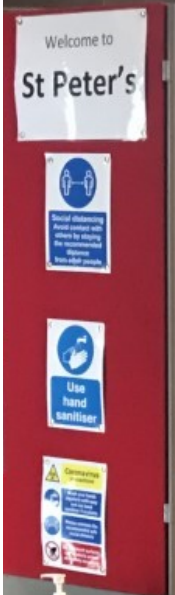


THE PARISH OF
ST PETER AND ST JAMES
BELFAST

PARISH NOTES

AUGUST 2020

Rector: The Rev'd Brian Lacey
St Peter's Rectory
17 Waterloo Park South
Belfast, BT15 5HX



*Rosemary Johnston and Daphne McClements
supervising the entrance of the church
at our re-opening on Sunday 26th July.*

GOD . LOVING . PEOPLE

RECTOR'S NOTES

WELCOME BACK!

I admit that it was a little bit strange to see people back in St Peter's. After four months of preaching and praying in front of a camera in an empty building, it's quite mentally hard to re-adjust. There is also the additional strangeness of having to impose social distancing measures: the congregation were welcomed at the door by a bottle of hand-gel; their names and phone numbers were recorded; they were told where to sit; they couldn't go to the toilet; there was very little social interaction within the building; they were instructed how to leave.

Now, I acknowledge that not everyone could be there in person for the re-opening of the church. We are still existing within a form of Lockdown, and we need to continue being very careful. What would concern me, however, is if parishioners who are otherwise able to come to church, avoid doing so because they dislike the 'new normal'. Please understand that no one, myself included, loves the measures that have been put in place by the NI Executive and the Church of Ireland, and naturally we all want to get back to the way it was before the Lockdown. But we must accept that these social distancing measures exist to save lives and to prevent our National Health Service from being overwhelmed by an influx of Covid-19 patients.

Despite that, we have a joyful duty—as Christians—to gather together to worship Christ. That must be our first priority, and we cannot let our annoyance with the current arrangements prevent us from doing so. Please, therefore, make every effort—as much as you are able—to return to St Peter's. After so long apart, we must never again take our parish community and our church building for granted.

MASKS IN CHURCH

I understand the reservation that many of us have over the wearing of masks. Maybe they're uncomfortable. Maybe they steam up your glasses. Maybe they look a bit strange. But maybe they'll save someone's life.



Ignore the ranting and raving from those who speak out against face coverings for spurious biological and spiritual reasons. The scientific data—and there is plenty of it—indicates that although wearing a face covering will not necessarily prevent you from becoming infected with Coronavirus, it will nevertheless definitely go a long way in protecting other people from being infected by you.

Of course, you could argue that if you don't have the Coronavirus, then there's no need for you to try to protect other people by wearing a mask. The difficulty, however, is that any of us could be infected but simply not know it. Yes, we see images on TV of people in hospital with the virus, but we must not be under the false impression that we will automatically end up in hospital if we get the virus too. The logical outcome of thinking that is that if we aren't sick enough to go to hospital then we therefore must be free of the virus. That's a very dangerous assumption because the fact is that many people can become infected and show little or no symptoms of it.

Indeed, you and I could be going about our day with this virus in our bodies, but be completely oblivious to it. If, then, we ignore social distancing, and inadvertently infect someone else, that person might have a much more serious reaction to the virus than we did.

So, we don't have the luxury of presuming that we are not a danger. We must think and behave as if we know for definite that we are carriers of this virus. And, as followers of Jesus, we

must be concerned with the welfare of other people.

So unless you have a legitimate reason for not wearing a mask (and I accept that there are some valid reasons), the right thing to do—the Christian thing to do—is wear a mask, and put the needs of others before your own.

DID THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH STOP DURING LOCKDOWN?

On St James' Day (celebrated on Sunday 26th July) I told you—and this might come as a shock to some of you—that rectors the length and breadth of the Church of Ireland never stopped working during the Lockdown. Parishes still needed to be managed. Sermons still needed to be written. Services still needed to be prepared. Worship and Bible studies still needed to be led. Pastoral crises still happened, and funerals still needed to be conducted. But—as I often tell you—the ministries and mission of the Christian Church go far, far beyond what the clergy do. And even if all the ministers had been sitting for the last four months twiddling their thumbs, the work of the Church would have carried on regardless. That's because YOU are the Church. Just not me and other members of the clergy.

You are the Christian Church. And you were still the Christian Church even when you were unable to come and sit in St Peter's. Because it's not being in our beautiful space that makes you a Christian. It's your relationship with God, through Christ, that makes you a Christian.

