

The Order of St James (UK) Newsletter

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ALL IN AN APRIL EVENING:

Fr. Ed Elsey OSJ (Wales)

A post Easter Communion discourse.

1 Peter 1 3-9 SEEING IS NOT NECESSARILY BELIEVING John 20 19-29

“Abba, Abba, lift me up, Abba” insisted the small boy to his father by the Western, the Wailing Wall as I stood and watched a Bar Mitzvah taking place. All Israeli children call their father by the affectionate title Abba and it takes one back to the stories of our Lord, calling His own Father, although Almighty God himself, Abba, Daddy.

Lift me up, Abba, worried the boy, I want to be able to see.

On my twenty-first visit to what we pleasingly call The Holy Land, this was the first I was on my own, without leading a group - adults with Raymond Cook Holy Land Tours and my own study pupils from Colston’s School where I was Chaplain and teaching RS. I enjoyed spending hours sitting, meditating, worshipping, eating, walking in that beautiful SAFE city. I have concentrated as my theme the idea that SEEING IS NOT BELIEVING. Not necessarily, though can be.

Dispute over ownership of places and hills in that area is controversial in many instances, though small by comparison with the argument over whether this or that site was the 'authentic' place where our Lord, walked, taught, worked, healed and challenged the local authorities. Jerusalem refers to what Manchester or London would parallel: 'Greater Jerusalem'. East Jerusalem still seen by Arab descendants as their rightfully owned sector of a divided city. Battles over larger candles and greater lights, bigger stones and more striking appearances have produced religious tensions and rows in this mighty melting pot of faith. Rights to possess relics & rituals often cause more dishonourable conflict.

Sometimes it is powerful, I have found, to get away from the inevitable churches, tourist shops, bustling streets and pestering traders is beneficial: not to look for the evidence but to feel the power. Less debate, more peace. Of course the evidence is important in a historical context.

I challenged my brain by reading out there Barbara Thiering's curious theological masterpiece: 'Jesus the Man', where this quite creditable Australian theologian and scholar of the Dead Sea Scrolls alleges that the evidence leads her to believe that all the events of the Passion, Crucifixion, Resurrection and establishment of the early Christian Church took place at Qumran in the strictly orthodox Essene Community where dozens of scrolls were later found and translated: that Our Lord did survive the Crucifixion, married Mary of Magdala and had several sons in the order of David rather than Melchizedek to continue the priestly line which was his by right.

The more lately disclosed Gospels of Philip and Thomas give chapter & verse for an amazing set of connections to our modern theology and its international development. John Dominic Crossan's more fascinating study: Jesus, a Revolutionary Biography, is somewhat more challenging and certainly less shocking.

Another tome I waded through was the fascinating study of modern Judaism by Rabbi Julia Neuberger: 'On Being a Jew', which I commend to you for intelligent reading and understanding of much vital tradition which helps us to understand the tensions of our more modern history and link with our Lord's background.

Lesslie Newbigin's 'The Light has Come' restores the spirituality to all this theology and Roman Catholic theologian Raymond Brown's 'Introduction to New Testament Christology' knocks Barbara Theiring firmly into touch.

Such is the indulgence of retired bachelor life, cheap flights & accommodation and ten days in Jerusalem! I have my favourite hidden places to stay and have built up good contacts all around.

Back to today, where we are against the backdrop of Easter and Resurrection and confused disciples trying to make sense of it all and adjust to the most radical change they had never imagined. Can you make sense of it all: did Easter make the earth move for you this year? Are you rejoicing or sad? Thine be the Glory, endless the victory, Risen Conquering Son.

So how do we acquire this inner light of Faith which enables us to grasp truth without necessarily seeing all through evidence; and to grasp power without necessarily feeling the pain He felt for us?

Former Dean of St Paul's, the famous Dean Inge said: If we cannot find God, it is perhaps because He is at home while we are abroad; He is ready for us, while we are too busy to attend to Him. Have we succeeded in finding God in the world? Then let us try to find the world in God. [No spiritual act is complete till it has been first prayed and then done.]

Did you see the comet? Lovely wasn't it. And eclipses of the Moon.

Even a fabulous night sky - in Devon, with minimal council lighting I get magnificent 'eye-candy' of the Universe. Nor on the Mount of Olives. To spend a night out there on the top of the ridge overlooking the Holy City, the spectrum of starry light is above that confused by City illuminations. The comet was beautifully visible my last time out there, not regrettably over Bethlehem this time, though not far away - was indeed thought provoking, I can tell you. But the pure light of the early morning Easter sunrise and the open light of the empty tomb is the light of grace: A triple star shines ever above us, with light blended yet distinct. It shines above us and with us and should shine in us too. The inner light is the light of Faith and the outer light is the light of Grace: these two are the human and the Divine of the same illumination: the illumination of God himself to our world and in our world.

Let's turn a moment to our Epistle reading: 1 Peter 1 and note from verse 1 my later connection with 'all the kingdoms of the world'. God's elect are addressed, and then the curious phrase 'strangers in the world.' That's us! Isn't it? Who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by His blood. Grace and peace be yours IN ABUNDANCE.

Paul confesses that 'the life I know is not my life, but the life which Christ lives in me.'

The secret, he says, is to have been crucified with Christ, in fellowship with his saints and martyrs, dying to self and rising to new life in Him. The sharing of Christ's suffering follows acceptance of his Resurrection power. We can never enter into His redemptive purpose until we have received his quickening spirit. But the promise in 1 Peter 1 8 is that suffering is not worth measuring alongside future hope - a hope Christ never lost and never doubted. Peter tells us: 'it gives you a share in Christ's sufferings and that is cause for joy; when His glory is revealed, your joy will be triumphant.'

Crucifixion and dishonour were compatible: Resurrection and Power are inseparable.

Your faith, says Peter, which on its own PERISHES, by His Power and Risen life, is PROVED.

It occurred to me that the little boy wanted to be lifted up by his father not so that he could necessarily see more but just in case he missed something. Even if you weren't that small as a child, but more memorable if you were, can you remember the frustration of feeling left out of things? It was that feeling of being disadvantaged by being small and wanting to be equal with his father in vision and opportunity. He wouldn't have seen any more but did see it with a different perspective.

Could you imagine a father replying: no I won't lift you up, son but I'll tell you what I can see myself?! Not quite the same. Abba, I want to see.

I was talking to a trainee Rabbi during the week: one I encountered whilst walking near Judas's Aceldama Field beyond David's city of Ophel. We drew alongside and walked and talked: a lovely feature of spare time in the Holy Land. Without a tour group in tow. Everyone has a story or an extra nugget of information. He asked me if I'd noticed that as soon as people got to the highest viewpoint, the first thing they do is look DOWN, not UP, or across. Why go up to the top if you want to look down? He informed me that tradition held that the power offered to Christ by the devil of ownership or responsibility [choice of translation] for 'all the Kingdoms of the world' was that the limits of that Kingdom were marked by the high mountains not by the valleys. It was unusual to have a boundary in a valley: it usually ascended the opposite hill and then could be defended, identified and held. An interesting concept if you now read the story of the Temptations again. I digress. I could go on - and my friends would say I frequently do!

