of food.

And as for an engaged compassion, has ‘the church’ forgotten that Jesus, our Lord and Saviour, our exemplar when it comes to ministry, grieved and wept at the tomb of Lazarus before raising him to life again?

Being actively engaged with the grieving and sharing in families and friends loss is essential when it comes to them being drawn into the presence of God, and is much more useful and productive than a professional disassociation that operates from the side lines.

We should not compromise on any single part of our faith but make our pastoral and sacramental services accessible, relevant and welcoming, especially when it comes to funerals. And if that means changing the liturgy or form of service we have used since the dawn of time, then that should be the way forward, no matter how much we personally are committed to them.

Our personal preferences matter little as priests, but meeting the spiritual needs of others without compromising the faith we are entrusted with is everything.

Our priesthood is not for our (sole) benefit, but for the (soul) benefit of others.

As a kind of analogy, think of it like this: liturgy is the vehicle, the priest or celebrant is the driver, and a growing relationship with God is the destination, but there are many different ways of getting from point A to point B, and many different kinds of vehicle. The choices depend on the circumstances and which options are most appropriate. There is an obvious need for flexibility.

The sad thing is that many 'churches' tell their drivers which route and which car they are taking. There is no choice regardless of the conditions or need – a case of 'you signed up with us and these are the rules'.

Eventually their priests will become as frustrated as those whom they serve and these 'churches' will suffer, their membership declining terminally if they do not come to their senses.

This is might be a good point to consider what funerals are designed to achieve.

Here are a few possible themes and purpose – there may certainly be more:

1. to effect a sense of closure in being able to let go the earthly remains of the deceased
2. to give thanks to God for the life of the deceased and learn from them
3. to offer prayers on behalf of the deceased and those bereaved
4. to commend the deceased to the loving mercy of God
5. to assure the bereaved that death is not the end but a new beginning
6. to assure all present that they are loved by God whatever their circumstances
7. to assert the importance of the communion of saints
8. to evangelise
9. to acknowledge and reinforce the authority of the church

Of these I would consider 1-6 are critical and should be our first priority. They are the essence of a balanced service in my opinion. Items 7 and 8 have some use if time is not a consideration but item 9 is a definite 'non-starter' in my book.

Practical issues:

Given that a service may occupy only 20 minutes, it's a big organizational balancing act to produce a relevant, appropriate to need and engaging service.

How these are balanced very much depends on those who will be present and their individual needs.

We also need to be quite pragmatic in that not everything we would like to be included can be included simply because of time constraints. Therefore being clear about the intention of the service will help up cull any unnecessary text from the formal liturgical elements.

It may even be that the formal liturgical elements we keep form less than one third or quarter of the total service, but so long as 1-6 are covered properly then the essentials are covered.

The eulogy, preferably approved and delivered by family (rather than one individual), will be the major component in the service, usually taking up to half the allocated total time.

Other traditional elements, depending on the bereaved's denominational/faith background, may include things like the reception and blessing of the coffin, the words of comfort, and so on, but with just 20 minutes there needs to be a good level of prioritization. Time is at a premium if useful ministry is to be achieved.

These different elements all need to be itemised and timed along with any individual items offered by family or friends.

Movements to and from the lectern also should be timed and a safety buffer included in case anyone breaks down during their offering.

An emotional breakdown during the delivery of the eulogy or any other family/friends item will need your immediate intervention to avoid overrunning the time you have been allocated for your service.

This needs to be made clear to those taking part before the service begins and a good degree of compassion is required in explaining this.

Be aware that the difference between a compassionate intervention and one that is not is timed in milliseconds. Get it wrong and you can screw up the whole service.

You will quickly see that as you plan your service with the family that any time you thought you had is rapidly being eroded.

You should be quite clear that you have been asked as a priest to conduct a Christian service and that the elements you consider as important need to be included without your faith being compromised. If this is not acceptable you should question why you are doing the service.

Given that the eulogy is the major part of the service, you may need to work closely with those preparing it to ensure that the focus remains on the deceased.

Sadly, there is an inevitable tendency for those contributing information for the eulogy to become a focus in themselves if not offered guidance. This can often be avoided by the use of the word 'we' instead of the word 'I'.

