

We are now well into the business of ‘lockdown’. Over the past couple of weeks I, for one, have found myself looking less at the news, I have absorbed the basic daily statistics and any changes being introduced by the government; but a weariness has crept in of absorbing more and more incidental details that do not directly impinge on me or my work. I have heard a range of reactions to this ongoing experience we are all sharing. Within a general feeling that the health authorities here have handled the overall situation well, I’ve heard a number of different impressions. For some there is a feeling of security, that people are reluctant to move out of. For others there is a frustration, not directed at the authorities, that this seems to be endless, that they can’t see an end to the threat posed by the virus, that we are stuck in a sort of limbo.

Then, earlier in the week, someone told me; ‘Kevin, I feel that I am losing control of my life. I’m used to being in control, and I don’t feel I am at the minute.’ This person was talking about their own particular circumstances; but, as I thought about what that person said to me, I realised that these words could apply to all of us.

As a society we are conscious of a lack of control, of a desire to regain some sort of control that will enable business and social life to continue. We have heard a lot about the old normal we’ve lost and the new normal that will greet us, as we emerge from the lock down.

This Sunday, the 7th Sunday of Easter, stands between the Feast of the Ascension and the Feast of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles. This period represents something of an in between phase for the

followers of Jesus. They've lost the familiar, the immediate presence of Jesus; they've been told to wait, to stay in Jerusalem until they have received power from on high.

So as I say, we find them in a period of transition; transition from the old normal; a close association of hearing, touching, physical presence to one of apparent separation. In our lesson from Acts, in this final conversation with the risen Jesus, they try to understand this new normal in terms of the old; 'Lord is this the time when you will restore the Kingdom to Israel.' There will be a kingdom, but it will not be a kingdom as they have understood it in the past, based on territory and power. It will be one based on the teaching, the presence, the power of the crucified, risen, ascended and glorified Christ, advanced not through the might of armies but by the witness of his followers 'in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.'

Then after he passes from their sight, they experience two men asking, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?' They are not to look backwards, they are to look forwards, to the task, to the mission he has entrusted to them. And so we leave them, standing between the old normal, the familiar normal, and the new normal, that uncertain future that lies before them, waiting for the coming of the promised Holy Spirit.

To return to our own situation, as we begin the process of emerging from lockdown, as we move from the old normal of unfettered contact, unfettered movement, unfettered gathering towards the new normal, the uncertain, the anxious future.

As that person said to me during the week:

‘Kevin, I feel that I am losing control of my life. I’m used to being in control, and I don’t feel I am at the minute.’

And as I said about ourselves:

As a society we are conscious of a lack of control, of a desire to regain some sort of control that will enable business and social life to continue.

I suppose we begin by saying that we will do this together, as we have travelled through the lockdown together. We are beginning to think of how we as a Church as a worshipping community begin the process of emerging from lockdown. In the past we enjoyed the chat, the handshakes, the hugs as we gathered for worship, as we gathered for coffee in the hall afterwards, as we departed. We have valued the intimacy inherent in our celebration of the Holy Communion, the exchange of the peace (even if some didn’t), the kneeling together at the rail, the drinking from the common cup.

As we move into the future we will follow public health advice, (to do otherwise would be highly irresponsible) and that will seriously impact these practices we have valued and which, in our isolation, we have missed. How do we do this without losing that sense of community, that sense of Common Prayer, as we gather for worship?

We will do that primarily in community, in communion with one another. We will do it in communion with the risen Christ who calls us as he called his first

disciples; who is present with us as he promised to be present with them; who empowers us as he empowered them in the coming of the Holy Spirit.

The lock down forced us to explore different, unfamiliar ways of doing things. As a colleague down the country said to me; ‘Isn’t it amazing how much you can learn in half an hour, typing a series of ‘How do you..?’ questions into Google?

In the process we have discovered the potential of YouTube, of Zoom and other online streaming platforms in reaching out not only to people who, before the lockdown, attended church on a regular basis – but also those confined to home, those who had simply dropped out of church life. These new ways will continue as part of Church life.

As we begin to make the move from old normal to new normal I would encourage us to see the new normal not only in terms of difficulty but also a stimulus to explore new ways of doing old things – that in us and through us God may continue to be worshipped; and in us and through us God’s Kingdom continue to be advanced ‘in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.’