

Love and Truth in the Time of COVID-19: Some Pastoral and Theological Reflections

Dear sisters and brothers,

In my Synod address last year I spoke on the theme of *Engaging a World of Difference with the Love and Truth of Jesus*. In the first months of 2020 we are discovering how different from the expected norm our world can be! Precisely for that reason the call to engage remains as urgent as ever, even if for a time the shape and form of that engagement changes.

Below are a few preliminary thoughts to help us navigate those changes

Take time to grieve, with hope

The temporary cessation of public worship services is a loss, both corporately and individually. For many us, the most transformational moments in our Christian journey occurred in this context. It is right that we and the people we serve are allowed to grieve what we are missing. Remember also that beyond and alongside grief there is hope. In our Gospel reading from this past Sunday Jesus reminds us that “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24). Our God, who cannot be confined by space or time, will continue to enliven and receive our worship as it is offered over the internet, in small groups and in daily acts of service.

Continue to embody love

The Christian faith is fundamentally incarnational. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). The Lord Jesus gave His body and shed His blood for us. In John 3:18 we are urged to love not just with words, but in truth and action. For a time prudence requires restraint in the use of our bodies to express that love in certain ways – hence the absence of handshakes and increased physical distance. But the call to put flesh on our words remains. Love can be expressed as we and our congregations distribute publications to those without email, as we deliver groceries to anxious neighbours, as we step back in a queue rather than rushing forward.

Communicate intentionally

Notwithstanding the above, words do matter. Words can re-assure, or they can alarm. Our call to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15) takes on new significance. In the days, weeks and months ahead we and our people will be processing a steady stream of information from a public health perspective. Most of this will be changing, some of it will be confusing but it is important it gets through. For those of us in pastoral ministry an important question therefore is this “Alongside this changing communication, what are the changeless truths I want to emphasise over time in my writing and speaking?” You will answer that question in your own way but let me suggest some themes drawn from our Gospel readings during Lent:

- John 3: In Jesus, God offers us the sure gift of eternal life
- John 4: In Jesus, God calls out worshippers in all times and places

- John 9: In Jesus, God's light shines brightly in the darkness
- John 11: In Jesus, God grieves over death, even as He proclaims his power over it.

We are companions on this journey. None of us would have chosen it, but in God's gracious sovereignty it is the path we are called to walk. I look forward to sharing it with you and, in time, gathering publically once again to break bread and share wine.

With love in Jesus,

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