Dress according to what is familiar to the bereaved family's expectations if you can. It will help family and friends. Tell them what the options are.

When you deliver the service, do not rush but proceed at a comfortable and relaxed pace. Make sure it has been well rehearsed and the timings of individual components are as reasonably correct as they can be.

Preparation is everything. Your confidence and calmness will spread to others. Just as will your uncertainty.....

You are required by law to remind people to observe social distancing, wear a mask unless medically exempt, etc. Make sure this is timed in.

As celebrant you are not required to wear a face mask. This at least works in your favour so remember to make eye contact with people and look or smile at them where appropriate. It's a simple way of making people feel included.

Pray before your service that God's will is achieved and needs are met, and give God thanks afterwards.

If you have done this and feel disappointed with the outcome, then don't condemn yourself. What God sees and what we see can be two different things. Who knows what he has wrought in our words and actions? We may never know but as an act of faith, we should accept what we have done in faith and with thanksgiving. God will make use of our offerings, and if it is within His will, we will see the fruits of our labours. If not, then it will serve His purpose too and it is not for us to question it.

Remember that there are elementals that would encourage our doubts and destroy our faith. These are not fictions but a spiritual force working against God and against us and will use our own fears and worries against us.

Trust God to work His will through you. Once you have given it up in prayer, give no credence that which comes from elsewhere.

+Ian, OSJ (UK)

UNICE BRIERLEY, OSJ (UK) Editorial Team

Heather Shipman, Lead Local Pastor, Wetherby Methodist Church.

I am sure everyone who knew Unice would agree that whenever any new cause was talked about or initiative suggested she wanted to be at the heart of it. You only have to look at that formidable list of things she was involved in to see the breadth of her interests and her willingness to get involved. In recent years when her health was not so good and when most of us would have retreated to hearth and home Unice wanted to be out and about. It wasn't, as she frequently told me, because she didn't like her own company, but because she was so interested in everything that was going on around her and because it was her contact with the world that kept her going. She wasn't content to be a passive member of a group either but up to the time she died she was the Local Preachers' Secretary, always keen to use her secretarial skills whenever and wherever she could.

When you live to be 95 people will often say that you have had a good innings but behind that comment lies a whole lifetime that has been lived through some of the most traumatic times in our history. Born into a world still struggling with the aftermath of the First World War and then the depression, Unice did not have the easiest of childhoods, nor the education to which today she would have been entitled to.

Money was in short supply and happiness often elusive. As a young woman she met Eric in a world again subject to war and their life together did not develop as planned. But they had a great marriage. They supported one another and complemented one another. 63 years together and 8 apart.

Unice took the lead in bringing up their three daughters, Susan, Janice and Julie and she would always supervise homework etc.

In later life, as adults they came to respect their mother's wisdom, something you are not always aware of as a child. When they went on to marry and have children of their own that wisdom was very much appreciated and when children and grandchildren arrived Unice was delighted and would tell us all about them so that we felt that we knew all of you personally.

The last 8 years of Unice's life without Eric were hard and the last 9 months of her life particularly so. Unable to get out and spend time with people Unice had to work hard not to be overwhelmed by difficulties. Through her deep faith she constantly reminded us that God must have a purpose for her life and that was why she was still with us. Through watching her struggle with her difficulties she taught us all the need to depend on God and talk to him in prayer and the value of determination.

And let's be honest, she could be stubborn too.

It was through her faith that Unice both supported Eric through all his ministry in the Church and the reason that made them both wish to open up their home whenever possible for those who needed it. So they would host house groups, meetings, and take in students from all over the world. Often they would have overseas students stay with them over Christmas. The connection with Privas was very important to Unice as was her opportunity to speak French or German whenever possible.

The North Yorks Moors Railway was another great passion for them both and they had many tales to recount of trips on the train. And of course her love of singing with the Choral Society and membership of the Bowling Club and U3A

Unice was there when people needed her, either to offer practical help as with the Food Bank or in prayer. She was more accomplished than we often had the chance to appreciate through her singing and her watercolour painting. She was adventurous; remember the holiday to South Africa which gave them both some amazing wildlife experiences and the chance for Unice to re-connect with her sister Jean.

Jean was 7 years younger than Unice so they had not had much shared childhood. She valued the river cruises which she took in later years a different daughter each year as it gave her time to spend with each one of you.

