

Over the past few weeks, there's been a lot of speculation about when our churches might re-open and also speculation about what that might actually be like. Some theologians are saying similar things: they're saying that what's most important about now, is to be asking the right questions, rather than seeking the answers as to how things should or might be. *What's important are the questions we should be asking, rather than the answers we might want to know.*

With that in mind, the questions I want to be asking on this day of Pentecost, are: what is the Spirit saying to the Churches / what is the spirit doing today? And before we all, on auto pilot, just do as we always do and start to try and answer that question, let's stop right here - these are highly important questions we're asking, and we're not going to try and find the answer, at least not for now. We're going to stick with just asking the questions - what is it that the spirit is saying to the churches, right now, in this context, right here, in this Benefice?

And what is the spirit doing within our communities – in other words, within all people- those who don't usually come to church and I would go so far as to say, because I know some of them quite well, don't realise or believe that the holy spirit is as present and active in their lives as she is in within ours. That might sound quite radical but I believe it to be absolutely true - the Holy Spirit is never limited to the Church but is inherent in all of life, for those who are members and those who choose not to be. The holy spirit, works in everyone and in all places. What is it that she is saying and doing now?

A sideways step for a moment to reflect. One of the most important aspects of our church life is the great need to honour tradition and to draw on all the richness that we've inherited. Rituals, symbols, sacrament, repetition, the liturgical cycle, beautiful music, the daily office, and so on and so forth. I believe all of these are essential aspects of Christian life – to love God through and with these things, and to glorify him.

But I've also always said that if all we do is the same things, again and again and never change anything, and especially in the ever changing culture we're in, the church will die out. Society changes rapidly and the church doesn't tend to do that. Of course there must be a balance – we need to honour tradition whilst looking onwards with imagination - and most essentially embracing all that the world about us has to offer to the Church.

For the last 50 years or so the decline of the church in our country has been a really profound problem and we know there's a host of sociological, political and psychological reasons for that dwindling in attendance and interest in church life, especially I think in England. And the Church has been unable to date to address these issues sufficiently in order to keep all churches active, vibrant, culturally relevant – even financially secure. It could be that one of the issues which hasn't been appropriately addressed is an over eagerness to problem solve – an over eagerness and hurry to answer difficult questions and so sometimes there's too much haste:

Here's a problem so we must find an answer, and I wonder how that shutting down of questioning by being too quick to provide an appropriate answer has caused damage to our church life. For example, in one diocese which will remain nameless (!) there was a huge worry about finances. Hasty decisions were made and new discipleship programmes were introduced with tactics and initiatives all aimed at getting new Christians into the churches so that they could become part of the Giving programme and so that finances would become more secure. That is a truly rotten way of doing mission and of course it didn't work! Finances remained rocky; not enough thinking time and questions not thought through.

And another area of questions to ask: how to embrace our LGBT+ community. And so historically we've had conversations and debates, events and gatherings – all wonderful, but why weren't these questions pondered much more carefully some 50 / 100 or so years ago and with more open minds to what the spirit might have been saying? Progress is being made, but again, premature answers which historically closed down conversations, has caused such grief for many people who now don't feel that they can be part of church life. Not enough – I think - of sitting with the questions but instead blinkered hasty answers which shut out possibilities and the church

has surely lost out by coming up with answers too hastily, resulting in exclusive practices instead of waiting on the spirit for the revealing of her purposes. The Hebrew bible speaks of a stiff-necked people and this is not a trap we wish to fall in to.

In relation to our current situation, we have many questions we need to ask, and if we try to answer them in haste we will undoubtedly repeat mistakes as the church has done historically and we'll end up living with the same frustrations which I think we closed our churches with several weeks ago – most notably the frustration I hear of with the lack of younger members. If we're not careful, we will undoubtedly waste this extraordinary opportunity, shutting out potential and possibilities, and the cycle of mistakes could just continue on. This time, despite its pain and distress, is a hugely important gift to us.

And so we could, if we wish, as and when our churches are re-opened, return to doing exactly the same thing as we were doing before the Covid19 pandemic. I truly believe that if we do just that, the church as we have known it will eventually just die, and possibly even during my lifetime. No ordained priest no matter how skilled, experienced or talented will be able to fill our church

buildings with young or marginalised people in the near future if we stay exactly the same. As current members, we will naturally die – until there's no one left coming in 50 years or so from now. We will have wasted this opportunity – this blessed nuisance, as Hugh so aptly described to us a few weeks back. What is the Holy Spirit saying?

She is speaking and stirring people in church and without, and she can't ever be for just those times which some describe as 'charismatic'; She works in ways which are way beyond the human limitations and descriptions which have in the past been imposed upon her. She cannot be present only in those more 'obvious' or extreme times in church life, such as healings or dramatic conversions. And the proximity of the sacred with the secular is far closer than some might like to acknowledge or imagine – we only have to glance back at our Jewish roots to see just how close sacred and secular were and still are: if you find that thought challenging, try re-reading the book of Leviticus and ponder why there is so much written about mundane everyday life and domestic life! The spirit is in all things. We've so tended towards compartmentalisation – 'this thing is spirit led', 'that was inspired by the spirit', and I'm sure some of those churchy things absolutely are!

But the spirit is working in all kinds of ways at this time, in this place – in our communities, people are stirred - and we know that for a fact – we can see it by the number of people who've turned to prayer in recent weeks and the ways in which people have volunteered in their communities in previously unseen ways. **All** good human conscience, I believe, is led and directed by the holy spirit – that is the one and only source and root of our being and our existence; it's what makes all of us tick – Christian or not.

Our task is to question what the spirit is revealing to us: what is being required of us; how are we really being directed and challenged? Are we really just going to revert to what is familiar and comfortable? If so, the danger is we perpetuate staticity. We may not like the answers that the spirit may offer us at some point over the next few weeks and months. But most importantly whilst we wait, we continue to question, and pray with **open** minds and hearts.

We mustn't assume anything and we need to be prepared that the spirit may guide us to use our churches in different and varied ways, which may even inconvenience us! Churches – as well as for our own worship - must be for the benefit of the communities in which they stand and never just to suit our own purposes or activities.

The spirit has already prompted us as a ministry team to work in a completely different way which none of us could ever have anticipated a couple of months back. I for one have had to learn totally new skills on my computer – and whilst that initially freaked me out and caused me a great deal of angst and headaches, I'm proof that it really is possible to change! Just a few weeks of trial and error and a bit of lost sleep, and a transformation has occurred! The brave new world of zoom is my new lifestyle! And it is ok!!

During this time, frustrating and disappointing for many, it's fundamentally important that we give **God** breathing space right now – that physical stirring of the spirit of God breathing upon us and within us – and avoiding filling that beautiful blessed space with our own human suggestions or possible solutions or hasty answers. What is it in this

time, in this context, that the spirit is saying to our churches?

To conclude, Bishop Ian Ramsey, in his mission to Oxford back in 1969, talked about 'cosmic disclosure' – when something begins to make sense, when the dots join up and the picture is revealed, when the jigsaw is complete. As we await what may be a 'cosmic disclosure', let's not anticipate what that might look like, but sit instead with the question 'what is the spirit saying to us'? Amen.