And although meeting together regularly with others to worship God is a very big part of being a Christian, I know that many of you have given expression to your faith in other ways during the Lockdown: When you've reached out to someone who may have been isolated or lonely, that is your Christian faith in action. When you offered to go to the shops for someone who is vulnerable and was unable to go for themselves, that is your



Christian faith in action. When you changed your behaviour during Lockdown, and avoided doing certain activities that you enjoy, because by doing so you might have endangered other people, that is your Christian faith in

action. When you juggled working from home whilst the children needed bathed, fed, educated, and played with, and found yourself arguing with your loved ones, to the point where you thought you were going to have a nervous breakdown, and then you remembered the Holy Spirit has an abundance of strength and love for you to tap into when your own reserves are running low—that is your Christian faith in action. When you heard that someone was going through a tough time, whether through isolation, or illness, or bereavement, and you prayed for them, even with as simple a prayer as “Lord God, please help them”, that is your Christian faith in action.

You see, even though most of the world was in Lockdown, and even though we have—by and large—not been able to meet face-to-face, and even though you have been unable to come into St Peter’s, the work of the Christian Church has continued because YOU have continued to put your Christian faith into action. That is what Christianity is all about. That’s what Jesus came into the world for.

So I want you to reflect upon your own attitude, and behaviour, in recent months. And ask yourself this: When you are unable to come to a church building for worship, when you are unable to have the social interaction that comes from being involved in the church, when you are unable to pray in St Peter’s—when you strip away all the outward trappings of religion that you took for granted before Coronavirus, what does your Christian faith look like? The answer to that question will tell you whether you are a follower of Jesus, or just someone who likes being in St Peter’s.

Now, going forward, as the Lockdown eases and normality resumes, we are going to focus so much more on putting our faith into practice in the local community, than we are on simply focussing on what we do within these four walls.

So whilst I am thrilled and delighted that we are now able to meet together here inside St Peter's, let's not think of this as merely the end of the Lockdown; it's also the beginning of something, an era in which we don't just talk and think about our faith in this building—much more importantly we will work together to find new ways to give it practical expression out there, in the world.

ARE YOU WHEAT OR A TARE?

On the Sixth Sunday after Trinity (Sunday 19th July) I told you that at the start of the Lockdown, when the weather was very good, I had the chance to get into the Rectory garden and cut back the brambles and dig up the weeds and put down moss killer and plant some new flowers.

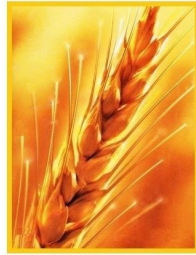
However, being very much an untrained, inexperienced, amateur gardener, the recurring problem that I encountered was telling the difference between the flowers and the weeds. The only weed I know for definite is a dandelion, and beyond that it would seem—as Rosemary Johnston has explained to me—weeds are just plants that grow where you don't want them to.

Now, this is the sort of thing that our Lord Jesus is talking about in Matthew 13: 24–30. The difference is that he's not talking about a garden. He's talking about a farm. And this difference is important because, when weeds grow in the Rectory garden, the worst you can say about it is that it's an eyesore. But when the weeds that Jesus was referring to grew up in a farm, well that could have very serious consequences. These “tares” as he calls them, are more commonly called “darnel”. If you want to be very fancy, their Latin name is *Lolium Temulentum*. If you eat them, it can make you delirious. In fact, the Latin word “temulentum”

means “drunk”. But more than making you feel tipsy and out of sorts, the effects can be fatal. So eating these weeds would be a big mistake.

Now, of course, you might say, “Sure, just don’t be eating weeds.”

Well that’s easier said than done when it comes to this particular stuff. Darnel and wheat look remarkably similar when they are growing, and even when they are fully grown, there is a slight



Wheat and Tares

resemblance. Indeed, in the ancient world darnel was sometimes considered to be wheat that had gone wrong, rather than being a separate plant altogether. Clearly, therefore, they did occasionally grow side by side naturally. And farmers would need to ensure that after the harvest, the heads of the wheat and the darnel were separated so that they only ate or sold the nutritious wheat, rather than poisoning themselves and others with the darnel.

What’s interesting in the parable, however, is that Jesus talks about someone purposefully sowing these bad seeds into a farmer’s field. This is therefore much more than someone messing around and being a nuisance. This is attempted murder. They want to kill the farmer, or kill the people to whom the farmer sells his crop, which would then destroy the farmer’s reputation and ruin his livelihood. So this is serious stuff.

