

## Love and Truth in the Time of COVID-19: Some Pastoral and Theological Reflections (4)

Dear sisters and brothers,

Our current circumstances have changed the expression and experience of ministry in subtle yet significant ways. One of those changes is that our ministries have become more visible to one another. In the pre-COVID world most of us spent Sundays focussed on the people God called us to serve at a particular time in a particular space. We might have had some inkling of what was happening at the ministry down the road or across the Diocese but by and large their regular goings-on were hidden from us.

Now that has all changed. From the relative comfort of our lounge rooms you and I can virtually visit a variety of churches on any given Sunday. There is much that is positive in that – opportunities to learn from each other, to re-connect with old friends and to appreciate something of the breadth and diversity of God’s work in the world-wide church.

There is also however the potential for attitudes to develop that are personally and spiritually destructive. We can find ourselves comparing ‘our’ ministry with what others have to offer – coveting our neighbour’s camera operator or lighting set-up or music group. We can become anxious about whether ‘our’ people will be drawn away by other more impressive ministries. We can find ourselves noting the number of views on our latest Youtube video as if it’s a barometer measuring our worth in the Kingdom of God.

Here are some suggestions on how we might guard our souls in this season of spiritual opportunity and danger.

. *Remember to give thanks before envying or criticising*

When we encounter another ministry gratitude is a great place to begin. Give thanks to God for whatever you can – for the content, for the production, for the way in which it has ministered to you. At the very least give thanks for the intention and initiative behind what you see and hear even if it is not quite to your taste.

. *Recognise that all faithfulness in ministry is contextual*

There is of course a core to the gospel of Jesus that transcends time and place. However, the expression of that gospel within the life of a particular community of faith will always reflect the character and history of that community. We can be confident that God has given each church the gifts it needs to fulfil His purpose for it in a particular time and place. Faithfulness means stewarding those gifts rather than wishing we had the gifts God has given to the church down the road.

. *Rest in the knowledge that you are accountable to a gracious God*

Youtube and Facebook do not determine our worth in the Kingdom or our standing before God. Nor do the opinions of our colleagues or even our own judgement. In 1 Corinthians 4:3-4 Paul writes that “with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.” At first glance being judged by the One who knows the secrets of our hearts may seem small comfort! But here’s the good news: *God’s assessment of our ministry will always be more gracious than our own self-assessment.* Ministers who rest in God’s grace in Jesus know that when all is said, done and live-streamed they are beloved sons and daughters first of all.

Finally, if you want to learn from what God's people across the (western) world are doing at this time you might like to check out the new e-book *The Distanced Church: Doing Church Online* which can be downloaded at <https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/187891>. With chapters on everything from 'The Challenges of Online in Indian Country & Rural America'; to 'Being Benedictine Online' there is plenty for us all.

In the Risen Jesus,

+Mark

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