

Dear friends,

I write this, my first pastoral letter to you, as your new Rector for the Wykeham benefice. I'm absolutely delighted to now be able to once again wear my clerical collar in public and become a very visible presence in all aspects of village and community life across all of our benefice. I'm looking forward to getting to know you all and be alongside you and all those who live, work and are educated in our parishes.

Could I firstly thank you all for the very warm welcome that I've received and also for the lovely gifts of food and other goodies that were waiting for me when I moved in. I've enjoyed a great deal receiving and reading the welcome cards that people have also kindly given to me. Thank you so much.

Could I also take this opportunity to thank publicly all those across our benefice who have worked so tirelessly during the time of interregnum, so that our churches are open and continue to be places that are at the heart of the community they serve. Can I in particular thank Reverend John Tattersall, our Associate minister, for his unwavering and grace filled commitment to the life of the Church in our benefice.

We continue to live individually and together as communities, and as a church family, in uncertain times due to the effects of the coronavirus. A time that might have and continues possibly to cause us to individually fear and to be wary. The announcement of the new national lockdown, that comes into full effect from today, has certainly caused considerable consternation and worry amongst many people. One of the most noteworthy differences though between this new national lockdown and the one that was introduced in March last year, is that places of worship are to be allowed to stay open not just for private prayer but also for communal worship, funerals and weddings. This would not have been the case had it not been made very clear that, due to the amazing efforts of churches and other places of worship across the country, in making them and the attendance at them as covid safe as is possible, that communal worship is viewed as being of low risk in terms of the spread of the virus.

In the light of this I would like us to continue if at all possible, given the excellent practices and procedures that I know have been introduced to make our churches as covid safe as is possible, to continue to be open for communal public acts of worship. I know that there are people in our community who feel not quite yet ready to once again make the decision to come to church, for whatever reason, be that for their own or a loved one's health and I assure you I fully understand these concerns. For this reason as a benefice I would like us to continue to have not only acts of worship in church for those who decide they would like to attend but also online services every Sunday afternoon. I am also thinking of introducing a mid-week early evening online prayer service for those who would also like to have a time of prayer through the week, but who are yet to return or yet to have started coming to church. I know there are some people who do not have access to or, for whatever reason, do not want to join in on line services. If you are one of these people or know someone who is then please do be in touch and let me know, because as your Rector I care very much for everyone's spiritual wellbeing and together we will find ways that I can help and support you in your faith journey.

As your Rector my primary concern is the care for everyone in the benefice. I do believe that with continued excellent ongoing good practices in our churches, making them as covid safe as is possible, we can continue to hold communal services, for those who would like to come and choose to attend. Keeping our churches open for communal acts of worship also I would suggest, gives a very clear signal to all who we serve, that the church is not closing their doors voluntarily and that we view spiritual wellbeing as being crucial to our faith, as well as for our mental health. The negative effect on individual, as well as the nations, spiritual wellbeing, of the closure of places of worship in the first lockdown, has been widely acknowledged.

In response to the announcement of the new national lockdown The Bishop of London said this;

“At a time like this, the Church is here to offer comfort and spiritual support to everyone. We have a duty to care for each other, but particularly those who are vulnerable or who may be most at risk. I would urge everyone in our churches to pray for those on the front line in our public services - the NHS and those working in social care, for schools and many others on whom we depend; and for parents and carers of children at this anxious and stressful time.”

He went on to say;

“There is hope. The vaccination programme is underway and, as Christians, we have a deeper hope in God that comforts us beyond fear itself. As we have been remembering this Christmas Season, even in the midst of our darkest fears, that hope brings light.”

These words I would echo and as a church family, and as a benefice, we are called by God to care for and look out for each other, as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Please do contact me if I can be of help to you personally or maybe to someone you know or a friend. A simple phone call asking them if they are ok goes a long way I've personally found, especially when someone is physically on their own.

Love & prayers

Revd Neil

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