My somewhat tenuous link with the example of the small boy was to suggest that if we beg, pray, ask, our Abba to lift us up, we not only have opportunity to see more, we see more, we appreciate more and we search for more. Lift me up, Abba. O, lift us up, great Lord of the Universe, our Abba Father, that as we span the heavens for your immensity, scan the earth for your generosity, and search our souls for your intensity, we may truly find you as we seek you, and truly worship you as we understand you.

You know maybe that the Gospel of John really ended at the end of Chapter 20. Chapter 21 was added afterwards, some time afterwards, it is alleged. This last chapter, part of which we read is the worst example of disconnected English and diffuse ideas in the New Testament. It is panicky, jumpy, random, leaps from idea to idea, goes into no real detail. It is instead a chapter of pure amazement, startlement, joy, fulfilment, trying to conclude something which is only just beginning and only glimpsing through brief appearances a revelation of the Divine Presence, Risen from the Dead. No-one experiencing a miracle stops to write it down: recollections of the details of restoration are dimmed by the effect of the finished article.

We don't have in this chapter reactions to the linen cloths lying: we simply have 'He [Peter] saw and believed'

We don't have Mary of Migdal's reaction to her own distress at finding her Lord gone: we only have her outburst of praise: 'My Lord and my God.'

We don't have any detail of Christ's return to the Father, of which he speaks in verse 17: we just have 'Go and tell my brothers'...and presumably sisters too! And so on.

Trace it through for yourself as your 'homework':

What questions do you want to ask? What extra detail do you need to know?

Why? What can't you see?

Those fascinating novels connected with the Bible story we read in our youth, some of us: *The Robe*, *Ben Hur*, and a radio series whose title I cannot remember - Dorothy L Sayers, was it - but which sought to expand the narrative to give ideas of missing detail in one way did us a service in helping us understand: in other ways they did a great disservice, as they took away this abandoned spontaneous style of fragmented mystery and sheer delight at seeing the Master in full resurrection glory.

The Lutheran Pastor at the Augusta Victoria Sunrise service I attended: 5am on the Mount of Olives - wonderful - posed the question: why is it that for three months the Western world talks of Christmas - via commercialism usually - but Easter, which is the greater story, takes but a few days? [apart from shops full of eggs, of course, which was a pagan fertility ritual anyway!]

And the Thomas story, expanded and enlarged in the gospel attributed to him, here has the simplicity of a challenge to doubt: Because you have seen me, you have believed: blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

SEEING IS NOT BELIEVING. You do not have to see to believe. Don't lift me up, Abba, or 'I want to get down, Abba. I've seen enough, Abba. I don't want to look, Abba. I don't like what I see, Abba.

Tell me, Abba, and I will believe. My Lord and My God!

George Appleton, who was himself for a while back Bishop of Jerusalem, writes in his meditative book, 'Journey for a Soul':

Faith is not knowledge or certainty. It is often contrasted with reason, but the true contrast is with the evidence of the senses. Faith is a kind of spiritual sight, an in-seeing into realities. It always wants to get beyond the superficial surface of things, into the spiritual behind the material. It wants to go beyond the outside symptoms into the causes of them. It consists of following knowledge and reason as far as they will take us, and beyond again, in the same upward direction. There is a risk about faith, which can only be tested by taking the leap when the sure path comes to an end.

Isn't it in the book of Hebrews we have: Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

But whilst seeing is not believing, believing should for us be seeing. It is our Christian responsibility, challenge and command to seek Him more, love Him more, tell of Him more, grow to Him more. If we do not do this every day of our life and every hour of our prayer, we fail him. We become faithless, not believing.

I heard two parents of English children trying to explain to their 10 or 12 year old offspring what the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was all about and why there was a tomb in it. Eavesdropping with a tour group waiting for you, is one of the pleasures of leisure time in Jerusalem and is a joy. Apart from the unprofitability of recounting the story to you, you would not have believed the story you heard. It bore scant resemblance to the one we have lived with in our investigative Faith.

We have a generation in this country, I suspect, who have come through 20 years or so of life without the Gospel and all they have to hang onto is a scrappy account which, apart from being inaccurate, is hopeless, purposeless, loveless and careless.

Help them to know through the work of your church and your own witness the love of a Saviour who could go to a Cross for your sin and shame and rise triumphant to new life for you and for me and for the world. Pray for those who deal with the young: parents, teachers in school and church, Chaplains, missionaries: pray earnestly for them and for their protection as they seek to make Him known.

Now, I must ask you: do you want to be lifted up by your Abba, or put down again?

And the result of your faith: here it is in I Peter 1, 7 Your faith may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see Him now, you believe in Him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

May we experience all that joy and fulfilment of our Risen Saviour, Our Lord Jesus Christ as we gather at His command and invitation around His table - with frequency - and experience His joy as He begs us to 'Do This in Remembrance of Me'.

For His Name's sake. Amen.

UPDATING CONCEPTS OF SIN FOR TODAY'S PEOPLE Fr. Ed Elsey OSJ (Wales)

“Let him who is without sin, cast the first stone” must have stunned Our Lord's listeners as they sought to commit a miserable sinner to a fatal stoning.

The law allows it and permits it.

Like Shylock insisting upon his bond of a pound of Antonio's flesh, as the law stated and allowed. The quality of mercy not being strained, as he was advised to perceive, by the young 'poseur lawyer', Portia, did not convince him and the miserable man went on to lose everything by rejection of everyone around him, in Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice story.

The last episode last month of Russell T Davies's stark record of the tragedy of the AIDS epidemic in his serial: "It's a Sin" brought me and many of my friends to a tearful recollection of those challenging years of our experimenting with gender orientation in earlier life and the almost daily news of the painful and unassailable death of friends we had been intimate with.

"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." — Edmund Burke

News of horrific rounding up of protestors and protagonists of change in countries where democracy is being challenged, and where corruption is rife and domination cruel: disappearance without trace of those who challenge those who have taken charge, unelected and appointed. Tut-tutting at news bulletins before moving on to the next chore of the day, or for us at the moment, another dullish day of lockdown, preventing us from getting out and about and helping personally with the daily issues and problems others suffer, and with which we feel we are well able to assist, advice, counsel and soothe. But so far away, these international problems. What can I do in such situations?

Pastor Niemoller, Nazi victim, expressed the outcome of our doing nothing.

First they came for the Communists

And I did not speak out

Because I was not a Communist

*Then they came for the Socialists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Socialist
Then they came for the trade unionists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a trade unionist
Then they came for the Jews
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Jew
Then they came for me
And there was no one left
To speak out for me.*

It is 'The sin of omission'. If an omission happens deliberately and freely, it is considered a sin. ... A person may be guilty of a sin of omission if he fails to do something which he is able to do and which he ought to do because he has put himself into a state or situation whereby he is unable to complete the action. In Catholic teaching, an omission is a failure to do something one can and ought to do. If an omission happens deliberately and freely, it is considered a sin.

More obvious, overt, sinful acts. Lying, idolatry, swearing, murder, etc. are examples of sins of commission. A sin of omission is a sin committed because ...

What does the Bible say about sins of omission? - James 4:17 declares, "Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.

Sins of commission are those sinful actions that are proactively done. Lying or stealing are examples of sins of commission.