What makes this particular type of sabotage even more cunning and annoying for the farmer, is that by the time he could recognise the difference between the wheat and the tares growing side by side in his field, it would be too late to do anything about it. That’s because—as is pointed out in the gospel reading—the roots of the wheat and the tares would have become intertwined, and it would be impossible to pull up the weeds without also damaging the wheat. So they had to wait until after both plants had been harvested together, in order to separate the good from the bad.

Jesus is, however, using this as a metaphor for the Kingdom of Heaven.

Note that, as I've said many times before, the Kingdom of Heaven does not simply mean "the place where you go when you die." It's not a place. It's a relationship with God. To be a member of the Kingdom of Heaven, or to live in the Kingdom of Heaven, means to be in a loving relationship with God through Christ. And that can of course refer to eternal life in the company of God after we die, but also—importantly—it can refer to how we relate to God in this world.

Now, if this world were a very straightforward place, then the Christian Church would simply be another name for the Kingdom of Heaven, because all Christians would be in a loving relationship with God. But the world is not straightforward, and not every person who calls themselves a Christian, or who considers themselves a Christian, is actually a member of the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus tells us elsewhere in the gospels that on the Day of Judgement some people will call out to him as their Lord, but he will—in response—tell them, "I don't know you." There is a sense that such people might have appeared to be good living, church-attending Christians, but despite that, they didn't have a genuine relationship with God. And it's that relationship on which they will be judged.

Now, if we were the sort of exclusive congregation who wanted to make sure that the only people who come to our church are the good sort—and there are some Christian denominations like that—then I'm afraid we would be in trouble.

Because the point Jesus is making—and this is why it's important to understand that the wheat and the tares look similar right up until the point when they are harvested—is that we humans will struggle to properly work out who has a relationship with God, and who hasn't. We are, after all, only able to see someone's behaviour, rather than their innermost thoughts and feelings. And whilst behaviour is often a good indicator (remember: a tree is known by its fruit) sometimes you can't judge a book by its cover.

Jesus' concern, therefore, is that if we try to make such judgements ourselves, then fair enough we might remove some of the genuinely bad people from amongst us, but in doing so we could also kick out some of the good ones too.

His commandment to us is leave the judging to him, and accept that the Christian Church, as a human institution, will have a mixture of people within it—some who truly love God, and some who don't. But it's not for us to work out which is which.

BE THE GOOD SOIL IN WHICH THE SEED OF THE GOSPEL IS SOWN

On the Fifth Sunday after Trinity (Sunday 12th July) I said that if you read the Bible in a very literal way, and if you pay attention to what you're reading in Matthew 13: 1–9, and if you have even a very basic grasp of mathematics, then you might think that our Lord Jesus is saying that only 25% of those people who hear about him, will become Christians. I say that because, in that gospel passage, we read about the parable of the sower and the seeds, in which Jesus uses seeds being spread over the ground as a metaphor for the Good News being proclaimed to the world.

Jesus lists four types of surface on which seeds can fall: path, rocky ground, thorny ground, and good soil. Of those four scenarios, the seeds will only thrive in the good soil. The other types of surface each have their particular problems, which are not conducive for the seed's survival and growth.



What, then, is the metaphor?

Well, Jesus then explains that the seeds represent the Good News, and the type of surface onto which the seed is thrown represents us. And he talks about four different ways in which we can respond when we hear the Good News. First, there are those who don't understand it, and who therefore quickly dismisses it. You hear a lot of that these days. Claims that spiritual people are delusional, or that the church is just a money making scheme, or that religion was invented to control the population. Such ideas—whilst seeming logical and intelligent to those who proudly proclaim them—really just betray the fact that they simply have never understood what Christianity is about. Of course, such misunderstandings are partly the fault of the Church itself, when its members have behaved in a thoroughly un-Christian way, and left us open to being called hypocrites, and a lot worse. So there are people who simply dismiss the Good News, because it was never communicated to them properly, or because they have an intellectual problem with the idea of religion in general.

Second, there are those who like the idea of the Good News, but turn away from it for fear of being unpopular. Like anything in life, it sometimes takes guts to stand up for what you believe, when everyone else disagrees. When it comes to Christianity, a few hundred years ago it probably took guts to stand up and say that you didn't believe. Nowadays, it's the reverse. Despite the census statistics indicating that the vast majority of the population have some sense of religious conviction or identity, the accepted norm in our society has become that most people are not overtly spiritual, and therefore if someone mentions Jesus in public they must have something wrong with them. In this sort of environment, it's easy to understand why some people, who might otherwise be open to the Good News, will avoid it. The peer pressure is just too much for them to withstand.

