

James' last sermon, 14th June 2020,
St Peter's Limpsfield,
streamed Eucharist
Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35 - 10:8

The kingdom of heaven is still at hand

May I speak in the name of God, who made us, who loves us and who gives us new life.

Today for the first time since before Lent - the first time since before lockdown in late March - we go green. Green and growing time, as the Godly Play lessons put it. Also known as Ordinary time, the longest section of the church's year.

Proclaim the good news, says Jesus, "The kingdom of heaven has come near." Or, in an alternative translation, "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 10:7).

Sometimes in my experience, and from what I hear from some others, we can go for long stretches when we don't necessarily feel it, but our truth and hope in God in Christ is that of the kingdom of heaven coming near. Being at hand. Making the ordinary, extraordinary.

That has been my experience through the privilege and often the joy - of being Rector, and Team Rector, here.

More than anything, through the countless kindnesses of you and others in thought and word and deed. And in our worship, letting God be God.

Alongside people with whom I have shared day by day and week by week; and those who I have been invited to walk with through profound moments in their lives. Each one special and different. Ordinary and extraordinary.

I was picturing in our temporarily empty pews all the many people who have filled them: some old and some gone to glory, some young and growing, some in the middle, and some for special occasions. Through the things that we have shared, the kingdom of heaven has come near.

We have had some things to endure together. But as Paul writes to the church in Rome, that produces character, and hope and God's love poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:3-5).

And of course I have had a few disasters! Just one to mention today. When I was very warmly welcomed for a funeral visit around the corner here by Rosemary Slayter, God rest her soul. It was only after about 20 minutes that I realised that her husband had died 12 years ago, and I had come to the wrong house! But still, I managed to move on after a while without loss of face or reputation. And it was a very warm welcome. So even disasters have blessings to be found in and through them! (This is the Christian way of the cross and our Easter hope of resurrection, in action).

There has been understandably a lot of talk in the lockdown about the church being the people and not the building. And so it is. But it is a building too. A gate for the Kingdom of heaven; and an asset belonging to our whole community, which will soon be open again.

Our church building is a place where, across many centuries, many people have found and will find consolation and joy, liberation and freedom, guidance and challenge, community and belonging, a place for offering talents to the glory of God, a safe haven, a foretaste of heaven, and a school for the Lord's service; a place of both human and divine encounter. This lockdown time has reminded us that it is not an ark for the chosen few, but that we are all in the same boat.

As Christians we are called to proclaim the good news afresh, and in the coming weeks and months we will quite rightly be asking questions as to what God is asking of us now in response to the new situation that faces us. The full outworking of the present crisis will take a long time to become clearer. I came into this post in 2013 with a process underway for laying down the church building at St Silvan's, Staffhurst Wood; I leave with a process well underway, partly through those resources, for renewing our ancient and living house of God here at St Peter's.

I am sure that the opportunity which we have at St Peter's through the well-advanced Millennium Room development and AV / Media projects in these coming weeks and months is one that I very much hope we will take. It is a chance which may not come again, to renew our church building, which is itself an icon, among our greatest responsibilities and treasures to nurture and share.

We now have both the resources and the unity of purpose through our MAP to transform it into a genuinely hospitable, versatile and vibrant 21st century public building to serve people locally and beyond, as a significant part of our sharing the good news of Christ afresh.

I know that, even in the new financial climate, our Archdeacon Moira is fully supportive of these projects. But that is now for you to pray, discern and to decide on through our church council, and to lead St Peter's forward in service and witness and love, in Christ.

St Andrew's and St Mary's will also be asking these questions in their service of the people of their parishes as to what God is asking of our churches now. (And remember, we do not have to resolve all the questions or resolve all the problems: that one step is enough.)

The kingdom of heaven has come near. How we contribute to that coming near is special and different to each one of us. But *that* it does is a joyful thing that we can recognise and celebrate, whatever our circumstances. "*The kingdom of heaven has come near*" through the Holy Spirit at work in you. Thank you.

I will miss you and continue to pray for you. Fare well in Christ, whatever our gifts, whatever challenges and opportunities we face - for in Christ the kingdom of heaven is *still* at hand.
Amen.

James Percival, Team Rector