Spurgeon, the renowned Baptist preacher and Bible commentator, said:

“Here be it observed at the outset, that in a certain sense, all offences against the law of God come under the head of sins of omission, Put simply, a sin of omission is any lack of conformity to God's law, or failing to do what God commands, which is as grievous as actively transgressing what He knows to be wrong in the eyes of God's people and their national laws.”

David, King and sinner, in Psalm 51 puts it thus:

To the chief Musician. Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

1 Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions.

2 Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

3 For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me.

4 Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest.

5 Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.

6 Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom.

7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Types of sin described in the Bible and emphasized by Paul for us all are traditionally:

Mortal sin, Sloth, Gluttony, Greed, Pride and Original sin - part of human nature, which we inherit.

“Let him who has ears to hear, listen” said the man from Galilee.

But what were we listening to?

The sins of the world, taken away by that same Godhead Man, on the Cross, did not resolve or dispense with individual sin in the eyes of a developing Pauline church and cash poured into the coffers of the established ‘faith industry’ from those who felt the need to expiate and confess, be shriven and be absolved - job done!

With all that Damoclean heaviness hovering dangerously above our heads, we might well ask: who then shall/can be saved?

The man of great wealth and property who appealed for a straight answer from The Lord, went away sorrowful, we read. Jesus then told him he would have to sell all that he had and give it to the poor. He said, “For it is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God”. (Luke 18:25). It was to this statement that the question was posed, “Who then can be saved?” (Luke 18:26).

John Henry Jowett wrote:

"I acknowledge my transgressions; and my sin is ever before me." --Ps li. 1-12. Sin that is unconfessed shuts out the energies of grace. Confession makes the soul receptive of the bountiful waters of life. We open the door to God as soon as we name our sin. Guilt that is penitently confessed is already in the "consuming fire" of God's love. When I "acknowledge my sin" I begin to enter into the knowledge of "pardon, joy, and peace." But if I hide my sin I also hide myself from "the unsearchable riches of Christ." "If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

"I must then make confession of sin in my daily exercises in the presence of the Lord. I am taking the way to recovered victory when I tell the Lord the story of my defeat. Satan strengthens his awful chains when he can induce me to keep silence concerning my sin. All his plans are thrown into confusion as soon as I "pour out my soul before the Lord." When I fall let me not add to my guilt the further sin of secrecy.

Unconfessed sin breeds in its lurking-place and multiplies its hateful offspring. The soul that makes confession is washed through and through, and the seeds of iniquity are driven out of my soul."

The practice of confession and absolution is no longer considered to be an essential precursor of receiving the Mass though many of 'the old school' still find a need to deploy the services of a priest for shriving and contrition.

Apparently good for the soul, it is the inner motivating of The Holy Spirit in the heart of man that can produce the true sense of being forgiven. Man is born to sin as the sparks fly upwards, said the poet king David - and from his history we certainly can 'tut-tut' at knowledge and realisation of the temptation of authority and power, in those days, as in ours.

'It ain't what you do but the way that you do it', spouted the old song. Or if you like, from another source, fifty years ago, that was 'The way we were' as distinct from today's: 'The way we are'.

Not the way to fill your church pews each Sunday by telling people how bad they have been! Accentuate the positive! Then enjoy coffee and biscuits and talk about the weather and gossip about mutual friends.

Cynical? Surely yes, but a chance post-lockdown for something a bit different. Back to basics and sound teaching from the direct analogies and teaching of Scripture., applied to us in 'our day'.

Hilary Brand, who did considerable research into film and tv representations of sin, wrote:

Our culture is smudged over with half-legible religious scribbling. The vocabulary that is used to describe religious emotions hasn't gone away, or sunk into an obscurity from which you could carefully reintroduce it, giving a little explanation as each unfamiliar new/old term emerged.

Instead it's still in circulation, but repurposed, with new meanings generated by new usages; meanings that make people think they know what believers are talking about when they really, really don't.

Nearly fifty years on, issues of sexuality are still proving to be a major field of conflict, at least within the Church. It remains to be seen, however, whether our preoccupation with this arena leads to the 'refinement of the consciousness of fault' that Ricoeur describes. Obsolete taboo, unnatural disapproval.

Brought up in a Baptist chapel environ, every sermon - and always a simplified children's talk, seemed obsessed with sin. Customarily a 'testimony' from someone the Lord had saved from a life of crime, drugs and sexual exploitation - made our faithful child lives seem very dull and our lifelong chapelled parents even duller. There was an excitement and daring in these 'saved souls' and their stories.

Oh yes, we knew very well what we should do and what was acceptable, never bringing shame on our parents or on our chapel. If we didn't sin in the eye of society and the local authorities, could we still be 'saved and redeemed' like the reformed 'villains' who told us their stories, we wondered.

The underlying morality of sex had, of course, begun to shift very much earlier than the 'swinging 60s'. Writing in the 1970s, the psychiatrist Karl Menninger asked the same question as this paper in his book *Whatever Became of Sin?*

He came up with a surprising answer.

It was all down to masturbation: the amazing circumstance is that some time after the turn of the present century, this ancient taboo, for the violation of which millions had been punished, threatened, condemned, intimidated and made hypocritical and cynical – a taboo thousands of years old – with attendant hinted threats of blindness in later life - seem suddenly, in the sixties, to have vanished almost overnight! It is not difficult to see why ALL sin other than ‘crime’ seemed to many to have disappeared along with this one.

And the absence of the word and the concept of sin from [most of] today’s sermons is fairly clear to see. In training as a Lay Reader I was warned against delving into the realms of sin or implied accusation to my appointed - long-suffering - Bristol congregation - one might easily think it was no longer an issue. The social gospel and food banks and care for our poor is the concentration of Bishops and senior priests, though I guess they have many old sermons from earlier ministry which were very different subject choices.

The old hymn: Yield not to temptation, for yielding is sin implied that any sin of ours could lead another into erudition and therefore guilt would attend us until the final judgment - only relieved and absolved by confession, apology, restitution and new resolve. Opposed to it was Oscar Wilde’s famous quote that he could resist everything except temptation. And you know what society did to him!

Thus in this article I have sought to outline a changing cultural viewpoint.

The activities are still prevalent in all parts of our society: yet the modern view of life, acceptance of people's infidelity and lack of compassion, sense of self-righteousness if we consider ourselves not so bad, or 'everybody does it so it must be okay', has given a softer condemnation and feeling that the law will sort out for us all that is not acceptable; that God doesn't really exist or punish - use of His Name, once an awful indictment of the English language, no longer a bad thing.

Swearing is good for the soul, we read, instead of confession - now there's a turnaround. Acceptance by society in general has produced a more comfortable feeling of 'just being human' and makes us feel forgiven.

No more a need for anxiety and brow beating, personal hair shirt and flagellation - just praising God for all the benefits and joys He has afforded us in this life and as long as nobody is harmed or disadvantaged by anything we do, then we 'haven't done so badly after all'.

And as soon as lockdown is lifted, let's all go out and do it all again! Oh surely in our hours of penitence and personal Lenten study, a different and newly-intentioned resolve.

So I have to end, as a priest in post-Lenten, new Resurrection year, with Michael Saward's:

We are ashamed, O God, for our carelessness in worship, for wandering mind and thoughtless prayer.

