



What an important time to be reflecting on what the Church is, where we find God, where we have our hope and to be reminded that we are not alone. God has not been locked inside the building.

Perhaps this is this time to really understand that WE are the church. It is US who must welcome and lead by example. We become the church during the week at home and for some at work as well as church in our place when we are allowed to get together again. This is our calling as Christians to be the light and salt in the world. In the world beyond the church doors.

Our reading from Acts 17 is such an important passage when it comes to thinking about our calling as Christians today. The context, Athens, was a place of a wide spread of different beliefs, just like today. Paul reminds us that *'God does not live in shrines made by human hands.'* In this passage though the inclusion of the temple was almost superstitious, to a God with whom they had no relationship.

Do we believe that God is less present in the vicar's garden or at the kitchen table, the curate or trainee Reader's study than our church buildings? A vicar I follow on Twitter the Rev Caroline Beckett states that we need to be *"careful not to diminish the spiritual reality of the presence of God in this format just because it may be new and uncomfortable to us."* For some people this has and will only ever be their access to 'church.' For others this opens the doors of the church and lets them have a look from a safe viewing point. They can turn up anonymously. Seek from the shadows and hunt out hope from home.

Statistics are being published in relation to the number of people connecting with online church. Tearfund have undertaken one such survey and the results showed that a quarter of adults in the UK have watched or listened to a religious service since the coronavirus lockdown began. That's around 15 million, nearly 10 times the number who normally come to church. Other faiths too have reported surges in people engaging with online religious activities as places of worship have been closed during the lockdown. And one in 20 people have started praying. Many people are reaching out to a God who they aren't sure even exists, but just might, like those people in Athens. It seems that there is a huge search for hope at this time, something to hold on to, which is completely understandable - and hope is something we are able to offer, because of God's love.

For Peter, as for all the New Testament writers, hope is not a vague aspiration or a dream. Our hope is in Jesus Christ the one who *'suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring us to God.'* Our hope is in a somebody not a something. And that somebody doesn't live in church. Our church buildings may be shut for mass public worship but God is still very much here and active. In fact God is in the heart of every believer via the Holy Spirit which we are reminded of in today's Gospel reading. The Holy Spirit abides with us and we are not alone. God is within.

How might we, in our society, in the current crisis help others find the hope they are looking for? How might we offer them the love of Jesus?

Last Sunday Bishop Graham was on Radio Norfolk talking about access to the church which had just changed to allow one person in leadership and their household into the church building. He said: *"The church has continued being the church by serving its community, by serving meals, by providing support, by providing a listening ear to those who are in isolation. This small change in the policy for some*

*clergy to enter the church building will bring some degree of comfort and hope to parishioners who know prayer is being said on their behalf in the church building which is a treasure trove of memory that they so love and delight in."*

This provision Bishop Graham mentions is what speaks of love and hope. You need only look at the Diocesan news and social media channels to see the church in action offering love and hope to its communities. This is the time to be inspired to create the church that we know we should offer our communities. We aren't doing this alone. This isn't our work. The Holy Spirit is with us.

The church is to be no longer a tucked away treasure of the community. The church is a body of people active and engaged on the frontline where they are living to bring love and hope and to share with people as those that came before us did. Many people are reaching out to a God who they aren't sure even exists, but just might, like those people in Athens.

Our buildings may be closed for the time being but we as the church are Jesus's hands and feet. We are here and active. We are called to go beyond the walls and go where Jesus leads us and serve as he calls us. In my experience this call usually involves being outside my comfort zone and not what I expected. Live streaming in the 'sacred space of home' feels most fitting. Amen.

A short poem to end by Ruth Wells

*God snuck home.*

*No longer bound*

*by the expectations*

*of a 'consecrated' building*

*She's concentrated her efforts*

*on breaking out.*

*Now in the comfort of*

*a well-worn dining table*

*she shares some bread*

*with some friends*

*And she laughs.*

*And she weeps.*

*In the sacred space of home.*