

PASTORAL LETTER 5

from Bishop Jonathan
to the parishes and clergy of the See of Ebbsfleet



3 August 2020

Dear brothers and sisters, Dear friends,

August is a month when many of us take time out, find some escape from our normal routines, and more importantly to take a holiday, a time of relaxation and recreation for our bodies and minds, which invariably eases our souls too. I hope that you are able to find some such time this month, and that you find some release from the anxieties that we're all living with, even if we must not forget the ever-present infection that is blighting our lives. Please stay safe, and protect the interests of others as much as yourselves. But while you are enjoying that time out I want to ask you to give some time to thinking something through, and take this letter with you (if only for the Gospel readings) so you have it to hand when you have time to think and to pray.

We have been able to return to public and private worship in church for a month now. Only last week new restrictions have had to be imposed by Government to prevent a rise in transmission of the infection. But church worship can continue – the doors haven't closed again (yet) – but (from the 8th August) worshippers are required till further notice to wear face coverings in church. It will be strange, and is certainly unwelcome, but it is a small price to pay for not being denied once again access to celebrating and to receiving the Sacrament of the Lord. 'Come, my Light, my Feast, my Strength' says the Lord (in the words of George Herbert's poem) – 'Such a *light* as shows a feast; Such a *feast* as mends [heals us] in length; Such a *strength* as makes his guest.' And so we must go to Christ in the Eucharist. It is for all Christians his light, his feast and his strength.

'If you don't use it, you'll lose it.' We say that about skills, physical exercise, brain power. It's true of so many of the arts and recreation facilities we want and need. It is true also of the churches: the buildings we want to enter, the worship we want to join, the good we want to do together. So, use it! Church life and faith don't come 'on the rates'. Those with responsibility in dioceses, who are spending a great deal of time and skill assessing the impact of the virus on our life (bishops and archdeacons yes, but lay leaders and staff too), are trying to conserve the interests of all worshipping communities. But we are not only communities of worshippers – we are also communities of *volunteers*. The Church exists *because* of us, because we belong and participate and share faith and life in the Spirit, because we're there. It doesn't exist 'for us', like an amenity, a public service. If we want it to be there for us and for our grandchildren, and theirs, as the great community of faith, we neglect it or opt out of it at our peril. And in the long run, if we lose our churches and our worship, and the clergy to serve that life and worship, it won't be the Government's fault, the virus's fault, society's fault. It will be *ours*.

Now, I am saying all this not just because it is practically (and in some ways painfully) true, but because I want to take you on a journey: a spiritual journey, which as always is journey inwards, to where Christ by his Spirit lives in you.

You will all know, I think, that I have appointed, Fr Gary Ecclestone, the vicar of Hanslope, to serve among our Ebbsfleet parishes as a 'Healthy Churches Mentor' for the next five years. The virus has just made that job much more necessary, and I hope you will welcome him into your parish. The job is nothing to do with our current concerns about health and safety! it is to do with the health of parish life and prayer and mission, and about the conditions for parish growth. One of the tools he will be using are the so-called 8 Essential Qualities, or key indicators of a healthy and Christ-shaped local Christian community (<http://ncd-uk.com/>). These 'qualities' are a way of life, not a programme or a model. One of the eight is the quality of 'Passionate Spirituality': something that, if it is to be seen in any *community*, must be true first of *each* of its members. Remember Jesus saying to Peter, "What's it got to do with you if he [John] is here until I come again? You must follow me!" (John 21.22) Jesus meant that Peter had to follow the way of his passion: 'You will follow in my footsteps, walk the way of my cross, the way of my martyrdom.'

'Passionate Spirituality' is a spirituality that is authentic and real. It is personal. It hungers for God, is nurtured in prayer, has spiritual understanding, and gives sacrificially to others. There isn't space here in this letter to explore this very fully. Suffice to say that among Anglican churches (internationally) it is *this* quality among the eight, which participating congregations always identify as *the weakest quality* of their church life. And yet 'as far as the growth of the church is concerned, research indicates that the most important thing is *not* a church's style, but the *degree* to which faith is actually lived out with commitment, passion and enthusiasm.' (<http://www.dioceseofcoventry.org/Definingthe8EQs>) Perhaps if that is true, it goes a long way to explaining why our church is weak in the face of the challenges that face us in our mission. Mission simply *cannot* be motivated who are unresponsive and self-centred in their experience of faith. Let us never forget that the Catholic movement in the Church of England was an *all-round renewal movement*. It made such strides in so many areas of church thinking, worship and mission because of *this* one quality. They were *passionately* and devotedly committed to the Gospel, and the Church Catholic.