We are ashamed that words of praise come so swiftly to our lips but so slowly to our hearts.

We are ashamed that we hear the name of Jesus but act as if he were a stranger.

Forgive us for our jealousies in the church, and for the irritations which so easily win the day. Forgive us for the times when we can see plainly what needs to be done, and complain that others do not do it.

Give us, O Lord, a vision of our church set as it is among people who do not know Christ as Lord, and give to us a deepened faith, an understanding love, a ready wit and the Holy Spirit's uncommon sense. So may we live, and so preach, that our neighbours may want to know the source of the joy we shall have, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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

Fr Ed Elsey

The post-pandemic death of 'the church' community?

The pandemic has meant that the building based church has had to adapt to working in new ways. With the building closed, technology has come to the aid of many clerics, anxious to remind their congregations that they are not forgotten and that their priest and church still has a major part to play in their lives.

Doing services on line has had mixed success. Some attempts have been amusing and I saw one priest set his vestments alight very briefly, a moment now indelibly and embarrassingly enshrined for posterity as it went out 'live'. Whilst many attempts were worthy efforts, others were less engaging, unenthusiastic and uninspiring, and an obvious explanation of why people stayed away from church, or came for a while and then departed for good.

At least these clerics, priests, pastors and ministers tried, even if it quite didn't work. It was better than doing nothing and I commend them for their efforts.

Communion without a congregation was also received with mixed success. The whole point of communion is actively being able to participate. It unfortunately reminded me somewhat of showing a TV programme about food to starving people. It may have been well intended but the hunger yet remained afterwards.

Communion in particular was a rod of 'the church's' own making. It has ritualised it and wrapped it in so much protective canon that it no longer belongs to the community but to 'the church' (the organization). That was a tolerable situation until 'the churches' closed and people were then denied all access to communion.

So it went 'on line', the priest receiving on behalf of the community.

I think of going to a restaurant, looking at the menu, appreciating and discussing each item but never tasting, then leaving physically empty after paying the bill.

Some people can do this spiritually exercise and be fully satisfied, but many can't.

Yes, you can partake spiritually rather than physically and you can be a witness, one of the great numbers making up the communion of saints, celebrating the mysteries of the birth, death, resurrection and saving work of Christ through the distant televisual and unreachable elements of bread and wine.

But for many, they were left with that feeling something was still missing.....

It was the physical act of sharing and actually handling the bread and the wine with a common purpose and intent which matters for many, if not most, people.

And although it remains a shared meal of fellowship which has its roots in the last supper, it importantly is still a meal shared with and in the company of friends.

There is no replacement for the real deal, genuine face to face fellowship in this shared act of faith and celebration. Some say without it, it is an invalid ritual of extreme selfishness. Food (and wine) for thought perhaps.

Even our own rebellious response of approving Self-Administered Communion without the need for a priest being present couldn't get round that one unless it was conducted as a family act. 'Communion' is not by nature an isolationist act.

Bible studies and prayer meetings similarly suffered. Once the technology was mastered, 'zoom' meeting proliferated. The sad fact was these too were no match for face to face meetings where the small nuances of voice tone, body language and silence, could be recognised, acknowledged and responded to.

These attempts were just what they were, temporary measures, and only that, not permanent replacements. The trouble is we have got used to them now.

My sincere hope is that when things eventually 'get back to normal', streamed services, 'zoom' meetings, etc., take a secondary place in the new world order. They have served their purpose in our hours of need but they are limited in what they can achieve in reality.

It is a fact of life that temporary measures soon become permanent if one doesn't keep an eye on things. This is especially true where cost savings come in to play – it is cheaper to do things 'on line' than keep a building open, heated, maintained and staffed. For those of you in the Church of England, you might want to keep an eye out for church closures, staff reductions and 'on line initiatives'.

Whilst some may see that as a good thing, the 'on line church' has revealed something quite disturbing. It has brought forward a small minority of self-appointed 'leaders' and 'prophets' operating from their own home studios, their positions often unassailable and dangerously without any form of accountability. Fortunately, their exaggerated behaviours and incoherent ad hoc teaching are often obvious enough for most people to avoid a return visit. It may be packaged as 'ministry', but it rarely is. 'By their fruits you shall know them', applies here.

On the matter of 'fruit', strange how we now often hear about 'visitor hits' rather than 'bums on seats' when it comes to how well a church is doing, hardly a sign of deepening spirituality although it can be a useful indicator of marketing success and initial outreach. So it seems we are all likely to be known by the number of the beast rather than by our own names eventually, whether we like it or not.

The real problem with all this technology is that it is actually reducing physical contact between people and reducing fellowship. In reality it keeps people at a controllable distance, safely isolated behind a protective screen that can be switched off and on at will.

I know God has a sense of humour, so let's imagine the following scenario:-

If people stop making actual physical contact and rely on technology, then the consequence may be that when they leave this world and enter the next, they may find themselves eternally seated at a computer terminal and restricted to sharing heaven through a screen. 'As ye have sown, so shall ye receive', and that will be as close as they ever get. Fortunately I believe God is much more gracious.

I remember a wayside pulpit sign from Mill Hill Chapel in Leeds city centre, way back in the early 1970's I think. It was somewhat prophetic even though the technology was embryonic. It simply said, 'Television sermonettes produce television Christianettes.' It was a wonderfully concise and timely observation.

If we aren't careful, that's what we might end up with when the churches begin to re-open and discover that no one wants to come to church when they can simply stay in the comfort of their own homes – that's 'on line' Christianity for you!

It seems that chickens really do come home to roost.

It leads me onto another and final point.

I remember years ago (1985-2005) being involved in experiments with internet based churches. I also remember the derision and scorn being poured out by the main stream churches we suffered as we struggled with this new concept.

It seemed a little strange to reflect how quickly all our ideas were enacted as soon as churches had to remain closed. All that criticism and condemnation seemed to have evaporated. Yet, for all of this new found enthusiasm for the 'on line' church, the churches failed to recognise something we discovered very early on.

After all the years of research, we closed down any further development of the concept of the 'on line church'. Whilst it could offer some peripheral and initial support, it simply wasn't effective as a long term solution when it came to building real communities and growing spirituality.

This was also similarly and quickly realised by schools as they were forced to close under Covid-19 legislation and adapt as best as they could to keep providing some kind of educational continuance. You only have to look at the effectiveness of on line educational learning compared to in class learning to grasp the truth – on line education was a stop gap necessity but it proved to be problematic and no replacement for being in the classroom environment. There is no doubt it will take many years of hard and dedicated work to make good children's education.

Similarly there is no doubt the same will be true of the still almost unrecognised damage done to people's faith whilst the churches have endured an enforced emptiness.

Whilst on line technology provides some answers to church buildings being closed, it has been of limited use and is no panacea to all the post-pandemic problems faced by 'the church' community. At best it has been a 'means to ministry', but it would be dangerous to think it has been anything more than that, or even to consider it as a possible substitute for fellowship best practice or as a potential alternative to and less expensive replacement for 'the church' itself. The reality is 'people need people', and technology is no substitute. Real face to face encounters remain the most effective and primary means of bringing people faith to living faith in Christ, and we must not allow our present infatuation with or growing reliance on technology to change that position.

