

Message for Corpus Christi 2020

Well I imagine some of us were thinking this day would never come! Today is the last day on which our churches must stay locked shut; from tomorrow we are allowed to open them for private prayer. In this parish we will be opening the church at Petworth for an hour on Wednesday morning, from 10am until 11am. I cannot wait to have someone other than just myself and Cathy in the building! We will then open each of our churches next Sunday for an hour, each beginning at the time when Mass used to start. After that we will see if we can open somewhere everyday – but that depends entirely on enough people volunteering to act as stewards. You can read about that on the newsletter. Such exciting times.

Of course, what we all really want is to be able to celebrate Mass together. We don't know yet when that will be, and we also don't know what sort of restrictions may be placed on us. We will have to restrict the number of people coming, of course, but in different countries different provisions have been made for the celebration of Mass. In some places there is no singing; in others people have to wear masks; in others some parts of the Mass, like some of the readings, the creed and the Gloria are being omitted. In Scotland, shockingly, the homily must be brief!

We don't yet know what restrictions will be placed on us when we are able to gather for Mass, but we do know that it will be quite different from Mass as we have experienced it in the past. Already we have got used to strange and unusual experiences of Mass: most days I celebrate Mass alone, which is certainly not usual; many of you have been watching Mass on the television or on the computer, which is also strange. Some of you have had no experience of Mass at all for more than three months, and that must be very odd. So, we have got used to our experience of Mass being disrupted; but I think it will be very strange to be back at Mass together, whenever that happens, yet experiencing it very differently. And so I thought, on this Feast of Corpus Christi, it would be good to reflect very briefly on what is going on at Mass: what is the essence of it, the core, that remains the same wherever it is celebrated, however, whenever. If we are clear about this, then whatever the disruptions are, however strange it may feel, we will not be distracted and we will be able to stay focused on the heart of what is going on.

The Second Vatican Council explained to us that everything the church does is directed at two things: giving glory to God, and allowing ourselves to be made holy by God – technically the glorification of God and the sanctification of people. That is the point of everything the church does, and above all it is achieved through our celebration of Holy Mass. We celebrate Mass to give glory to God, and to allow him into our lives in a way that makes us more holy. (Sacrosanctum Concilium n 10).

In these lockdown days, when public Mass has not been possible, this has been the point of your family gatherings on Sunday, the times when you get together (or if you live alone, when you have done this on your own) to read the

scriptures, or to say the rosary, or to pray the office. You have been doing this to give glory to God, and to open your hearts to him so that he can enter your lives and make you holy. Even when you watch the Mass on television, although you are not present at the celebration, you do this in order to give glory to God and to allow him into your hearts. This can be quite difficult to do, it is so easy to be distracted in your own home. We have to make a clear mental decision before we begin: this is not like watching a television programme; this is not like anything else I do; this time I give to God for his glory, and in the longing and hope that he will enter my life to make me more holy.

Do you remember a story from the Book of Exodus, where Moses goes up the mountain to receive the tablets of stone. As he comes down the mountain again he does not realize that his face is glowing with God's glory: he has entered God's presence, and has been made holy.

Whatever Mass is like when we are allowed to celebrate it in public again, it will probably feel unfamiliar. This could be very distracting, and even rather disappointing. We might be in danger of ending up like the Israelites in the wilderness who forgot that they had been saved from slavery and turned on Moses: *"Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food."* (Numbers 21.5). It is a natural human thing to do, comparing the present with the past. But however strange our future celebrations of Mass may be, however much we may miss the full church, and the music, and the servers, and the splendour of it all, let's remember that none of that is essential. We come to Mass to give glory to God, and to allow Him to work in our hearts and build us up in holiness.

The beautiful texts of today's Mass remind us of all that we are missing at the moment, and it's tempting to be like the Israelites in exile, to hang up our harps on the trees in Babylon and weep. Things are not as we want them to be. But take heart, the Lord is at work! Our churches are opening again; we will be able once more to kneel in adoration and pray before the Blessed Sacrament; God's presence in our world will be very clear to us, and he will invite us to be lifted into his heavenly presence. My goodness, that is so amazing. When we can celebrate Mass again, we must not be distracted by what is unfamiliar. We might need to say to ourselves: I have come here to give glory to you, God, and to allow you to enter my heart; that is all, and that is enough.