Unice has left us with lots of memories but also with a legacy. Her faith and her determination to carry on doing God's work whilst ever she could are an example to us all. Her love for her family and the mutual love and care you share as her offspring, young and old alike are an example to us all. And of course the fact that none of us are ever too old to begin a new adventure. We will miss her greatly but her memory and her legacy will live on. Remind the younger generation of the detail – the places Unice lived, the jobs she did and the challenges she left – not least of which was studying to be a Local Preacher in her 80s. Keep sharing her story with those not yet old enough to understand and those not yet born. You have a heritage to be proud of.

Rest in peace Unice and may God bless all your family and friends. Amen

A Doctor and Nurse have Emotions!

+David, OSJ (Wales)

For over a year now, our doctors, nurses ambulance staff, emergency services personnel and the hospital volunteers and ancillary staff have really been pushed to their limits of physical, emotional and mental capacity.

A sister in one of our biggest hospitals relates the following secret of a nurse's smile - "As a new young nurse I felt so sorry for a patient in pain. I couldn't stop tears coming into my eyes. An older staff nurse saw what was happening and straight away sent me off on a message."

"Later, she took me aside and explained firmly, but kindly, how a patient's last strength, maybe even their recovery, often lies in their nurse's smile. And how a tear in a nurse's eye can undo the good of a whole course of treatment. It's a lesson every nurse has to learn, I was told."

This simple but compassionate act equally applies to doctors too and emergency services personnel even today! I can assure you there are a few of us who have had to quickly take refuge in a changing room or instrument sterilising room and cry for a while. Then wash our faces, and if one is a lady they can put on some fresh make up, straighten their caps, (they used to wear) sadly no caps these days, then step briskly back into the ward.

"We don't fool each other, but we must not give way to our emotions. It never becomes easy, though with the experience of years it does become less hard."

Our nurses and doctors..... how much we all owe them! And what a poor place the world would be without them!

“God be merciful unto us, and bless us, and cause His face to shine upon us”.

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Never Judge a Person By their Living!

The Old Book says: “Judge not, that ye be not judged”.

These words came to mind the other day as a friend made a confession to me. He was talking about a neighbour of his, a very silent man, a widower.

“He died last week,” said my friend, and I was at the funeral. If I tell you what I’d thought of him for many a year it wouldn’t make you think very highly of me. I knew he was in regular employment.

I knew he had somebody to go in and clean for him David. I knew he never went to the cinema, or pubs even clubs to my knowledge. And I’d come to regard him as something of a skinflint who could have afforded to spend more on himself than he did, and wasn’t by any means given to charity.

“As I say, I was at the funeral, and I went back to the house afterwards, and got talking with my neighbour’s sister.

Until then I hadn't known he had a sister.

It seems that her husband has been disabled practically all their married life; and she told me that her brother had supported them both, and that week by week he'd given them almost half his wages!

Do you know David, I've never felt quite so ashamed of myself as I did that day. NEVER."

No better fitting tribute can I add than, "Love one another, as I have loved you".

+David, OSJ (Wales)

-oOo-

ASH WEDNESDAY 17 February 2021

Fr. Ed Elsey, OSJ (Wales)

A small burning device, a crucible, will be set in the middle of the Chancel arch in many faithful churches this year. It would even as you read this, now be smouldering away, awaiting your Palm Crosses, brought from last year as a ritual called 'Imposition of Ashes'. Vergers would not be so happy at the old-time tradition of having given you your share of the ashes you would have been free to throw the dust into the air above your heads, or you could rub them into your hair or the priest/celebrant would simply make the mark of the cross upon your forehead. A ritual. An ancient ritual of the early church.

Of course, no ritual in itself achieves or changes anything in our lives or the world, but often they serve as a reminder - it's why we do practical, visible things for children, for they remember what they have seen more than what they have heard. 'Remembering that we are dust and to dust we will return' - says the priest as he or she marks the ashes on our foreheads in the shape of the traditional cross - 'Repent and believe the gospel'

Two things are valuable. 1. The sense that we are in an edifice where probably thousands have worshipped before us, carrying on the rituals of the early church, in memory/honour of Our Lord, seeking to make our spiritual lives more disciplined and more attuned to His will.