The pandemic quickly revealed the weaknesses and inadequacies of 'the building focussed church' all too quickly. We should be very careful about returning back to our pre-pandemic practices without considering their worth and value – things have undoubtedly changed, things are no longer the same as they were, and there is always room for improvement.

Similarly, we must not allow the 'virtual church going' habits the pandemic created to continue any longer than necessary. If we do, we seriously risk our congregations not returning, choosing instead to remain in splendid 'on line' isolation and gradually to drift away in favour of other more pressing interests.

It is in these perceptions that the key to answering the question about the potential death of the post-pandemic 'church' community may eventually lie. It will, to coin a well-used OSJ (UK) phrase, 'be what we make it or allow it to become'.

+Ian OSJ (UK)

Does everything originate from nothing?

+David, OSJ (Wales)

Some refuse to believe in God and put all their faith in scientific theories. They feel rational people should reject the Bible's fanciful version that man and the universe suddenly appeared from nothing. So they accept the alternative: the theory of evolution. But just because people believe that life evolved, does it shield them from the inevitable conclusion that original life appeared from nothing?

Evolutionary thinking endeavours to answer the question of origins by linking one life form with another over millions of years. When faced with the enormous improbabilities of many biological designs evolving in stages, evolutionists will say: 'Given enough time, anything can happen.'

However, on this theoretical journey to link all life, the question must still be asked: ***"How did the first life originate on our lifeless planet? Did it miraculously pop up from nothing, or did it arrive on some cosmic taxi?"***

If it is suggested first life arrived from another planet, the question then arises: Where did life on that planet originate? Continued questioning will reach the point of asking: Where did the first source of life originate? There are only two conclusions: (1) it has always been there without beginning, or (2) there was nothing and suddenly there was something. This is the dilemma of the origin of the universe. It either does not have a start (infinity past), or there was nothing and suddenly there was something (the Big Bang theory).

Atheists reject: **In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth** (Genesis 1:1), yet they demonstrate unprecedented faith in their belief that: in the beginning there was nothing – the nothing exploded and gradually created everything.

Isn't it odd that some cannot believe in an infinite God who created the universe from nothing; but, instead, would rather accept that our infinitely complex universe (which the human finite mind cannot possibly comprehend), designed itself from a Big Bang ($0=1$). We should question putting faith in scientific theories which refuse to accept that something may originate from nothing – yet ironically start their founding premise with a Big Bang.

The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork. (Psalm 19:1

+David, OSJ (Wales)

Love Changes Everything - A timely reminder of the Easter Message

The Good News of the Easter message is that Jesus can open our eyes to spiritual reality. He can forgive our sinful rebellion, erase any fear of what happens to us after we die, and he can give us life to the fullest - right now. All we need to do is turn to him as Saviour and Lord. Romans 10:9-10 explains that "...if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved; for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness [being made right with God], and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation."

Easter is almost upon us again and to most of us I think, it seems no time at all since the last celebration of the resurrection of Jesus. In spite of the disruptive effects of Covid to fellowship, we still celebrate Easter in our hearts and minds.

During that time most of us will have moved forward as individuals in our own relationship with Him. We will (all being well) have overcome bashful reservations about talking to others and contributed to the spreading of the Gospel.

We will also have developed into better people through our Christian teachings and the need to be more like Jesus.

Looking around us today at more earthly concerns, Government coffers are empty, many people are bereft and empty too - of any meaningful way of life and have nothing on which to pin their hopes and expectations.

Large corporations and individuals find their own integrity an empty vessel. Many people's bank accounts are almost empty as are most car show rooms. As we again relive the first Easter, the tomb that temporarily housed Jesus would soon be empty too. Compared with all the other kinds of emptiness, this tomb, this emptiness, was the beginning of an exciting, fresh new way of living, signalling the beginning of change. Jesus had been resurrected from the dead, was and still is - ready to change people.

John 3.16 recalls "God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life".

The suffering of Jesus was borne out of love for His Father and His love for us. He died for us in our place that our sins may be forgiven that we may be saved – through his sacrificial love. The death of Jesus on the cross was not an end in itself, but a means to an end. His resurrection gave birth to a whole new way of life for everyone that came looking for Him. In our thinking we cannot separate the Good Friday experience from that of Easter Sunday.

Over two thousand years after the first Easter Day, more and more Christians are basking in new life, hope, comfort, forgiveness, peace and joy that - for the asking - God willingly continues to grant each and every one of us.

Our weakness is replaced with strength, doubt with faith, selfishness with selflessness, anger with gentleness and judgement with forgiveness. We are nearer to being like Jesus than this time last year.

The lovely part about Easter coming round every year is that it encourages us to continue improving and we can clearly see that we have moved forward as His disciples. Love changes everything that we see, do, say, think and feel.

The tomb is empty, our cup of joy, full to overflowing..... We are filled with great joy because of what Jesus did for us. Jesus is alive today, tomorrow and forever.

Nothing can stop Him making all things new!

Our hearts are full with and for the love of God.

We are ordinary people that have been changed into extraordinary people - by God's love.

Today, God's love can change even the most difficult situations, into heaven on earth.

Let us all Thank God for Jesus this Eastertide - and tell others about Him too.

Let us realise and remember - Love changes everything.

Fr. David Startup, OSJ (UK)

March 15th – the Sarah Everard Vigil, Clapham Common.

‘Reclaim These Streets’ had organised the vigil before being forced to cancel following consultation with the Metropolitan Police, which said it would be in breach of coronavirus rules.

The Prime Minister said he was “deeply concerned” about the footage from the event, some of which showed (both male and female) police officers grabbing women and leading them away in handcuffs.

He will use the meeting to discuss the Government’s strategy on violence against women and girls, securing safer streets, rape prosecutions and the criminal justice system.

Ahead of the meeting, he said: “Like everyone who saw it I was deeply concerned about the footage from Clapham Common on Saturday night.

“I have spoken with the Metropolitan Police Commissioner who has committed to reviewing how this was handled and the Home Secretary has also commissioned HM Inspectorate of Constabulary to conduct a lessons learned review into the policing of the event.

“Tomorrow I will chair a meeting of the Government’s Crime and Justice Taskforce to look at what further action we need to take to protect women and ensure our streets are safe.

“The death of Sarah Everard must unite us in determination to drive out violence against women and girls and make every part of the criminal justice system work to protect and defend them.”

It comes as landmark legislation comes before the Commons that will give police greater powers to crack down on disruptive protests.

Labour has said it will vote against the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill because it contains “poorly thought-out measures to impose disproportionate controls on free expression”.

Source and Extracts Microsoft News

What is ‘Reclaim These Streets’?

A website says that Reclaim These Streets "is organised by a group of women who wanted to channel the collective grief, outrage and sadness in our community" following the death of Sarah Everard.

Events had been planned across the UK, including a vigil on Clapham Common to pay tribute to Sarah, who disappeared while walking home in London and whose remains were found this week.

The vigils were seen as a way of publicly urging for women's safety in the UK's streets.

Organisers add: "We believe that streets should be safe for women, regardless of what you wear, where you live or what time of day or night it is.