Over many years of Natural Church Development's international research Anglicans have said of their own weak survey results in terms of passionate spirituality that it's because of 'Anglican diffidence generally'; 'our reluctance to share experiences of faith to avoid appearing arrogant'; 'not wanting to sound like fundamentalists in upholding the scriptures'; 'not wanting to seem to more 'liberal' Anglicans to be too dogmatic and exclusive'. Or because of a 'lack of courage'; 'being forgetful of the full breadth of Anglican spirituality that has existed over time'; 'failing to encourage a wide range of spiritual gifts and with them spiritual leadership'; 'believing our critics – that Anglican Catholics have nothing of significance to offer any more'; and the very strong 'tendency to isolate Sunday worship from the rest of life inside and outside the home'. Do you recognise any of those? I'm sure you do.

If we do not each seek in the months and years ahead to pull ourselves up by our spiritual boot laces—bishops, priests and deacons included, but all the laity no less so—this weakness will undermine us and our parishes more than any other, and therefore undermine the Church. So many people have heard the words of Jesus, 'Follow me', and have paid lip-service, fallen into a minimal attitude, have not 'used' the strength that Christ gives in the many gifts he gives to his Church. They have avoided the way of the cross, have therefore not discovered joy and peace in it. Through no fault of Christ, we have lost what St Seraphim called 'the spacious vision of the early Christians', the vision which will save the world.

O God, you know that we are set in the midst of so many and great dangers, that by reason of the frailty of our nature we cannot always stand upright: grant to us such strength and protection as may support us in all dangers, and carry us through all temptations; we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Collect for the Fourth Sunday before Lent

I trust that gives food for thought, and a support for hope. Please renew your commitment to your church, and use it. If because of age or health reasons you can't, remember, *Christ calls to you no less: 'Follow me!'*

Yours devotedly



DAILY GOSPEL PASSAGES FOR AUGUST

These are the daily Gospels for the Eucharist, which you can make the centre of your daily prayer. If you haven't got a copy of the daily prayer booklet 'Prayer for the Long Haul', then ask your parish priest, or office@ebbsfleet.org.uk for a copy.

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| 4 T | St John Vianney: Matt 15.15–20 | 18 T | Matt 19.23–end |
| 5 W | St Oswald: Matt 15.21–28 | 19 W | Matt 20.1–16 |
| 6 T | Transfiguration of the Lord: Luke 9.28–36 | 20 T | St Bernard: Matt 22.1–14 |
| 7 F | Matt 16.24–28 | 21 F | Matt 22.34–40 |
| 8 S | St Dominic: Matt 17.14–20 | 22 S | Matt 23.1–12 |
| 9 Sun | 9th after Trinity [19 th OrdSun]: Matt 14.22–end | 23 Sun | 11th after Trinity [21 st OrdSun]: Matt 16.13–20 |
| 10 M | St Lawrence: Matt 17.22–end | 24 M | St Barnabas: Luke 22.24–30 |
| 11 T | St Clare: Matt 18.1–5, 10, 12–14 | 25 T | Matt 23.23–26 |
| 12 W | Matt 18.15–20 | 26 W | Matt 23.27–32 |
| 13 T | Matt 18.21–19.1 | 27 T | St Monica: Matt 24.42–end |
| 14 F | St Maximilian: Matt 19.3–12 | 28 F | St Augustine of Hippo: Matt 25.1–13 |
| 15 S | Assumption of the BVM: Luke 1.46–55 | 29 S | Passion of St John the Baptist: Matt 14.1–12 |
| 16 Sun | 8th after Trinity [18 th OrdSun]: Matt 15.21–28 | 30 Sun | 12th after Trinity [22 nd OrdSun]: Matt 16.21–end |
| 17 M | Matt 19.16–22 | 31 M | St Aidan: Luke 4.16–30 |