2. That on Ash Wednesday we begin to sit still for a time - with so many churches now being allowed to offer personal prayer, with distancing - to hear the ancient voices tell us we can and ought to be otherwise - better than we are - that we can indeed change if we want to do so.

To put away our arrogance, pride, foolish anger, mistakes and failures: even in our fallenness we are what we are, unique, related to God directly, even at our worst!

Sinners have turned to repentance throughout the ages and in all major religious practices - except perhaps Buddhism where something slightly different happens. The personal discipline of fasting is also observed by Eastern Christians, Muslims, pious Hindus and Buddhists.

Roman Catholics have little of those original disciplines these days, but do observe confession as being purging of the soul and therefore good. Yet so little is demanded of us as Anglicans, so it is sometimes, especially on this Ash Wednesday, good for us to remind ourselves of the sacrifice and repentance we are called upon to make.

In the Old Testament Job and his comforters wept, tore their clothes, threw dust over their heads. Jonah preached to the Ninevehans who would listen and they put on harsh, rough sack-cloth, high-born and lowly alike, and sat in ashes.

The danger with repentance and confession is that if we're not careful we revel in our inadequacies, bathe in our repentance ONLY as a ritual, breast-beating ourselves to lack of self-worth and then forget about it all until next year. Martin Luther learned to keep his repentance in proportion to his Christian activity and challenge of the Church's inflexibility, prejudice and arrogance.

Joel - not so well known as a prophet, who took a different line from the 'party line' of Judaism. "Rend your hearts and not your garments and turn unto the Lord your God: for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness".

Yes, the repentance is important but it is not enough. "Even now, says the Lord [Joel again] return to me with all your heart". Amos told the people, "If you would live, resort to the Lord. Seek good and not evil."

David told us that he cried out to the Lord in his distress and the Lord heard him and came to his aid. James in the NT urges us to draw near to God and He will draw near to you.” Ash Wednesday is the beginning of Lent and Lent is the ancient term for Spring. It is a time of new birth, new life, new growth, new healing, new shape, new commitment and new care. Spring seems to have come early for us this year. It is a chance for us to get in earlier with our repentance. Spend longer in heartfelt private prayer.

The Jews, especially the Pharisees, valued a truly repentant person. Don't think that when they judged our Lord for eating and drinking with publicans and sinners they were against sinners: but their acceptance was conditional upon obvious and stated repentance. The sinner must take the initiative and they wouldn't, mustn't have anything to do with that person until the repentance was obvious and declared.

They did not like the way that in order to bring the sinner to repentance Our Lord demonstrated you have to sit and talk and maybe eat with sinners in order to get alongside them: recognition of one's own sin brings about a compassion for the sins of others. Our own self-justification is 'as filthy rags' in God's sight.

Our task as Christians who declare we are committed is to reach out - that's not sticking up a notice to say the church is open, come if you want to - but reaching out.

Most of us have the chance to do that each day in our workplace and the market place of life.

Or used to before we started working from home!

But do we do it?

I bet my excuse book is bigger than yours for well-thought out reasons for not doing so. Too many personal concerns already. Not enough time. Too busy. Thinking of something else. Not really my business. Did one yesterday. Need a break! Could compromise friendship/work relationship. Might offend. Next time. Maybe. Oh yes, we're not short of excuses and one day the Bible tells us we shall have to account for these failures.

Jesus talks about our search for the Lost. The Lost Sheep, the Lost coin, the Lost [Prodigal] Son. 'Searching by Love' could be the title of another sermon in itself for another occasion. And the rejoicing in Heaven is not over hundreds who repent but over 'one sinner' at a time. Individual rejoicing by an Individual Father. How great is our God. How great thou art.

So this is our conversion: Turning away from our former self and conduct.

Helping to repair the damage caused by our sin
Praying, without ceasing, for the Kingdom of God
Almsgiving generously to bring about that Kingdom
Disciplining our nature and bringing it under subjection
Enjoying and declaring the forgiveness we feel.

Wholeness and Holiness, body, mind and spirit. <> True and complete healing.

The Greek word for repentance is metanoia - it means more than a change of heart and mind and involves turning to God and changing one's ways - a transformation and a new direction.

