



Pastoral Letter from Fr. Mark

Wednesday of the 5th Week of Lent (1st April 2020)

"Change or decay in all around I see; o thou who changest not, abide with me."

My dear friends,

Those of you who know your hymns will recognise that the above is a line from that often sung funeral hymn, *"Abide with me"*, written by the 19th century divine, hymnodist and poet Henry Francis Lyte (also the author of *"Praise my soul the King of Heaven"*). The sharper eyed amongst you, or at least those of you who have turned to 331 in your New English Hymnal, will have spotted that the words reproduced above are not quite as Lyte penned them. The amendment (from Lyte's "change *and* decay" to "change *or* decay") was, I am reliably informed, first insisted upon by the Revd. Canon Sir (George) Percy Maryon-Maryon-Wilson Bt. (Rector of Christ Church St. Leonard's-on-Sea and, interestingly, the 12th baronet of Eastbourne) – a wonderful and colourful priest of the sort of clergy sadly now filtered out by the increasingly "managerialist" church in which we sadly find ourselves these days.

Changing Lyte's word was no whim or eccentricity on Fr. Percy's part, as he was making a very serious point – that change is *not always synonymous with decay*. It seems almost trite in the circumstances to state that we are living in a period of great change. In many respects it is unsettling and troubling and we ask ourselves the question as to whether our day-to-day lives will be the same again after all this is over. Some of you may have seen Archbishop Rowan Williams on BBC2's *Newsnight* programme reflecting on the issues this crisis raises for how we might construct society after it is over, and I thought it would be worth reproducing here what he said:

"It is an opportunity for people to work at what matters to them. Really to settle down and think "well what matters? who matters?" And the question of "who matters?" is a big one because of course we are being asked to undertake all these difficult social distancing exercises not just to keep ourselves safe, but also to keep safe the people we most care about and that really brings front and centre just how important to us are the people we love. So there's something there to work on... I think that the real question that's posed to us here is what does it really mean to live in a safe society, a society where vulnerable people are secure because suddenly when we are faced with insecurity on this scale we realise how very poorly equipped we are as a society to look after those who can't so easily look after themselves. So what does a really safe society look like?" (Newsnight 23rd March)

The same applies, of course, to our *spiritual* lives as we all are adjusting to life without direct access to the sacraments, which is also unsettling, troubling and hugely difficult. But we are now called both as individual members of the Body of Christ, and also the Body of Christ which is the Church itself, to worship, bear witness and be involved in mission and outreach in new ways. In short, in this crisis, God is calling us to change and adapt and with his help and grace we can do so and make this work. In this context I am reminded of Jesus' teaching in the Synoptic Gospels about not *"pouring new wine into old wineskins"* for fear that they will burst (see Mt. 9:16-17, Mk. 2:21-22 and Lk. 5:36-39). We don't know how long all of this might last but the change does not necessarily mean decay; it may even mean renewal. Who knows, perhaps period may lead to the renaissance the Church needs?

Not having direct access to the sacraments, though painful, should also encourage us to a fresh appreciation of what wonderful and gracious gifts they are. Equally, in a time when many of us are considerably less busy than we usually are (although I'm not entirely sure I agree with one of our congregation when they asked me if I was enjoying my "holiday"!), we are given the opportunity in an immediate sense to appreciate God's blessings in the here and the now (as Keble put it – *"New every morning is the love. Our wakening and uprising prove; Through sleep and darkness safely brought, Restored to life and power and thought."*). The Jesuit priest and spiritual writer Fr. Jean-Pierre de Caussade (1675-1751) wrote about the "sacrament of the present moment": *"God speaks to every individual through what happens to them moment by moment. There is no moment when God is not manifest in the form of some affliction, obligation, or duty. No moment is trivial since each one contains a divine kingdom, and heavenly sustenance. The present moment holds riches beyond your wildest dreams."*

Are we taking these opportunities for deeper reflection, and appreciation, as we should be? Clearly we are some way from the end of this crisis. When we come out at the other side though – and we will – will we be able to say that the time we have spent in isolation has been used well? I'm not talking about the fact that some of us will have tidier gardens than we have had for years, or cleaner homes. Equally, will this unsettling time of our life make this year's celebration of Holy Week and Easter (during which I commend using the accompanying booklet) more powerful than ever, despite the necessarily impoverished nature of our liturgical celebrations? I do hope you will join me spiritually at home as I offer the liturgies.

As most of you will now be aware, having been contacted by one of the clergy, we have divided up our contact list between Frs. Thomas, Tony, Richard and myself, and aim to keep in touch with all of you by 'phone once a week. This will obviously mean that you will each regularly hear from one of the four of us, but not all four! If you think we have missed anyone, please get in touch with details of who and why and ways to contact them. As before, please do circulate this message to your social circle. Morning and evening prayer continue to be live streamed every day at 8.30am and 5pm, and as many Masses as we can given the restrictions under which we operate (and you can also catch up) - please regularly check our Facebook page for this: www.facebook.com/stsaviourseastbourne

With my prayers for Holy Week (and immense gratitude for yours for us), and love,

Fr. Mark