"We shouldn't have to wear bright colours when we walk home and clutch our keys in our fists to feel safe.

“It's wrong that the response to violence against women requires women to behave differently. In Clapham, police told women not to go out at night this week. Women are not the problem.”

Banners and Placards:

Despite these statements, the banners and placards revealed that there was much more going on in terms of the politics. A selection taken from images of the vigil:-

‘We should be safe, not brave.’

‘Abolish the police.’

‘The Met are racist and violent.’

‘We can manage our protest and vigil.’

‘No killers, no cops.’

‘Stop killing, raping, harassing us.’

‘Stop brutalising us.’

‘Educate your son.’

Draw your own conclusions as to whether these reflect the stated intentions of ‘Reclaim These Streets’ as being "a group of women who wanted to channel the collective grief, outrage and sadness in our community" following the death of Sarah Everard. It seems the intentions and outcomes were much more complex, but mostly anti-men and anti-police.

Other responses:

6pm curfew for men proposed in Parliament by Green Party Baroness

People are calling it 'insane', but the Baroness believes it 'would make women feel a lot safer'

The Baroness proposed the controversial suggestion in the House of Lords.

A 6pm curfew for all men has been suggested by a Green Party peer today 'which would make women feel a lot safer' following the disappearance of Sarah Everard in South London.

Baroness Jones spoke in the House of Lords during a debate on domestic violence this afternoon (Thursday, March 11).

Office of National Statistics – the facts:

Source: [Homicide in England and Wales - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://ons.gov.uk/homicide)

Main points:

- There were 695 victims of homicide in the year ending March 2020, 47 more (7%) than the previous year; this figure includes the Grays lorry incident with 39 homicide victims – if this incident is excluded, homicide showed a 1% increase overall.
- The homicide rate was 11.7 per million population, with the rate for males (17 per million population) almost three times that for females (6 per million population). Women are statistically nearly three times safer than men.
- The homicide rate over the three-year period to year ending March 2020 was 49.5 per million population for the Black ethnic group, approximately five times higher than for the White ethnic group (9.4 per million population).
- Just under two-thirds (443 or 64%) of all homicide victims in the year ending March 2020 were from the White ethnic group.
- There were 142 homicide victims aged 16- to 24-years-old.

- The most common method of killing continued to be by a sharp instrument, with 275 homicides by this method.

Comment:

Statistics do not reflect the loss, heartache and grief of death, and when we look at the numbers we should always bear in mind that each victim is a person who was loved, had a future, had a family and friends, and their own God given purpose in life that no other person could fulfil. Their loss extends beyond our imaginations far further than we could ever conceive.

The tragic death of Sarah Everard should never have happened. Whatever the reasons behind her death, the taking of a life remains a wholly illegal act and is an act against God and the sanctity of life. Its consequences go deep and extend far beyond her family, and it obviously has great implications for society as a whole.

Society is not perfect because people are not perfect, but there is no excuse for not trying to make things better to help avoid this kind of tragedy happening again, not that this will bring Sarah back to her family and friends.

Like many protests during the periods of lockdown and restriction of public gatherings, the vigil on Clapham Common was an illegal one and should never have happened, even if there was a justifiable sense of frustration and anger. Covid-19 remains an indiscriminate serial killer still at large, and to pretend it is of secondary concern and risk catching the virus and infecting others, the people we say we love, care for and want to protect, remains an act of supreme selfishness.

Despite this the vigil did take place and as an illegal gathering it did need policing.

If we choose to break the law, however unfair it may seem, then there are consequences to be faced. The law also has to be applied evenly and uniformly too, otherwise it becomes a mockery, as it did in the case of Dominic Cummins.

It appears that we are all in favour of 'the law' when it protects our views, our being, our possessions, etc., but apparently not when it stops us doing the things we want, or get caught out by it.

(We know this as Christians and have seen the consequences of what happens when individuals begin to say, 'this law/commandment does not apply to me'. Perhaps this is why so many more 'liberal' churches are now in difficulty.)

We won't always agree with the law but we need law to provide a framework for building a safe and secure society where we ourselves can be safe and secure.

At least that is the principle. Because there are still those who believe the law is optional or doesn't apply to them but to others, the law needs policing. We need to keep in mind that policing is aimed at law breakers, not law keepers.

To abolish the police (as one of the placards stated) will actually destabilise society and make it a much less safe place. We might get away with it in a perfect world but we still have a long way to go before we get to that state.

There is a balance that is very difficult to find between personal freedom and a regulated society. At the moment I believe that the balance is very much in favour of personal freedom at the expense of personal responsibility towards the community we live in. We increasingly seem to live in a world where 'me and my rights' matter much more than any of those of other people.

I am pretty sure that this is not what God intended for us. We are told to 'love God' first and secondly 'to love our neighbours we would wish to be loved ourselves'. 'Society' in its fragmented and egocentric state seems to have given up on both those precepts and we are now dealing with the consequences.

So what did the people attending the vigil hope to achieve when their actions had already been declared as unlawful?

Some I am sure went with good intent. Not all did. It was certainly politicised and deliberately provocative and intended to result in arrests by some. A quick scan through the placards and there you have the summaries of intent by the different factions attending. There was the evidence of infiltration and hijacking.

So where does all this lead us and what conclusions can we draw?

The ONS statistic point to women being nearly three times safer on the streets than men.

Men are much more likely to be attacked.

The chances of being murdered are one chance in 58,823 for men and one chance in 166,667 for women according to the ONS.

There are risks in nearly every aspect of life and it would be irresponsible not to weigh up those risks and to act accordingly and appropriately.

Laws are put in place to protect us and need policing but we have to do our bit too by upholding those laws even if they mean we can't always do what we want or behave in ways we would much prefer.

If we choose to break the law then we must accept the consequences.

Violence in any form is not acceptable.

Other people's safety, not just our own, is something we are all responsible for.

All our decisions and choices have consequences and affect other people.

It is not a perfect world yet and we all need to take some responsibility for protecting ourselves and others, and not putting ourselves or in danger or harms way. It is still something worth working towards, not just for our own benefit but also for others. If we fail to do it then we shouldn't be surprised when our government tightens up legislation and removes yet more of our freedom to act selfishly and without concern or consideration when it comes to the needs of others. The answer to tightening legislation is in our own hands and depends on whether we are individually prepared to make the effort and take responsibility.

And finally,

this is not a gender issue but simply one of respect, care and responsibility which transcend gender, age, race, ethnicity, equality and a whole load of other stuff. Those with darker agendas will tell you differently.

We are reaping what we have sown by ignoring the very basic teachings of the Christian faith. If we as a society made it our daily mission to make just the second great commandment a minute by minute reality, the 'love your neighbour as you would like to be loved yourself', then there would be no need to talk about curfews, hate crime, new legislation or policing, etc. Fear would gradually become a thing of the past as we learned we could trust one another, respect and be respected. It would genuinely transform the society we live in.

It's not so much a matter of changing the law but of changing attitudes (even our own), and each individual accepting personal responsibility for what happens to every other person in our communities and caring about and for them.

This is not a new concept or rocket science. It's been around for more than a few millennia and is well tried and tested.

We also need to stop saying 'it's none of my business' because it is.

It's not someone else's problem, it is ours, whether we like it or not.