A new motivation and a new commitment. The kiss of life involves the inbreathing to an apparently un-breathing being - someone who has stopped breathing purposefully. God's divine inbreathing to us enables us not to rely or live on His breath for ever but to breathe ourselves in the way He has given us.

We must develop our lungs for our own breathing.

William Barclay, fascinatingly different, describes repentance as 'afterthought'. A second personal interpretation, with wisdom of hindsight of what God's wants us to be. A change of mind becomes a change of action. Things after the afterthought can - or should - never be the same.

Forgiveness does not abolish the consequences of what we have done, but puts us right with God. With the Holy Spirit we can win battles we never thought we could win - or never thought we would have to fight - and with His power we can resist what seems irresistible.

And here is the Cross which enables all this to happen, and before which we kneel. This is our Pilgrimage. This is our progress. This is our salvation. This is our faith.

Bunyan writes this of his Christian - and with this I finish:

'Up this way therefore did burdened Christian run, but not without great difficulty, because of the load on his back.

He ran thus till he came to a place somehow ascending: and upon that place stood a Cross, and a little below, a sepulchre. So I saw in my dream, that, just as Christian came up with the Cross, his burden loosed from his shoulders, and fell from off his back and began to tumble...till it came to the mouth of the sepulchre, where it fell in, and I saw it no more.

Then was Christian glad and lightsome, and said with a merry heart, "He hath given me rest by His sorrow and life by His death"

Here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy and living sacrifice unto thee.

And although we be unworthy by our manifold sins to offer unto thee any sacrifice, yet we beseech thee to accept this our bounden duty and service, not weighing our merits but pardoning our offences, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

O Saviour of the World who by thy Cross and precious blood hast redeemed us,

Save us and help us we humbly beseech thee O Lord. AMEN

Lent I:

Fr. Ed Elsey, OSJ (Wales)

Genesis 12, 1-4; Romans 4, 1-5, 13-17 John 3, 1-17

It is Lent. Three connected passages are proposed for our thinking on this day and I will attempt, with you, to link them, for our instruction and further thinking.

Our central character is an experienced – privileged, true, but also disciplined teacher of the Jews, **Nicodemus**. But he is deeply troubled.

A true son of Abraham, for whom ‘the Promise’ was assured. Justified by works, which he had been taught was the criterion of his faith. Obedient to the conditions of the Torah and an example to others as a respected authority on issues of faith and daily living. His example would be ‘credited to him as righteousness’ as Paul’s letter to the Romans puts it. Paul too, as Saul, came from this same strict tradition so the juxtaposition of our three lessons is significant.

It helps us to see what full circle happened in Paul’s life, from the persecutor to the interlocutor. His letters to squabbling and wandering Churches is the message we also need. Every part of our Church life and experience has been ‘done’. Paul had been there – and has got something useful to say to us. He’s been there, as they say, and got the tee-shirt!

Nicodemus’s whole career and seniority is at risk if he ‘rocks the boat’ in the Upper Council of the Jews.

Hollywood movies have frequently exploited the idea that he was almost a lone voice, with Joseph of Arimathea, to try to defend the Saviour of the World as he approached the kangaroo trial and as the events of Holy Week moved inevitably towards the destiny and death which led to the salvation by which we are redeemed. Was it, after all, better for one man to die than risk the destruction of the whole Nation?

The Christ, the Messiah, was, as the converted Paul puts it in our second lesson, “delivered over to death for our sins and raised to life for our justification.”

So this experienced and perceptive authority figure comes to Jesus by night, protecting his anonymity with the darkness of the search. Now, face to face with ‘The Master of Masters’, this Nicodemus arrives - interestingly probably not elderly, as usually depicted, which is contested by some authorities, but like Paul, in his prime as a legal wrangler - a searcher for truth would need to be a bit young, a bit headstrong and fiery to be allowed to think the unthinkable - and, like Paul, a similarly suitable candidate for stunning on the Damascus Road as a potential means of promoting the Jewish faith for the Gentiles. That’s us!

He must have struggled to phrase a right question: one that would elicit an answer that could confirm, once and for all for him, Christ’s authority to do what He had been witnessed doing by a whole people - events and miracles which could fulfil their wildest expectations of the coming of a Messiah they had hoped and prayed for – and whose coming they also feared. Their doom!

