

Following the announcement of a second national lockdown, this letter has been sent to Church of England clergy from the Archbishops and Bishop Sarah Mullally.

To the clergy of the Church of England

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Greetings to you on this All Saints Day and as we are reminded again that we are indeed part of a universal company of saints.

We are writing to you to set out some of our thinking in the light of the most recent announcement by the Prime Minister. We are very aware that details are still not clear and there is much discussion still to be had about what the impact of the new lockdown will mean. We are also writing to assure you of our prayers for you and our thanks for all you do. We are clear that we do now need to call all Christian people to pray and to do so continually over this next month. In this letter as well as reflection we also set out an invitation to you to join in this call to prayer and to keep both praying and serving our communities.

This is a difficult and challenging time for all of us. We are sure that some of you reading this letter will wish we had made other decisions during the period of the first lockdown, or even challenged the government harder on the decisions it has made. You may be right. However, it is our view that the best way we can serve our nation now is by pouring our energy into doing the things that we can do, which is to pray and to serve. We also dare to hope that we will be kind to each other and that God will give us the courage and humility we need to be faithful witnesses to the gospel of peace.

A second lockdown will be upon us on Thursday. It is going to be different from the first one. The days are getting shorter and colder. We are anxious for ourselves, for those we love, especially those who are vulnerable and elderly, and for our families. We know that this pandemic is having a devastating effect on our economy and on people's mental health. Thousands of people are dying. The National Health Service is being stretched to the limit. We also know and must continue to bear witness to the fact that the poorest communities in our nation are suffering the most. We are in for a long haul. It is going to be a hard winter.

But this second lockdown will also be different in other ways. There is much that we have learned from the first lockdown and there is much to celebrate and be proud of. Of course we are full of gratitude and respect for the amazing courage and commitment of all key workers, especially those working in the NHS. Their contribution is rightly and widely recognised. We also applaud the many creative ways that churches up and down the land have been serving their local communities and working with others to make sure that the hungry are fed and the vulnerable cared for. We have managed to maintain and, in many cases, extend our outreach by streaming worship online and by developing other ways of building community online.

We are grateful for people's energy, hard work and creativity in making this happen and we hope and pray this will continue. We are grateful that the new guidelines being introduced on Thursday not only allow churches to remain open for private prayer but also enable online worship to be broadcast from the church building. We were cautious about these issues during the first lockdown – perhaps overly so – but in this second lockdown we want to encourage church buildings to remain open for private prayer wherever possible, making sure that their buildings are Covid secure in the ways that we have learned in recent months, and to broadcast services from their church buildings. However, if you do not have the resources or wherewithal to do this, please do not feel that you have failed in any way. The good thing about provision of worship online, is that people can join in from anywhere and therefore we can support each other more easily in this endeavour. Our national digital team will continue to offer training and support and provide national services each week.

However, worship online still means that the people of God do not have access to the sacraments which are so central to our life in Christ. This is a huge loss and since we were not consulted about the lockdown provisions, we fully intend to speak with government about why certain exemptions are made and not others, emphasising the critical role that churches play in every community. The sacramental life of the church cannot be seen as an optional extra. Nor can we separate out our worship from our service, it is always both and not either or.

Nevertheless, we will of course abide by the law and ask you to do the same. We must do all that we can to keep our communities safe and to enable the NHS to manage this crisis. The Recovery Group chaired by the Bishop of London will be issuing specific guidance in the next day or two.

Bearing in mind our primary vocation as the Church of Jesus Christ to pray and to serve **we call upon the Church of England to make this month of lockdown a month of prayer.** More than anything else, whatever the nation thinks, we know that we are in the faithful hands of the risen Christ who knows our weaknesses, tiredness and struggles and whose steadfast love endures for ever.

Above all we recall people to some of the fundamental spiritual disciplines that shape our Christian life. How we do this is up to each congregation and clergy person. We will publish resources to support you before the first day of lockdown. During the first lockdown we cheered for the NHS every Thursday. During this second lockdown we invite you to fast in a way appropriate to you as well as pray for our nation every Thursday, for its leaders, its health and essential services and all those who suffer.

We thank you for your service and ministry and pray that God will sustain you and encourage you. After consulting the House of Bishops we will be writing a more general letter to the whole nation we serve, a letter expressing the hope we have and calling for courage, calm and compassion.

In one of the climactic passages of the New Testament, Paul says to those who follow Christ that their "love must be genuine, that they hate what is evil and hold fast to what is good." He asks them to "serve the lord", exhorting them to "rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers." (See Romans 12.9-12.) None of this is easy. Especially not at the moment. But it is our calling.

Yours in Christ,

The Most Revd & Rt Hon Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury

The Most Revd & Rt Hon Stephen Cottrell, Archbishop of York

The Rt Revd & Rt Hon Dame Sarah Mullally, Bishop of London

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