



PATIENT ENDURANCE

A Pastoral Letter for September from the Bishop of St Asaph for the faithful of the diocese

When I wrote to you at the end of July, the beginnings of the lifting of lockdown were underway. As I write in mid-September we are learning, if we didn't already realise, that the lifting of lockdown is not a straightforward or linear process. What is lifted one week may have to be re-imposed the next. One freedom may be given, but the necessary strings of safety requirements may be attached the next. Very early on, people started talking about the possibility of a "new normal", but now we are beginning to see what that will look like. Our churches will be open for worship, but it will include the wearing of masks and social distancing while we pray. The sacraments will be celebrated, but emergency measures may last a lot longer than we anticipated. The postponement of a couple of months may turn into a couple of years, while things remain uncertain, and people's health and safety must remain the top priority.

All this can create in us a sense of anxiety and concern; as Fr Richard Peers described it to the Cathedral congregation last Sunday, a sense of unresolvedness. To live in the second half of 2020 is to live with uncertainty, and not knowing what shall be or what shall be asked of us.

The Scriptures are sure that in the light of uncertainty, our hope must be in God. As Psalm 46 says: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea ..." It is not that as Christians we can expect to be exempt from trouble – that much will be obvious already – but that we believe God holds the key to the long term future, and to eternity. Speaking to his disciples just before the catastrophe of his own arrest and the events of the Passion, Jesus says to his disciples: "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." (John 16.33).

One of the central doctrines of the Christian faith is the Atonement, literally the At-one-making. Christians believe that in dying on the Cross, God in Christ was taking all the pain of the world and the cost of human failings (of sin) onto his own shoulders – "that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation." (2 Corinthians 5.19) For the individual, this means that God is taking the price of our sin on the Cross and writing it off; for creation it means that God is acting to heal all that is broken and causing harm. It means that in the dark, we may find some light, that in desolation, we may find comfort, in distress, we may yet find peace. For these are the gifts of God's grace – to be with us danger and difficulty, and to seek to strengthen us. Such a faith allowed Mother Julian of Norwich to see the whole of creation bounded as a small walnut in the hands of God, and to say: "All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well."

The Book of Revelation is mysterious in its imagery and symbolism, but the message is clear enough: after all the chaos and dangers of this world, God's intention is to create a new heaven and a new earth in which there shall be peace. It is made possible by God's willingness to bear the cost: in Revelation, Christ is depicted as a Lamb slain from the foundation of the World, but as such, as one who is worthy to open the way to a restored Creation.

This attitude of faith is described in several places in the New Testament as "patient endurance". It is my prayer that such patient endurance will be God's continuing gift to us as we face the ongoing challenges of the virus, and yet respond in faith and with courage.

May God bless you all,