It exists and it won't go away or be quiet, so how do we deal with it?

Essentially, the solution is the central daily practice of Christian love and it has little to do with 'church' or 'religion'. It's simply about respect, care and concern.

Our response should reflect that same love, respect, care, concern and responsibility 24/7 and be extended to all without prejudice or favour. It also implies we work within the limits of the law and take a measured perspective of all the safeguarding elements involved in our dealings with others.

We also need to be aware of what happens in Parliament and those bills and measures being proceeded. Politicians represent parties rather than people and need watching – love of power over the lives of others is a great corrupter. You might say that the best guard against this is to 'never leave them unattended'.

The riots in Bristol where 21 one police officers received injuries, two seriously, is a point in question. As to who is to blame or is responsible, there are arguments about the protest being hijacked and the organizers losing control to disruptive elements intent on confrontation, violence and free media coverage.

Far from creating support for stopping or moderating the proposed Policing Bill, it played right into the hands of those presenting the new proposed legislation.

‘This is exactly why we need this legislation.’ I can hear them saying.

Was the violence a visible outpouring of the frustration of lock down, or was is nothing more than an expression of closet anarchism, or was the government behind it? Take your pick depending on your politics or conspiracy theory.

Again, it shouldn’t have happened, but it did.

The politics of violence is not ‘Christian’, and neither is the violence of politics.

Anything that results in people being hurt or victimised or scapegoated or publicly humiliated is also not ‘Christian’, even if they disagree with us or live their lives differently to us or believe in different things. They are still the children of God as much as we are, and we do not have the right to judge or condemn them – only God has the right to do that.

And there is plenty of judging and condemnation in our society. There is plenty of fodder out there. All with a cause, all demanding rights and protections, all demanding their voice be heard against all others or them being (legally) silenced if the clamour be too great. This does not bring people together but divides them even further.

None of this would have happened if we had ‘loved our neighbour the way we ourselves would be loved’. The neighbour that is a human being just like us, with needs, failures, imperfections, hopes and desires, and a child of God, made in His image, with a unique set of gifts talents and skills that are purposeful in His plan for all mankind and for their benefit.

Dare we, with our imperfections and sin, dare we criticise God for His creation not meeting our exacting and unforgiving demands and expectations?

Dare we reject his gift in another person because they are a different sex, different race, different intelligence or character, have flaws and imperfections greater than our own, are different looking, have a different accent, a different way of dressing, support a different team, support a different political party or have a criminal record worse than our own (we know the truth, the difference is that we never got caught)?

This kind of prejudice is another form of violence.

It may not be physical but it still leaves wounds that never heal properly.

This is all just one part of what we speak about when we talk of the 'communion of saints', the fact that every person has their part to play and their own gifts to bring without which we are all impoverished and lessened.

Every single person in all of creation is appointed by God and has their designated role and part to play in bringing God's kingdom on earth to fruition. Therefore every single person matters.

The sad fact is we are where we are in a troubled and fractured society because we have not always welcomed these people, we have sometimes rejected them and even killed them, we have ignored and abused them by letting them suffer, and we have remained either deaf or silent when we should have listened or spoken up for the hungry, the dispossessed, the lonely, the troubled, the sick, the hungry, the homeless.....

It seems that our selfishness and egocentricity just got in the way. That's the trouble with 'free will' – it always seems to involve effort and self-sacrifice..... but never mind I hear - a plausible lie is often more comfortable and convenient than the truth, and will silence a troubling conscience.

(I marvel at the ease at which our consciences can be quietened, one in particular that the media has touched base on, that we can rest assured that by giving just £3 a month we can save the world, and we willingly accept it because it's what we want to hear instead of the truth. I wonder if the media learned that from some of the churches that taught a good weekly offering and/or large donation will secure a place in heaven? On that, I think that when the truth comes out there are going to be a lot of people asking for their money back.)

Free will – a curse in the wrong hands but a gift of great love and power in the right hands.

Like all gifts, it takes time to get to know it and use it the way it was intended to be used. The clues come in the two great commandments, 'love God and love your neighbour as you yourself would like to be loved'. There is the purpose.

Love is sacrificial and it means putting 'self' aside for the greater good of others.

You would go to the ends of the earth for the person you truly loved and nothing would be too much. The only thing that would perhaps stop you would be 'common sense' and your 'conscience', that inbuilt and annoying knowledge of what is good and evil, that quietly nagging recognition of what is right and wrong.

There is a saying, 'to do evil is easier than to do good'.

In the frustration of lock down the quiet voices of common sense and conscience and often drowned out by the media and the loud excitable voices of self-proclaimed righteousness. We easily get sucked in and welcome the distraction. It provides the excuses we seek to do what we want rather than to do what we need to do.

It's that moment when rational and intelligent people find themselves throwing stones and fireworks at the police, breaking windows and setting fire to vehicles, manipulated, exhilarated, excited and oblivious to reason, doing things that in the cold light of day they will silently be ashamed of.

Such is the power of mob mentality. (It becomes easier to see why Jesus was crucified by those he healed, fed, nurtured and loved.....)

In reality these people have acted selfishly, putting others at risk of violence and of increasing the risks of transmitting Covid-19 to others.

That does not even take into account the financial burden to the community, the damage done to livelihoods, the cost of policing and of clearing up and repairing the damage. It does not take into account the emotional damage to shopkeepers who are already struggling with the effects of lock down on their businesses, have no income but lots of outgoings, and are faced with damaged and looted premises.

Not exactly 'acts of love', in fact quite the opposite.

It is said 'the devil is the great deceiver' and his role is to bring chaos and despair to all of God's creation, 'to turn the world upside down', and turn people against their Creator and one another.

Looking at the media it would seem 'he' is doing pretty well but then it seems he gets better PR coverage than God. The media and people seem much more interested in the bad stuff or bringing down that which is good.

I remember as soon as Captain Tom was brought to the fore, the reports of hate mail being received by his family. What an indictment of the society we live in.

There is good out there in the world but there is also bad and it is a real force to be reckoned with. It is not something that should be ignored or tolerated.

Whether it is personified in 'the devil' or whether it is another name for utter selfishness is an interesting theological debate, but it exists, is a reality, and is threatening the very fabric of society by destabilising it and undermining its very structure.

It feeds on fear and ignorance, it focusses on 'self', 'my needs, and 'my rights', it divides people and provides them with excuses and reasons to do the things they know deep within them are wrong.

It provides easy lies and distracts from the truth.

It is freedom without responsibility, something for nothing.

It is life without moral concern.

It is isolationist and tribal and ultimately violent because it cannot and will not be reasoned with.

It is simply the path to self-destruction.

So what would I say to all those who self-indulge in those activities that contradict the lock down measures or those that end in violence as there will be a personal price to pay? In the end, was it worth it?

The first is to be clear about your objective and motivation.

Then secondly make sure it is not hijacked by those with other agendas. Be careful who you involve and who you trust. Those who speak encouragingly of your actions are not always your friends.

Thirdly, make sure you avoid violence and stay within the bounds of the law. The law is there to protect you as well as others and if you step outside of that then you deserve what you get. Violence is never a good outcome.

