

**To Parishoners and Friends of Merrylea Parish Church  
from the Locum, The Reverend Jim Gibson.**

Sunday, 22nd March 2020  
Fourth Sunday in Lent

In my former office at Bothwell Parish Church there is an unbroken record of Ministers and Rectors of the parish of Bothwell stretching back from 31 March 2019 (date of my retiral) to the early twelfth century. During all that time, not once have the main doors of the building been closed to worshippers. Even in medieval times, when the armies of Edward I and Edward II travelled north to bombard the Norman castle at Bothwell and encamped within and around the building, the ancient liturgy was celebrated. The strong advice given these last few days that *“public worship be suspended until further notice”* is without precedent.

Our Interim Moderator and the Session Clerk had little option but to reluctantly accede to the official advice given. Given the uncertainties of the current threat presented by coronavirus, there would be no joy in conducting worship within an empty church and it is our duty to think of others whether working within the pressurised zone of the NHS or the elderly self-isolating for safety and helping to flatten the curve.

But, I do wonder if the Church’s withdrawal will have a lasting effect in how the Church is regarded in the future. Will the congregation return when the doors are reopened? Will the threat of death stalking the land bring people to a more intense sense of their place as human beings in the great scheme of things? Or, maybe, people will start to wonder what they ever needed the Church for in the first place. Will all our regular worshipping friends and others who are elderly members of the congregation survive to the time when we reopen?

No-one knows just how long this imposed shut-down will last. As may sadly happen for some small businesses, I suspect that some small, financially weak congregations may not survive. I have long held the view that, in time, bankruptcy will close congregations presently clinging to life by their fingertips. Churches exist only for one reason: the worship of God. If that cannot happen then as the poet Philip Larkin says in his poem *Church Going*, as entering an empty church he stoops to take off his cycle clips: *‘in awkward silence’*, pronouncing *‘here endeth’* more loudly than intended and hearing *‘the echoes snigger briefly’* before wondering *‘what is this place for?’*.

What indeed ?

Thankfully, worship is going to be broadcast nationally on television and those local congregations with the expertise will do the same via the internet to people isolated at home. This will help, but only so far. Worship is intrinsically a social activity. No matter how popular it may be, nor how useful, social media can only ever be a distant semblance of the real, living thing.

Some argue that you don’t need Church to worship God at all. That you can sit at home, or climb a mountain, or sail a boat and commune with the Deity in the silence of your own heart. Such naivety overlooks the fact that such religious faith as we may possess is not of our own creation but is our inheritance received from generations before us. Maybe sitting at home over the next months may reawaken us to the vital role that meeting together with fellow searchers of truth, meaning and forgiveness has in knitting us together as human beings dependent upon each other for life and life’s joys and necessities.

Religious services may have been suspended, but the love of God has not.

The love of God is for everyone. Sunday by Sunday in our worship, our consistent preaching and praying is that God's love is for all, regardless of race, creed, sexuality, colour or intellect. And for none more than the most vulnerable. Right now, that means all of us who – for whatever reason – are fearful and anxious.

In order that worshippers at Merrylea and other members and friends of the congregation can feel some contact with the church, it is intended that I will offer a weekly homily and prayer to be sent to all who may wish to receive it. I am very grateful for the support of the session clerk and others in making this possible.

Moreover, sadly, parish visiting cannot take place at this time. However, anyone is welcome in extremis to make contact with me by phone or email should they feel conversation together useful.

Jim Gibson.

*Suggested Reading:*

Hebrews 4. Verses 14 – 16.

*Prayer:*

Loving God, our Mother and Father, a refuge and strength over generations past and source of help and hope in present times, receive this prayer as our nation and the peoples of the world face uncertainty through the unseen threat of viral infection. May your love encompass those living alone, elderly, isolated and feeling most vulnerable to that which we cannot control. Calm their anxieties and through your unchanging and unchangeable love for all may they, and I, rest content in your peace which surpasses all understanding. Strengthen the endeavours of our scientists in their research for a vaccine to combat this infection and of medical workers in their care for the wellbeing of us all.

God of love, you have enabled our hearts to trust you and our minds to seek your presence in our lives. With cheerfulness, may I face each new day thankful for present mercies and confident of great things yet to enjoy; through faith in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.