But notice, in the event, he doesn't ask a question to begin with: he makes a statement, a declaration.

“Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God, for no-one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him”.

Unusual for a trained Rabbi.

If you listen to a debate between orthodox Jews you will hear question answered by question leading to question answered by question – and so on. It is the practice lawyers have used ever since. Get the suspect to condemn himself. Not the first or the last time they tried to get Our Lord to do this: and each time he cleverly asks them a question back.

Our Lord was not into temptation to do magic tricks – a devilish temptation [a problem for some of us with accounts of the miracles] but to demonstrate God on earth in human form – and to be gracious and faithful to the promises of the past – promises to which Nicodemus had, himself, looked forward.

As we have found with human challenges of faith arising from 9/11, from the Tsunami and from Iraq and Afghanistan, racial persecution and political intrigues, there are no real answers. The Covid virus a case in point as retrospective investigation now takes place and recriminations abound. There are only, ever, more questions. A good teacher seeks to elicit answers from his students, not tell them what they should think.

David, the king, too, as we are reminded in our Romans passage, sees a blessedness from God “for the man whose sin is not counted against him”. Unlike us, whose sins ARE counted against us, and then forgiven, through grace, in their entirety, upon our repentance for them. And the heirs of Abraham, the heirs of David, the heirs of Christ which make up their ancestral inheritance is our inheritance too.

It only struck me as I prepared for this sermon, that, according to the gospel records, Jesus did only ONE miracle of each sort – though sometimes with several persons at a time. You realise why?

The symbolic ‘types’ of miracle were the ones to be documented: to provide the evidences someone like Nicodemus would be looking for; not statistics or number-crunching, but symbols, demonstrations, of the intervention of Divine power in the lives of ordinary people, to assure them of the immense power of their God and to create impact of what was possible through trust in Him. His people, their God! Apparent miracles in the Old Testament littered the stories they had learned from childhood.

But the effect of the miracles is transient. The hungry man is fed, but hungers again. The sick man is healed, but he will still die, eventually. The victim of oppression is delivered, but he becomes ‘slave’ of other ‘principalities and powers’. They are signs pointing to a gift that is never exhausted, a satisfaction that never passes!

This is, surely, the Gift of the Son of Man! But He, the Son of Man, is also the Seal of the Spirit, the Father abiding in the Son. If we see ONLY the visible effect and fail to see the sign, our life will be an endless 'rat-race' in pursuit of satisfactions which never endure. That's why in tsunami type situations of life – and there are more and more it seems, fire, flood, tempest, pandemic, destruction – it is mankind who has been given the means to send help – and mankind whose bureaucracy also prevents the effective distribution of fairness to that same mankind. Christ, as God, provides a sense of timing for all our work and worship for Him. Seems a shame we so rarely get the timing of the world right!

We should never fall into the trap of imagining that the salvation of the world is left entirely up to us. Let's not be so arrogant. We are chipping away gradually at the evils of the world, drawing mankind – not shoving it – towards God., with the forces of evil – the axis of evil as it has now been termed – endlessly trying to hold us back. Look at Darfur and Congo Myanmar and Sudan. Yet we still believe that God IS in control and will bring a purpose to all our efforts for Him. He will also, I believe, control the things we get wrong and prevent them from doing too much damage to His Divine Plan. That is not to say we do not need to be careful in what we say and do; yet more often it is in our actions, not our words, that Christ is seen and known.

Could it be true that we are often so busy 'doing' that we fail to stand back and observe what others are doing: too busy trying to get in first, that we fail to see the opportunity another person needs, deserves, can fulfil better than we can; yes go on, let's say it, someone nearer to God than, regrettably, we may be?

It was Christ's mighty works – the deeds Nicodemus refers to - which needed to be interpreted by his disciples for the rest of time – our time too. Our works are not anything if not HIS works.

His works remain but can only be recognised by some of the world if we are to shew them forth and turn them into topical preaching and teaching, often as we walk rather than when we talk.

Again, at this scrutinizing time of Lent, we have to ask if the Church, and we its members, are shewing forth to the world the works of Christ, or trying to claim them for our own, as the Jews had traditionally thought themselves doing for God.

