



*Church of Ireland
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Dear Friends

Since last we communicated with one another, our situation regarding the coronavirus has changed in alarming ways. We never thought we would see so many people dying and yet we were indeed warned that this was going to happen. Our sadness is immeasurable. The advice from The Chief Medical Officer is that each of us lives our life as if we have the virus. This is stark and direct advice. This is quite a shock, particularly if we have heard anything of the stories of those who have been suffering from the coronavirus. Some have no choice but to live their lives as if they have the virus - because they do have the virus and they are struggling to survive. These individuals are always in our thoughts and prayers as are those who care for them. But some do have a choice. They need to exercise that choice in a way that protects and respects others – and in a way that respects the virus. We are learning an old lesson in new times and it is this - that respect for other people brings with it respect for ourselves. From the outset, we were told that we are in this together. In recent times, we have seen this to be the case in very particular and painful ways. One word we need to keep remembering is solidarity. Another word we need to keep remembering is patience. The other word we need to keep remembering is watchfulness.

The turn of the old year into the new year has been slow and January has proved to be a long, slow month. This is normally how January is, but January 2021 has been very specifically slow. The days have been long. The numbers of individual people infected has been high and the numbers of people dying has also been high. We must always remember that they are individual people, one by one, with a rich life story and a tragic death story. We must honour their memory at a time when it is almost impossible to grieve publicly, emotionally and appropriately. This is hard for family members and hard for good friends. For them there is no conventional or meaningful Goodbye.

Many of us had imagined that the reopening of regular life in December 2020 might herald some sort of return to a reopening of a similar sort in January 2021. This was not to be nor is it going to be, by the look of things, for many months now. We need to prepare all over again to be kind to ourselves and to one another. We are now gearing ourselves for significant Lockdown for the rest of 2021. Anything less than this will be a bonus, if not a miracle. Our country is small. People are well acquainted with one another and people are friendly. People love to congregate. People miss the company of one another deeply. But, as the healthcare experts keep telling us, the virus loves crowds. And every gathering is a crowd, whether it be church or school, cinema or birthday party. The happiest of gatherings have become the most treacherous. On a brighter note - one afternoon

during the week past I was walking dogs. A lady walked past me carrying shopping and singing audibly to herself. As she stopped at her gate to go in, I thanked her for singing in a tuneless world.

In the calendar of The Christian Church, February 2nd is the Feast of The Presentation. Joseph and Mary bring the infant Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem for him to be dedicated and in a special way to be received by God. His presence may indeed have gone largely unnoticed by those who run and manage the temple. Their focus is not particularly on this family group from Nazareth, as ours might be. After all, this was simply another young family doing what people do with their young son. But two people in particular win our admiration and command our affection: Simeon and Anna. Both of them saw, in his being there, signs of hope and shafts of glory. They had been there for years, in many ways on their own. They put their life experience at the service of hope itself. They had patiently and painstakingly prepared for this day. And they recognized it and shared their joy with others when it came.

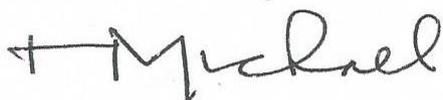
Many of us can identify with Simeon and Anna in these days. The times in which we continue to live mean that once again we have no option but to dig deep and to learn from people such as Simeon and Anna. They are people of grounded and practical wisdom. They knew neither the day nor the hour when The Messiah would come. They lit the lamps, they prayed the prayers, they funnelled their energy into hope when others had different preoccupations and priorities. It never was a matter of trading one priority off against another. It was respecting the place of the invisibles in the visible world – prayer and prophecy. This silent energy, this invisible strength enabled them to recognize and to respond. They gave what they had through who they were.

Hard though it may seem, impossible though it may sound, we need to garner and to treasure and to share these qualities with others. If we are to contribute to the national effort, if we are to help those who are in the front line, if we are to free up our hospitals, if we are to make safe again our nursing and residential homes, if we are to open up our schools and colleges, we need to live by these qualities. We need to share the expectation of a glimpse of glory and the recognition of the flowers of hope burgeoning in the community. Our community is not made up exclusively of Christian people. But the story of The Presentation in The Temple draws together three generations around a small child. This type of gathering happens the world over. The Presentation points to the coming together and the opening up of earth and heaven. It is the place where new light meets with existing light. This is a message for everyone, particularly for the generations that are now separated from one another by Restrictions.

The patience and the glory for us come together in the care that people have shown to others and that we have shown to one another. We are now in the second year of Restrictions and for many people it is already even harder than the first year. The window simply does not open far enough and maybe it does not open at all. We need to continue to be brave, to be hopeful, to be kind and to be careful. We have done it before and we will do it again. Taking each day at a time is the key to it. The days are lengthening. Let us take the light into our own lives and let us make the light shed from our own lives into the lives of others.

My hope is that you continue to be safe in regard to all the things you do and in regard to all the people you meet,

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross-like mark at the beginning.

+Michael
