

This Sunday is a special day. Last Monday the Government announced an easing of a number of restrictions that have been in place since Christmas. Hairdressers and barbers have been doing a roaring trade. Of course another restriction that has been lifted has seen the opening of our Churches for public worship - so here back in Church.

This pandemic has taught us, is teaching us a number of lessons. We've had an extended period of closure on and off since March 2020, during which we have had to resort to a wide range of online methods to maintain any sense of corporate worship.

We have missed people; we have missed each other. We realise how important community is, the truth of those words in Genesis, 'It is not good for man to be alone.' No, we are made for community. Now we love our Church building and with it all the memories we associate with it. But over the past twelve months we have been reminded that Church is first and foremost not the building but the community that gathers around it.

Lots of people are saying that life is not going to be the same after Covid. The workplace will be different, with more and more people opting to work from home. All aspects of commercial life, particular in our city centres, retail, hospitality, pubs and restaurants are having to come to terms with changing patterns if they are going to survive into the future.

So, it should come as no surprise when people tell us that Church life is going to be different. With the advent of the first lockdown in March 2020 we went

on a very steep learning curve as we unravelled the mysteries of YouTube, Zoom, Facebook as we sought to stay connected to each other and the Church. In the process, people who were housebound were able to be part of our worship in a way they hadn't before. I've had messages from people who rarely, if at all, joined with us on a Sunday morning. As the Diocesan Communications Officer said, we have learned things that we might not have tried for another three or four years, that we should in fact have learned three or four years ago.

So, as we emerge from lockdown, as we just enjoy each other's presence as we worship together, we need to start thinking about how we apply some of the lessons we learned over this past year.

For me there have been two important lessons. First of all there is the re-affirmation of community that I've been talking about; the togetherness of our corporate worship; just being together, chatting to one another, exchanging smiles. The limitations of our technology, the limitation of services when we could be together to 30 minutes have encouraged a simplicity in our worship. Sermons needed more careful construction, prayers needed to be less wordy. As we prepare to re-insert music into our services – this won't be for a number of weeks yet. We have all missed the hymns. Having been without music for some time, maybe this is a time to ask what music lifts our spirits and what music do we struggle with.

We are entering a crucial period in the life of the Parish of Howth, as we emerge from lockdown, as my incumbency draws to a close and the process of choosing my successor begins.

Without being pietistic, this is a time for waiting upon God.

As it turns out, last Thursday was Ascension Day and the Gospel reading appointed for that day is Luke's account of the ascension. Prior to his final parting from them the risen and soon to be exalted Jesus tells his disciples:

And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.'

Just stay put. The word used in the Greek text is καθίζω, which has connotations of being seated. As I thought about that, the first image that came to my mind was that of a dog being trained; being told, 'Sit ..... sit ..... sit ..... come.' Initially I dismissed it as being rather trite. Then the more I thought about it there is something in the attentive passivity of the dog in that picture. I just want to hold those two words together – attentive, passivity

Just go back to Luke's words: I am sending upon you ..... Stay here ..... Until you have been clothed. They are called to that attentive passivity I am talking about. When we are truly waiting upon God in prayer we lay aside our own agendas, our own preferences. Our prayer must involve something of this same attentive passivity, this radical openness to God that I am talking about. When we are truly open to God, we can be truly open to one another. Church meetings, be they Select Vestry, School Board of Management, Diocesan and

General Synods, all begin with prayer. On these occasions, I would frequently pray that ‘God may in all things direct and rule our hearts.’ Of course, we will come to those meetings with our own preferences, our own ideas but we must also come with hearts and minds open to others and a shared resolve to find a common mind under God as to what is the best course of action to follow.

In the account of the Ascension and the few days that follow we have a picture of waiting upon God, an openness to receive what the Spirit will impart. This episode reminds me of the need to foster a spirit of waiting, a genuine openness in our own walk with God. An openness that incorporates a readiness to set aside our own preferences and agendas in our service of him who is Lord of the Church, that his name may be glorified and his Kingdom advanced in this community that is the Parish of Howth.