For my personal Lenten study this year I am reading *The Desert* by a former Dean of St Paul's Cathedral, Dr John Moses. He traces the passage of Christian 'greats' out of the town and into the Desert, where survival is tough, self-scrutiny relentless, painful; resources stretched to the limits of human endurance. He uses extracts from great writers and thinkers, the new power experienced upon the return to civilization.

He writes:

“The renewal of the Church requires a continuing exploration of its traditions of faith and prayer in the context of an ever-changing world and its ever-changing people, remembering that God is constant and unchanging 'Lent is the Spring-time of the Church's year. The season of renewal’”.

An extract from the Jerusalem Community Rule of Life has also helped my thinking this year immensely and I commend it to you for Lent:

"In the crucible of silence you will learn holiness; silence is the door to humility, contemplation and mercy. By leading you through self-forgetfulness silence will allow you to discover God, and in the heart of the silence you will rediscover the world by God's light".

During lockdown I have appreciated much silence and it has become, for me, profound and of vital importance to stay on top of the sadnesses during last year.

Back to Abraham for a moment. In Abram's day, of course, human sacrifice was well known and regularly practised. Abraham was one of the first to understand that our God did not desire it of his faithful people. Mind you, by starting the bloody tradition of sacrificing animals instead he had obviously only understood part of the Divine intention.

I wonder what Abraham's reaction would have been had he stood by the Cross on Good Friday some 3000 years later. They're still sacrificing men! And women. And children. After all they've learned and the suffering they've known!! And even more so, if he returned to his native Middle East and saw the slaughter there today!

Do not imagine that because this was happening then and not now it was in any way significantly different for Abra'am, coming so far with God, Yahweh, and having struggled to achieve so much.

Our response is still our greatest challenge.

The other Moses, not the former Dean of St Paul's, lifts up a serpent in the wilderness for his dying people. You are familiar with the sign which became the 'codassuria' – the Hippocratic oath symbol of the snake[s] on a pole, the symbol of healing and medicine. All who look will be saved. The Cross is our saving grace. Through it we are healed, renewed, ransomed, forgiven - and raised up to new life. Healing, we might deduce, is part of the journey of a faithful people.

If we do not return from the Cross strengthened & newly equipped for new challenges and calls to Christian service, then we may have wasted our concentration on Christ's Passion yet again this year. A deeper worship and personal commitment, 'in Spirit and in Truth' is required from us.

Life is never going to get easier. Not for any of us. That is contradiction in terms.

Life progresses even if we consider it frail progress: two steps forward - several back. But life goes on. We grow, or should do - need to! Important, therefore, to remember that He died for YOU and ME: 'that we might live'. In Him, through Him, for Him.

There are no really valid excuses for any of us for the human situation in which we find ourselves. Christ is here for us, however far we have strayed. "You met us in your love and brought us home", says my most favourite Eucharistic prayer.

We witness the same respect Christ gives to Nicodemus

- to the Samaritan woman,
- to the woman taken in adultery
- to Zacchaeus
- to the cured lepers
- to the woman touching the hem of his garment
- to the dying thief
- yes, even to Pontius Pilate and to the Sanhedrin

In our world, especially post '9/11', and doesn't that terrible event now seem so far in the past. We are yet again reassured that there is no human situation nor tragedy where Christ has nothing to say. He has been to the depths in order to raise us to the heights. A song by David Haas, 'YOU ARE MINE' was sung at various memorial services in New York following '9/11'. It expresses Christ's all-surrounding love and reassurance. I sent to New York at the time of that great tragedy, for the words. As appropriate for our New Year of 2021, surely....

I will come to you in the silence; I will lift you from all your fear.
 You will hear my voice, I have claimed you as my choice;
 be still and know I am here.

I am hope for all who are hopeless; I am eyes for all who long to see.
 In the shadows of the night I will be your light - come and rest in me.
 I am strength for all the despairing; healing for the ones who dwell in shame.
 All the blind will see, the lame will all run free; and all will know my Name.
 I am the Word that leads to freedom; I am the peace the world cannot give.

I will call your name, embracing all your pain;
Stand up now, walk and live!
Do not be afraid, I am with you; I have called you each by name.
Come and follow me, I will bring you home to me;
I love you and you are mine.

There is so much more to squeeze out of the links between the passages set for today and Victorian preachers would do so, til late tonight. But we need to stop here. It's a suitable point.

