

Dear Friend

Today marks what for many will be a huge milestone in getting back to normal as the lockdown eases - non-essential shops will be reopening! We were once described - and not in a flattering way - as a nation of shopkeepers. (Apparently the phrase - though mistakenly attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte was actually used first by the French revolutionary Bertrand Barère de Vieuzac on 11 June 1794 in a speech to the National Convention: "Let Pitt then boast of his victory to his nation of shopkeepers". You never know, this piece of trivia might be useful in a quiz one day!) - *source: Wikipedia*

A more accurate portrayal of our society might be that we are not so much a nation of shopkeepers as shoppers, so the opening of shops will be greatly welcomed by many. For us there is an even more significant event, which is of course that churches - and other places of worship - can now reopen, although just for personal prayer. This hasn't received quite the same media coverage as the retail sector, but for the Christian community, and indeed the parish as a whole, it is of huge significance. Although there will be necessary restrictions in order to keep risk to an absolute minimum, it will be so good to get back into the special space that is St Matthew's Church. We rightly speak of church as being all about people, not buildings, nevertheless the fact that we have not been able to use the building, or to meet in each others' homes, has made it extremely difficult for us to be church - to fulfil one of our most important tasks as the people of God, to meet together to worship him. Somehow watching a screen at home - which is a peculiar experience when it is oneself on the screen! - and even sharing bread and wine - is just not the same thing. One of the most significant aspects of eating bread and drinking wine is that we are doing it together - hence the term 'Communion' - as an act of solidarity and unity with each other and indeed with the whole Body of Christ. Although we are calling our celebrations "Agapé feasts", the idea is still the same - we are involved in sharing a foretaste of the heavenly banquet which is still to come, and it won't be much of a banquet if we are by ourselves or just with our immediate family!

So let's do our best to come to church when it is open, just to enjoy the atmosphere of prayer, and as part of our prayers, let us seek the Lord that he will move by his Spirit in the corridors of power such that a decision is taken soon to allow us to worship together. At this time, let us also remember the many hundreds of thousands of our brothers and sisters for whom not being free to meet together is normal, and unlikely ever to change. When I had the privilege of carrying Bibles from Hong Kong - then still under British rule - to China with the "Open Doors" organisation, I met a house church leader in Shanghai who some years later was imprisoned and spent years in the most appalling conditions of solitary confinement. This kind of thing is still happening today in many countries of the world.

Recently, on the streets of the USA and many other countries, we are seeing yet further repercussions following George Floyd's terrible murder. I was brought up to believe in the universal goodness of the British Empire. It was only when I travelled to South East Asia - to some former British as well as Dutch colonies, that my perspective shifted and I saw dear old England with fresh eyes, and also realised my own racism, which was an almost inevitable result of my education. As we reevaluate and reexamine our past we need to do so with the understanding that we cannot apply our own standards to our ancestors. Things that we take for granted now would have been an anathema to them, and vice versa. By all means let us move statues to a setting where a full explanation can be given of the person's life,

belief system and conduct, but let's also find a way of celebrating the lives of more modern heroes who have brought about change by being unafraid to challenge the status quo.

Another crucial, and as yet unspoken of, aspect to all this protest and call for change, is that we must remember that slavery has not yet been completely abolished. There are many modern day slaves today, who have been trafficked around the world and exploited, kept under lock and key with no rights or freedoms. Alongside challenging the unjust beliefs and practices of the past, and the evils of racism, oppression and the unjust structures in the present, we must also work to root out the evil of modern day slavery and seek to create a world in which every single human being is respected, valued and free - a vision of nothing less than the Kingdom of heaven on earth.

A prayer for today:

Father God, as we cry out to you for justice for the minorities who live with oppression, a lack of opportunity, inequality, and racism as realities of daily life, help us as a society to work for equality, freedom and the upholding of human rights for all people. Shine the light of your holy Word by the power of your Holy Spirit into hearts darkened by evil ideologies, and forgive us when we have consciously or unconsciously colluded with those ideologies. We thank you, Lord, that you are the God who rights all wrongs, lifts up the downtrodden, brings light where there is darkness and life out of death. Show us how you want us to respond, so that we may be those who reveal your love and goodness through the way we live. To your praise and glory. Amen.



Something to help you smile (or groan):



1. Always remember that you are unique; just like everyone else.
2. Consciousness: That annoying time between naps.
3. Why is "abbreviation" such a long word?

God bless you and keep you.

With my love and prayers

Simon