**Sermon – Sunday 17th January 2021 – 2nd Sunday of Epiphany**

**May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.**

We gather again this week together, yet apart, with the doors of the Church closed and I know this is a difficult time for everyone.

Unlike previous lockdowns this is not a decision that has been imposed upon the Church by Government but a decision taken locally in response to the deteriorating situation and I wish to reflect on this for a few minutes so that hopefully you appreciate why I took the decision I did.

Our two readings today, from 1 Samuel and John’s Gospel remind us of the call of God and of sacrifice.

Samuel committed himself to a life of service and responding to the message of God, no matter how hard that might have been to hear or to deliver and Nathanael followed Jesus as one of the 12.

Two lives dedicated to God and all that this would mean for them and their families and the sacrifices that they would have to make and to act and live outside what may be the expected norms.

As we meet together there is a certain resonance with our current circumstances – of difficult messages delivered and decisions taken.

When the latest lockdown was announced by the Prime Minister on the 4th January, places of worship were excluded from those venues or businesses that were forced to close – public worship could continue, as could private prayer and occasional offices.

However the overarching message was one of careful assessment as to the individual situation and circumstances and if the feeling was that the Church should close this would have the support of the Diocese.

Equally you would be supported if you wished to stay open provided your assessment was comprehensive and all the protocols were followed.

Upon consultation with your DCC, the majority were in favour of remaining open and this would have been the case if the situation had not deteriorated sharply towards the end of the week.

On the Thursday there was at that time a record number of deaths announced, record infection levels and the Mayor of London declared a “major incident”, meaning that there was a fear that within 2-3 weeks the hospitals would be overwhelmed.

Alongside this announcement he and other civic leaders requested that places of worship across London voluntary shut their doors to help control the spread of the virus and reinforce the message of “stay at home”.

Based on this changing scenario and following advice from the Diocese I took the decision that in all conscience I should close the doors of the church.

This was not an easy decision and if you speak to any minister who has faced the same dilemma they will all speak to the anguish that this causes as we know the importance of being able to come into a place of worship.

Two things I want to make very clear and to avoid any misunderstanding:-

1. This decision was mine after consultation with and advice from the Diocese. If you are angry and upset I am sorry.
2. The decision to close is not a reflection on the hard work that has taken place to ensure that the church is as Covid secure as practical in respect of the cleaning that has taken place, the risk assessments undertaken or the protocols that are being followed.

Nationally churches are very safe places in respect of Covid transmission and I am extremely grateful for all the work of the DCC and especially Don and Bert in overseeing this.

This week the Cathedral also took the decision to close to public worship and private prayer and I am sure that they, too, had comprehensive control measures in place.

Across the Diocese approx. 80% of all churches are closed, with a slight variation in the more rural parts outside the M25.

Speaking to colleagues across the East Lewisham Deanery a number made similar decisions after the Thursday announcements and whilst a couple are still holding a service of some form each week the vast majority are now closed and are on-line only

It is sad and it hurts and no one is ordained or in a position of leadership to make these short of decisions but sometimes it is the right thing to do.

The situation in Lewisham is still very concerning, with rates of infection at 1,036 per 100,000 and just this week I personally know of 3 families outside of the St. Barnabas community who are isolating due to Covid and tragically one lady who died at home from Covid with minimal symptoms.

The latest briefings from the Government stress the need to continue to stay at home and maintain all the normal protocols if you need to go out and restrictions on travel have been tightened.

In some respects it would have been easier if we have been forced to close as we would have obeyed the law and carried on as per the two previous lockdown.

But having the choice means that we have to think about the decision and where our focus is and the role the Church plays in the community and that people will look to the Church for guidance.

As a Church we seek to be involved in the life of our community and to be able to walk alongside people in their joys and sufferings.

At this time our community is suffering.

Suffering both in respect of ill health due to Covid but also suffering in respect of the impact of lockdown on their work, their children’s education and prospects and our general well-being as we all struggle with the psychological effects of this situation, with appears to be endless.

Christians are not immune to any of this and we as a community have known tragedy during this time.

The Catholic Archbishop of Vienna has spoken about the Church sharing in the suffering of the community by making the sacrifice of closing and not meeting together and of supporting the civic leaders in their work to control the spread of the virus.

This is always a delicate balance but as Christians we proclaim a Gospel of love for God and for our neighbour.

At this time our actions can show love for our neighbour by the way that we follow the guidelines and minimising the contact that we have with people, hard as this is.

The Church is often looked to at times of national crisis or emergency and by voluntarily closing we are showing that we are not immune to what is happening around us and are not carrying on as if nothing is happening.

One of the critiques of this pandemic and the response has been the apparent contradictions of trying to control the spread yet allowing some things to carry on as normal with the result that there is a fudge and nothing is clear.

I know this is not easy and there is a recognition that the ability to meet together for worship and what fellowship we can have is positive for wellbeing which is why any decision to close is such a difficult one.

One change from previous lockdowns is that as this is a local decision we are not, at present, governed by a national decision as to when we can re-open.

Local clergy have been in discussion as to what the indicators should be before it is felt appropriate to re-open and we are asking for guidance on this point.

I, and the DCC, will keep the situation under regular review and we will look to open the Church again as soon as it is felt appropriate, probably initially for private prayer and then at some point for public worship.

As Christians we are Easter people and we have faith.

We know that God knows us – as we were reminded in the Psalm this morning – and knows what we are feeling and experiencing – of pain, of hurt, of anger, of emptiness.

And we know that God is walking alongside each of us in this time of isolation and separation and that God will equip us to overcome this time – we are not tested beyond our ability to cope, although at times it may feel like we are.

We have the hope of a brighter tomorrow with the roll out of the vaccine and the possible plateauing of infection rates locally so that the pressure on our health service will ease.

In this season of Epiphany we are celebrating the revelation or making known of Christ and are reminded in our liturgy that Christ came as the light of the world.

May we hold onto that light until we can meet again.

**Amen.**