As you prepare for Holy Week and for remembering the means of our salvation, make fullest use of the silences you can spare to let God speak to you.

Not always easy in a busy world, but for many of us here much more possible.

Make time for silence, especially now in Lenten discipline, as we await again the celebration of the final sacrifice of the Son of Our God. And His Glorious Resurrection, which is ours, and with Abraham, Nicodemus, Paul - is our Hope and our Call

May it be so, for His Name's sake. AMEN.

© Fr Ed Elsey

Are we at War with God?

+David, OSJ (Wales)

War occurs when two or more nations are at odds and neither party will compromise. Generally, no nation is inclined to give in while it is strong and has high morale. Only when war has taken its toll and one side cannot see any hope of victory, will it then consider surrender.

Not wishing to be political, sadly a similar situation has developed and is now occurring in the USA at this present moment.

Today, is the inauguration day for the new President of the United States.

I pray this ceremony takes place with no serious disruptions nor violence, and that all parties can see a way of coming together in unity, setting aside political differences to bringing peace and security to all people in the USA.

One of the hardest things about Christian living is to accept God's plan instead of our own.

Until we do, we are at war with God, which won't be resolved until someone surrenders. We Christians can be stubborn, but we must remember that God is immutable.

He can never change.

He doesn't need to – He is perfect and we are not!

Even so, we often still feel we know what is best for ourselves and expect God to compromise His plans and bless ours.

But God will never compromise His perfect position – we must compromise ours.

God is patient.

He allows adversities in life (often self-induced) to shoot down our self-dependence and blast away our arrogance. Eventually, when our failed solutions have taken their toll, we will consider surrender and reluctantly come to God with our conditions. However, even surrender cannot be on our terms – it must be on God's terms and must be unconditional.

Only then can God finally work through us and His wonderful plan will be revealed to the eternal glory of Himself and OUR everlasting delight and happiness.

Then we can say, 'I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.' Galatians 2:20.

With all Blessings, for you and all those whom you love,

+David.

Emergency Measures, OSJ (UK):

It has been decided that given the situation we find ourselves in currently that two new temporary measures have been implemented for **all** members of OSJ (UK), whether in the Ministry Team or the Ministry Support Team.

Any member of OSJ (UK) may self-administer communion using the form suggested, and that includes to their families and all who are in need if they cannot receive communion from a priest or Eucharistic Minister through unavailability.

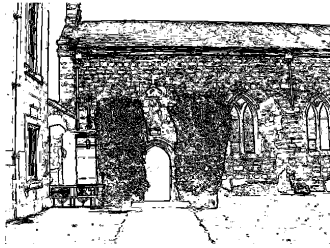
The same applies to the giving of last rites (viaticum).

Forms of approved service are available with instructions to download using the two links below:

1. [Self-administered Communion](#)
2. [Last Rites \(Emergency Measures\)](#)

Also to be noted, services at St Leonard's have been temporarily suspended until further notice. This is particularly regretted.

+Ian, Executive Bishop, OSJ (UK)



**St Leonard's Chapel,
Hazlewood Castle, Yorkshire,
LS24 9NJ
OSJ Services, 2021.**



Unless otherwise stated:

Services take place on the FIRST and THIRD Sundays of each month at 6.00 p.m.

Services take the form of a short and very gentle communion service, lasting 20-30 minutes.

Covid-19 precautions in place: St Leonard's will remain closed until further notice.

3rd January, 2021

7th February, 2021

7th March, 2021

4th April, 2021

2nd May, 2021

6th June, 2021

4th July, 2021

1st August, 2021

5th September, 2021

3rd October, 2021

7th November, 2021

5th December, 2021

17th January, 2021

21st February, 2021

21st March, 2021

18th April, 2021

16th May, 2021

20th June, 2021

18th July, 2021

15th August, 2021

19th September, 2021

17th October, 2021

21st November, 2021

19th December, 2021

We use a non-alcoholic wine so children may take part too.

There is no requirement to be baptised or confirmed, only to treat with due respect.

All are very welcome and all may receive regardless of tradition or denominational background.

Additional Services:

Remembrance Sunday: 7th November 10.35 a.m.

Midnight Mass: 24th December 11.20 p.m.