Third, there are those who again like the idea of the Good News, but they prioritise other things in their life, and nothing comes of

it. Jesus actually specifies "the cares of the world and the lure of wealth" as the main issues here. "The lure of wealth" is straightforward, in that if you wake up every morning thinking "I really want a million pounds to live a life of luxury" rather than "I really want to do some good in society" then clearly something has gone wrong in your journey of faith. But "the cares of this world" are more likely to be the issue for most people who want to live a Christian life, but who struggle with it. The difficulty for them comes from not applying the principles and practices of Christianity to the everyday issues that they deal with. They treat God as something to be thought about every other Sunday when they're not busy with something else, rather than experiencing him as a friend who accompanies them every day. And so when times get tough, they simply don't remember that he's there to draw strength from, to talk to, to be guided by. And as a consequence, the cares of this world choke and strangle the Good News within them.

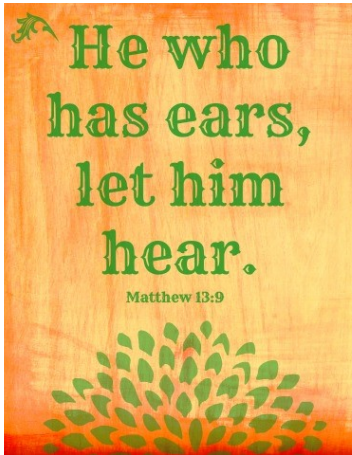
And then fourth, there are those who respond to the Good News, but it has a positive effect on both their own life, and on the lives of those with whom they come into contact. Now these are the sort of people whom Jesus wants us to be. People who understand what the Good News is, and allow ourselves to be transformed by it. That Good News, in a nutshell, is that Jesus Christ has restored our broken relationship with God, that through his own attitude and actions he has shown us a pattern of behaviour for our own lives, he has sent his Holy Spirit to help us be better people and to create a better world, and he has given us the hope of a future beyond the pains of this world. When we believe that, and we trust that Jesus has achieved this for us, and we seek to live our lives in accordance with that, then we are the good soil in which the seed of the Good News is planted.

Now, I said at the start that, taken literally, this passage suggests that only 25% of those who hear the Good News will become and grow as Christians. I don't think we need to be so literal

about it. But it's worth noting that clearly a high proportion of the population will not respond to the Good News the way that the Church would like. Some people would never dream of having anything to do with the Church. Other people might express a genuine interest for a short while, and then for one reason or another, they will drift away.

What we might take from this is a little bit of comfort for those times when someone new comes to worship in a church, and perhaps stays for a few weeks or months, and then disappears, never to be seen again. Sometimes even despite our best efforts to keep in contact, they decide Christianity is not for them. We need, sadly, to accept that as part of life.

But we should also take from this that we must persevere in proclaiming the Good News even when it seems to be falling on deaf ears in our community. You see, unless we have insight into the minds of everyone we meet, we will never truly know



what a person's lasting response to the Gospel will be. Indeed, it will often be the case that the people whom we think are likely candidates to become Christians have absolutely no interest, whilst conversely the people we least expect to come to faith are the ones who do. All we can really know for sure, therefore, is that we must keep sowing seeds, and then hope and pray that they fall in good soil and bear fruit.

THANK YOU

I would like to thank the Rector and Parishioners of St Peter's for their prayers and support after the sudden death of my cousin-in-law Joan Hill. Joan and her husband John loved to support St Peter's at many events over the years. Without the support of St Peter's I could not have coped so well.

Many thanks, Daphne

Lockdown and me

David Cromie



Recently Dame Vera Lynn died. The loss of a ‘national treasure’, as the press like to call such people, was sad in itself, but she also took with her one of the increasingly few tangible connections we have with the last time this country and the wider world were threatened with catastrophe. Soon we will have little more than footage, museums and constant re-runs of “Dad’s Army” to remind us of those awful days. Then the enemy was clearly observable in the menacing form of aircraft and submarines, and had better tanks than

we did. The governmental reaction was to vastly increase defences, restrict the freedoms of the domestic population and spend money on an unbelievable scale. This time the enemy is visible only under magnification, still partially unknown and liable to counter our best efforts to defeat it by changing its very essence, but our reaction has been on a similar scale to that of the 1940s.

For many, especially those with gardens and families, lockdown meant long and languid early summer days, freed from the necessity of work by government subsidy and entranced by the smell of barbeques. I have to confess I was very lucky in this respect, an extended social bubble and the arrival of a grandchild meant we could play happy families in the sunshine. But we all knew intuitively that there was something terribly wrong in our world and we didn’t need the daily “deaths by Covid” count and ministerial briefings to bring this fact to mind.