Fourthly, however strongly you feel about an issue, your responsibilities are to the community you are a part of and you should do nothing to endanger others or yourself.

Fifthly, do your homework, be vigilant and trust no one. Keep your eye on newly proposed legislation, new social trends and new groups and initiatives. Be aware of sponsorship and funding by outside parties. Nothing is ever as it seems, and errors of judgement cannot always be resolved, rectified or undone.

Lastly and critically, listen to God and act upon His Word. It stands between you and eternal condemnation.

(If you are not a person of faith at least listen to and be guided by your conscience. It stands between you and many sleepless nights.)

We need to be aware of the consequences of our actions and not act on a whim or spontaneously but with forethought and with due consideration.

We also need to take responsibility not only our actions but for the consequences of them. That is something that is a rare characteristic in a person these days, especially when things go really badly.

Be assured that every single and individual act matters and has consequences for good or for bad, not just in the present but long into the future. The wisdom of the bible speaks of 'the sins of the fathers being visited upon their children, and their children's children unto the fourth generation' (paraphrased). Yes, even the most seemingly trivial and unintentional act has the power to irreversibly change the future.

Every action matters and has consequences. It's a huge responsibility and that alone is worth some real and deep real thought and consideration. However, we are not without guidance and help.

Our aide memoire and protection - two simple commands, 'love God, love your neighbour.....' guide us - both capable of powerfully transforming individuals and society if we understand and apply them rightly.

If we claim to be people of faith, nothing more is needed, and less is not acceptable.

+Ian OSJ (UK)

Announced 15.03.2021 – the Roman Catholic position:

*Responsum of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to a **dubium** regarding the blessing of the unions of persons of the same sex*

TO THE QUESTION PROPOSED:

Does the Church have the power to give the blessing to unions of persons of the same sex?

RESPONSE:

Negative.

Explanatory Note

In some ecclesial contexts, plans and proposals for blessings of unions of persons of the same sex are being advanced. Such projects are not infrequently motivated by a sincere desire to welcome and accompany homosexual persons, to whom are proposed paths of growth in faith, “so that those who manifest a homosexual orientation can receive the assistance they need to understand and fully carry out God’s will in their lives”^[1].

On such paths, listening to the word of God, prayer, participation in ecclesial liturgical actions and the exercise of charity can play an important role in sustaining the commitment to read one’s own history and to adhere with freedom and responsibility to one’s baptismal call, because “God loves every person and the Church does the same”^[2], rejecting all unjust discrimination.

Among the liturgical actions of the Church, the *sacramentals* have a singular importance: “These are sacred signs that resemble the sacraments: they signify effects, particularly of a spiritual kind, which are obtained through the Church’s intercession. By them men are disposed to receive the chief effect of the sacraments, and various occasions of life are sanctified”^[3]. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* specifies, then, that “sacramentals do not confer the grace of the Holy Spirit in the way that the sacraments do, but by the Church’s prayer, they prepare us to receive grace and dispose us to cooperate with it” (#1670).

Blessings belong to the category of the *sacramentals*, whereby the Church “calls us to praise God, encourages us to implore his protection, and exhorts us to seek his mercy by our holiness of life”^[4]. In addition, they “have been established as a kind of imitation of the sacraments, blessings are signs above all of spiritual effects that are achieved through the Church’s intercession”^[5].

Consequently, in order to conform with the nature of sacramentals, when a blessing is invoked on particular human relationships, in addition to the right intention of those who participate, it is necessary that what is blessed be objectively and positively ordered to receive and express grace, according to the designs of God inscribed in creation, and fully revealed by Christ the Lord. Therefore, only those realities which are in themselves ordered to serve those ends are congruent with the essence of the blessing imparted by the Church.

For this reason, it is not licit to impart a blessing on relationships, or partnerships, even stable, that involve sexual activity outside of marriage (i.e., outside the indissoluble union of a man and a woman open in itself to the transmission of life), as is the case of the unions between persons of the same sex^[6]. The presence in such relationships of positive elements, which are in themselves to be valued and appreciated, cannot justify these relationships and render them legitimate objects of an ecclesial blessing, since the positive elements exist within the context of a union not ordered to the Creator’s plan.

Furthermore, since blessings on persons are in relationship with the sacraments, the blessing of homosexual unions cannot be considered licit. This is because they would constitute a certain imitation or analogue of the nuptial blessing^[7] invoked on the man and woman united in the sacrament of Matrimony, while in fact “there are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God’s plan for marriage and family”^[8].

The declaration of the unlawfulness of blessings of unions between persons of the same sex is not therefore, and is not intended to be, a form of unjust discrimination, but rather a reminder of the truth of the liturgical rite and of the very nature of the sacramentals, as the Church understands them.

The Christian community and its Pastors are called to welcome with respect and sensitivity persons with homosexual inclinations, and will know how to find the most appropriate ways, consistent with Church teaching, to proclaim to them the Gospel in its fullness. At the same time, they should recognize the genuine nearness of the Church – which prays for them, accompanies them and shares their journey of Christian faith^[9] – and receive the teachings with sincere openness.

The answer to the proposed *dubium* does not preclude the blessings given to individual persons with homosexual inclinations^[10], who manifest the will to live in fidelity to the revealed plans of God as proposed by Church teaching. Rather, it declares illicit any form of blessing that tends to acknowledge their unions as such. In this case, in fact, the blessing would manifest not the intention to entrust such individual persons to the protection and help of God, in the sense mentioned above, but to approve and encourage a choice and a way of life that cannot be recognized as objectively ordered to the revealed plans of God^[11].

At the same time, the Church recalls that God Himself never ceases to bless each of His pilgrim children in this world, because for Him “we are more important to God than all of the sins that we can commit”^[12]. But he does not and cannot bless sin: he blesses sinful man, so that he may recognize that he is part of his plan of love and allow himself to be changed by him. He in fact “takes us as we are, but never leaves us as we are”^[13].

For the above mentioned reasons, the Church does not have, and cannot have, the power to bless unions of persons of the same sex in the sense intended above.

The Sovereign Pontiff Francis, at the Audience granted to the undersigned Secretary of this Congregation, was informed and gave his assent to the publication of the above-mentioned Responsum ad dubium, with the annexed Explanatory Note.

Rome, from the Offices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the 22nd of February 2021, Feast of the Chair of Saint Peter, Apostle.

Luis F. Card. Ladaria, S.I.

Prefect

✠ Giacomo Morandi

Archbishop tit. of Cerveteri

Secretary

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.

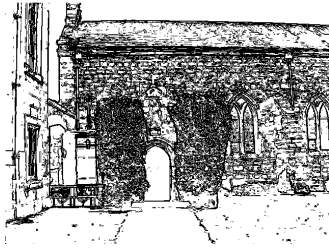
The same applies to the giving of last rites (viaticum).

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

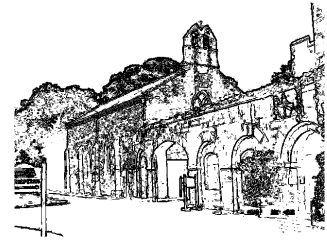
1. [Self-administered Communion](#)
2. [Last Rites \(Emergency Measures\)](#)

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 (UK) 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: St Leonard's will remain closed until restrictions are lifted.

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.