

Welcome to the chapel at South Canonry for this very shortened, socially isolated, online, stay at home Eucharist of the Chrism and Renewal of Commitment to Ministry.

The annual Maundy Thursday service cathedral is one of the highlights of the diocesan year as we prepare together to celebrate the great three days at the heart of the Christianity.

We are all missing access to our churches and cathedral and are feeling the difficulties of ministry in keeping with the guidance to stay home. Yet this small chapel in the bishop's home feels a bit like Dr Who's Tardis with more people in it today than ever before. Thank God for the technology that makes it possible for us to meet online, to pray and be together even when we are apart.

In receiving Communion I will do so for us all. It's a strange eucharistic theology for these strange separated times in which we are united in Christ.

John 13.31-35

In keeping the guidance of the archbishops and the government there has been a corporate Lenten discipline. It's strange and it's tough. I am sensitive to the laments and despair about that. I am also grateful for the way in which you have been getting on with it.

Yesterday Helen and I received an Easter card and letter from one of the Benedictine monks who live in The Close by the cathedral here in Salisbury. It said, "This year will be a real Holy Week with people really walking the way of the cross."

He had in mind those in hospital and seriously ill, but also our experience as Church. We are feeling the closure of our church buildings as places to pray together and alone, the deprivation of the sacraments and of that normal gathering of people to worship, the people who with whom we are a community.

This week we are remembering the way of the cross and the disruption of our usual practices is very disturbing. We are bewildered and whilst I don't want to over spiritualise this it is a very different, real way of the cross, and potentially positive experience of Holy Week. As bishops, priests and deacons we have a responsibility to try to make it so for the church and wider community.

John's Gospel is very helpful to us. It is the most Eucharistic of the Gospels with the bread of life and true vine. Perhaps the Eucharist in that community was so well known that there is no institution narrative at the Last Supper. John tells of foot washing, of the Master teaching his disciples to serve, of God being glorified and the disciples as little children being given a new commandment to love one another. Maybe that will help us and our churches to be Eucharistic communities without being able to receive the bread and wine, body and blood of Jesus, in the celebration of Easter? Today we all share in my celebrating communion, just as those in your care are asked to share in your celebrating communion when you do so at home.

The blessing of oils for the anointing of the sick and dying, for the signing of the cross at baptism and the oil of Chrism is an act done now for the future. You won't be able to collect the oils until we are able to travel again. You can collect them when it's possible and when needed. But this year's ordinations are going to be moved from Petertide at the end of June to 26th September, near Michaelmas. That gives greater certainty for everyone involved in planning for those occasions and I hope they will be a Diocesan celebration of our shared ministry. The ordination of priests in the morning could be the occasion for the distribution of the oils for use in the ministry entrusted to us.

Despite or perhaps because of the social dislocation of recent weeks, I have been very struck by this year's Lent book by Ruth Valerio, 'Saying Yes to Life'. Her focus on the care of God's creation is at a time when there is growing concern about the work that is needed now to ensure all will be harvested and we will be fed.

But one of the upsides of what we are going through is the renewal of creation taking place in this period of shutdown with less pollution, clear air and wonderful birdsong. Ruth makes a lot of the sabbath, the last day of creation when we give thanks for all that God has given us. That is a Eucharistic community, living in grateful response to the wonderful creation God has given us. For the beauty of the earth.... And for the skill of those addressing scientific endeavour and human need.

In 1981 when I was a young priest the missionaries John and Audrey Coleman were held prisoners in Iran. They were unable to receive Communion but every day as he said the Lord's Prayer, would cross his hands to receive not the sacrament but whatever God gave them that day.

In the coming weeks it is possible that some of you will face a significant increase in the care of the dying, funeral ministry and care of the bereaved. Chaplains are playing a vital part in the hospitals. Links have been made with crematoria and with the councils. Bishops Karen and Andrew are putting in place a bereavement service using clergy and other ministers with the gifts to do this by phone.

We do this because of Christ's way of the cross which we mark so differently this Holy Week but which celebrates all that God has done for us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to whom be glory now and for ever. Amen.