One obvious indicator of strange times was the closure of St Peter’s for public worship. Let’s be honest, for many of us the parish is a great big social bubble: we do like to see the familiar, friendly faces there each week. The Rector called me out of complacent, summer relaxation and told me to get to work; first to join teams telephoning members to make sure they were alright and had help with shopping and such like, and then to assist with broadcasting morning worship and by producing prayers and reflections for the Sunday evening slots. We began with a bang when we did a broadcast service for Radio Ulster – wasn’t it terrific that St Peter’s had a starring role in reminding the province the church was alive and kicking, and still there for those who wanted it?

And it was still there, but it felt very odd. I would drive up strangely empty roads, and arrive at St Peter's around ten o'clock each Sunday morning to discover the Rector had been there for ages, complete with a fizzy drink or a flask of tea, and surrounded by laptops, tvs, gadgets and wires. The booming welcome was always cheering, but there were often problems – with focus or the camera position, with the sound not working properly, or with getting the broadcast links to work on time. With no technical ability whatsoever, I merely watched, my responsibility limited to telling the rector we were running late and not to forget to ring the little bell which announced the start of the broadcast. There was, of course, a lot of good humour, not the fatalistic mirth of soldiers going into battle, but that of two men forced out of their comfort zones and just hoping the mic was on when it was supposed to be on—and mostly definitely not on when it wasn't! We got very quick reactions from those viewing the output, usually very supportive, though occasionally along the lines of “I switched on fifteen minutes ago and still nothing”—they knew little of the panic to get the broadcast links to work as they should. One of the most helpful commentators was Ken Houston; he had been very active doing broadcasts from home, and it was such a shame that first social distancing and then health issues prevented him coming down to join in the productions.

For those used to a tidy and well laid-out church interior, it looked and felt very different during lockdown. Not just because of the lack of people and burbling voices; but also because of the cables snaking over the floor and seats, a tripod standing triumphant in the middle of the centre aisle, a step-ladder leaning against a pillar and clerical vestments strewn in sundry places amongst boxes of electrical goodies and other detritus (including the rector's tea), all of which screamed out “this isn't normal!”.

Now we are back, it is normal, yet it isn't. Black and yellow tapes define standing positions, hand sanitisers greet parishioners and even the smiles of the churchwardens are hidden behind masks, though you can see their eyes twinkle as they make sure we maintain social distancing. We even have our names written down as we enter and leave the building for virus tracking purposes. But we are back, the church never went away, the message never changed, just the means of transmission. It might even be said that lockdown forced us all to work harder to maintain contact with our fellow-members, especially the more vulnerable; and I know the boss will not like me saying this, but the sermons were terrific and the thanks expressed by many watching the services on-line showed that links were

maintained and that the church remained vibrant and relevant. The trick, now that we seem to be getting back to more normal operations, will be to build on that relevance and value; that is the challenge for all of us.

One final thought. It was a privilege as well as a pleasure to be able to do something practical to help the parish during lockdown. Even on the odd occasion when things didn't go quite as planned, I knew instinctively both that listeners would forgive my occasional stumble during a live reading (isn't pre-recording such a wonderful thing!) and that there was a very real link, however ethereal, between the rector and me doing our little bit in an otherwise empty church and the listener, perhaps sitting isolated and alone with their laptop. I shall not swiftly forget lockdown, nor the opportunity given to me to help make something positive out of it.

Parish Notes On-line

There are full colour versions of Parish Notes on our website. Visit www.stpeters.connor.anglican.org and click on "News".

The sound of birdsong never changes

Dora Hanna



The spring of 2020 was a time we are not likely to forget. Fear and uncertainty about a monster virus, that few knew anything about, had taken over our world killing hundreds of thousands and stretching health services beyond their capacity. Health care workers were acknowledged as heroes working night and day to save lives. Children drew rainbows and put them in their windows. People clapped in the streets.

The elderly and vulnerable were in lockdown and the goodness and kindness of the human race was evident in how people cared for their neighbours.

Only essential services were kept going and silence and inactivity descended upon us. All seemed to be quiet and still.

I will be forever grateful to my cat who woke me every morning at dawn; I would step out into my back garden and watch the most beautiful sunrises morning after morning—the beginning of another day. The most uplifting and wonderful experience during those mornings was to hear the dawn chorus—there seemed to be every type of birdsong in my garden. I felt very close to nature and God's creation for that little while before I faced the strange world again.