

Fr Peter's Message to The Parish of Petworth and Midhurst for The  
Fourth Sunday of Lent, 2020.

The first Sunday without public celebration of Mass  
due to the Coronavirus pandemic

My dear friends,

It never would have occurred to me, even a few days ago, that I might be writing a message such as this one to you. The world has changed dramatically in a matter of hours. As I listen to people talking, I am struck by just how much loss people are having to soak up at this time. Each of us experiences these losses in so many different ways, many of them to do with loss of certainty, loss of engagement with other people, loss of security, just loss of the familiar, of the way of life that we have been comfortable with. Now that there are no public celebrations of Mass there is a new level of loss, and on occasion I have been almost overwhelmed by the horrifying prospect of not being able to celebrate Mass with you. It feels, to me, very much like a parent realizing that he or she can no longer feed their children.

I think it is really important for us all to acknowledge and recognize the reality of our different losses. Life has changed dramatically, and at least to start with all we see is loss, change for the worse. This is real, and frightening, and pretending that it is not there would do us no good at all. But, having acknowledged this feeling of loss it is important that we do not stop there and allow it to turn into despair. We have to be able to tread a middle path, not pretending there is no problem at all, or that it will be over soon, but also not allowing it to overwhelm us. As followers of the Lord Jesus Christ we are all, each one of us, apostles of hope and as such the world needs us now more than ever.

One of the scripture readings for the Fourth Sunday of Lent, from the Letter to the Ephesians, says this: 'Wake up from your sleep, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you'. Now there is nothing good about this coronavirus pandemic, but we can make a choice that we will make our responses to it a pathway for good. In our time of prayer we might reflect a little on those words: 'Wake up from your sleep'. In what ways have we fallen asleep – either as individuals or as a culture? What do we need to be more awake to? When we finally emerge from the present crisis (as we certainly will) do we intend to emerge more awake, or will we drift back off to sleep?

As we come to terms with our new situation, and the new way in which life must work, the sense of loss will begin to pass. As apostles of hope, people who believe that God can bring something good out of every situation, can

even restore the dead Christ to life, we must look for ways in which we can make God's love and mercy real and present. Missing the Mass, let us keep alive that great hunger, that great longing for the Eucharist. Let us pray each day that this holy hunger continues within us. Let us hunger, too, for the easy social interaction that we have lost. Let us look for new ways to make and sustain friendships, being careful not to neglect all those who find the world of the internet too difficult to manage. I am absolutely sure that some of the new things that we begin to do in this time of trial will be of great use to us, and will shape the future for us, even once the trial is passed.

'Wake up from your sleep'. It is time for us to be awake to the new world that we are living in, but awake to its possibilities as much as to its problems. There is much work to be done!

I would like to end with some beautiful words of hope from St Paul's letter to the Romans. He writes: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God" (Romans 8.28). In the middle of all the suffering and the sadness, God has a plan for good things, and we are the ones to make them happen.

I would like to say to you all that I want us all to stay very close, if not physically then at least in spirit. I know that it is a great loss that you cannot be with me for Mass, and I feel that loss terribly. I promise you that as I go to the altar each day (every day, seven days a week, always at 9.30am – if you hear the church bell ring, you will know that I am about to begin) I will carry there with me every prayer that you would have made, every anxiety, fear, hope or joy that you would have brought to the altar. Although physically apart, we remain absolutely one. The Church has not abandoned you, and never will. I know that you will pray for me, as I will for you. I will continue to write a weekly message for you throughout these difficult times, and to do whatever is in my power to help you. Let us be apostles of hope, heralds of joy, in difficult times. And O my goodness, what a party we shall have when first we can celebrate Mass together once more!

Praise God in his holy place,  
Praise him in his mighty heavens.  
Praise him for his powerful deeds,  
Praise his surpassing greatness!

Fr Peter Newsam  
Petworth  
21<sup>st</sup> March 2020