

Pastoral Letter 57 19.5.21

Dear Friends,

How lovely! How lovely that so many of us are learning to be a church again. Yes, I know – I've said it myself often enough, and the last eighteen months or so have proved it – the church is people, not buildings. However, the very name 'church', which translates the Greek word 'ekklesia', means 'assembly'. We are more truly church when we are together. We're not quite there yet: we are still required to wear face coverings and advised to keep at least one metre apart when we do (or two, if not masked). We are also not allowed to sing indoors, and are encouraged not to stay and chat after the service. It makes sense, of course, and it is part of our caring for one another, to keep one another safe. And not all of us are quite ready to return yet.

In his great prayer recorded by John (chapter 17) Jesus asked that his disciples be one as he and the Father are one. Perhaps our biggest challenge as a church family is to be one, when some of us are together in church and others remain safe at home. It's not a new situation: we have always had to care for those no longer able to join us at worship through age or infirmity; what is new is that we have learnt that we can be together in worship at the same time, whether at home or in church, thanks to various technologies: Wesley's Chapel in City Road London streams, via YouTube, daily prayer and Sunday services (some of which are now also 'in person'); and there is a telephone fellowship comprising people from all over the world who listen to the services and then hold a conference call, sharing prayer and fellowship. How lovely! And we all know by now what Zoom is.

I write this the day after we were allowed back into one another's homes, to sit in a café or pub, to stay the night with a friend or relative and even travel abroad to a few locations (if they'll have us). It is also when another strain of Covid 19 has been imported from India (for which country we continue to pray) and there is still fear. It may be a while longer than we expected before we can sing lustily and see one another's faces and share tea and cake once more.

I presided at the Lord's Table at St Michael's Shared Church Sheerwater on Sunday. I usually choose the readings for Ascension Day on that Sunday, but this year I used those for the Sunday after Ascension, including part of Acts 1. I found myself at what must have been the very first Christian congregational meeting – church council? – which appointed Matthias, one of those who had been with Jesus throughout his ministry, from his baptism in the Jordan to his crucifixion, and could testify first hand to his resurrection. He was chosen by God to make up the number of apostles to the symbolic twelve, following the betrayal of Judas Iscariot; but it was not just to fill a gap. He was appointed to take his place in ministry (diakonias) and service (apostoles). Some of us are chosen, set aside, ordained or commissioned, to special service; yet each one of us is appointed to service and ministry, as spelled out in the Methodist Church's 'Our Calling': worship; learning and caring for each other; being a good neighbour and challenging injustice (service); and to make more followers of Jesus Christ (evangelism: do read Barrie's article in the last edition of *The Wey Forward*).

Stay safe, and be blessed.

Peter