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Dear Friends,

***Owe no one anything, except to love one another;  
For the one who love another has fulfilled the law (Romans 13.8)***

On 21<sup>st</sup> March as the nation went into lockdown and our family was mourning the loss of a holiday and a son's wedding in Switzerland, I sat down to write what would soon become a weekly newsletter to you all. Now as the weeks and months pass by I wonder if there is anything left I can usefully say. A letter that was initially a bit of a roundup of life in The Rectory and a reflection on the Sunday readings has become a long and sometimes uninspiring bit of clergy piety on the biblical narrative - sorry if I've somehow lost my way.

So this week I'm going to return primarily to sharing with you what it has felt like over the last few days to be a wife, mother and priest in what some people glibly call "our new normal". One day our grandchildren and great grandchildren will perhaps be learning about our stories just as the children today learn about the battles and struggles of long ago so here goes for more Clergy Covid Chronicles...

After arriving home from France a couple of weeks ago we were placed under house arrest for 14 days. Am I the only one who loves their family yet finds them incredibly hard to live with 24/7 when we are unable to escape for a walk, a breath of fresh air, a trip to the supermarket or a visit to see friends? I should not feel like this because I'm privileged; we live in a large house but I still find there's no space to think, pray, reflect, read or be creative. I guess I'm not alone when I admit I am frustrated by the endless treadmill of preparing and cleaning up meals and sorting out the competing needs of the family while trying to respond to pastoral needs, plan services, organise rotas, work with others remotely and do the many things I should be doing for the smooth running of our parish.

I was sad that I could not conduct the baptism of little Evelyn Kearney last Sunday, just as I feel sad when I tell families who call or email to organise their child's baptism that, until the social distancing restrictions ease, baby cannot be baptised in the presence of all their friends and family because we just won't fit into our church on a Sunday morning...oh and, by the way, I will not be able to plant a kiss on the forehead of your infant as I welcome her as my brother or sister in faith into the Lord's family. I am not permitted to hold an infant at the font and must pour the water on her with a shell or similar without touching her or her parent: some family welcome that will be. Sadly, a Covid image posted on FaceBook comes to mind of a priest baptising an infant with a child's water gun.

During the final days of our holiday I was contacted by a family asking me to arrange their father Roy's funeral, which I conducted on the day I emerged from isolation this past week. Unless you have organised a funeral during recent months you will have no idea just how painful it is. Funeral Directors and clergy are still struggling to get their heads around the new guidelines and the impact on grieving families is enormous. They are trying to process the loss of a beloved family member and we are talking to them about numbers, hand sanitising and social distancing. Many families and friends have not been able to visit their loved ones as they neared the end of their life and now the help we try to give them is overshadowed by risk assessments and the necessity to provide names and contact details and so on. Please don't tell me this is our new normal ...this is cruel. Priests like me are feeling a sense of failure; we are not able to offer good pastoral care.

Today, another heartbroken bride called to say she may have to postpone her wedding - again. She wonders if after the emotional roller coaster and the loss of her deposit at a venue she can be bothered - after all they are living together very happily right now. I feel for her, my son Peter and Lauren his fiancé may be cancelling their wedding for a third time this year unless the number permitted to gather to celebrate their marriage increases above thirty people.



A few days ago I joined a webinar (that's a live lecture on your computer) on the subject of loss and bereavement during Covid - our communities are overwhelmed with grief...we are bereft at so many levels.

This morning Thomas H Wood, a local estate agent, called to say my tenant (in the little house I bought after my mother died) has announced he's just going to return to Spain ignoring his legal obligations to fulfil his contract despite my generously reducing his rent by a third for many months. Annoying though this is for me, for my tenant, a freelance airline engineer, who has been stacking shelves in Tesco and helping out at a Covid test centre to make ends meet, the loss is far greater. From 200 job applications this man had only four replies apologising they could not even offer him an interview. His story of loss is familiar; heartbreaking.

This week our children return to school yet this is not a normal first week back after the long summer holidays. Adults are fearful and the children know it. Our youngsters returning to university will pay around £9,000 for what they are calling "hybrid learning" a mix of online learning and some (if they are lucky and the unions permit) face to face teaching. Many fear the older generation will blame them if the R number increases in the next few weeks. In The Rectory we are busily trying to despatch Charlie to the Sorbonne; In contrast to his first years in Edinburgh University his fees will be just a few hundred pounds. On Tuesday, just as we were on the verge of transferring funds for his accommodation, we discovered he had been taken in by a student accommodation scam. Ugh! We came within a hair's breadth of losing a lot of money. In a few days' time Amy, our young Director of Music, will return to The Royal Welsh College - she will pay her rent in Cardiff and her fees but will she and all the talented musicians receive the education they deserve? Covid is already affecting their job prospects and their wellbeing, not to mention their finances. Young adults feel that in the struggle to "save" the vulnerable that they been forgotten.

In the past week I've spent hours on the phone to David from the government's regulatory services as we try to work out what activities can "legally" take place and which may not in our church halls. It seems as if just when I've got my head around the minutiae of government permissions they change. Today, as I write, we cannot open the hall for an adult art group, lunch group, slimmers group or choir, yet all supervised children's activities, acts of worship and exercise groups can take place. We cannot serve refreshments in a church or community hall unless there is a reasonable excuse (i.e. after a funeral or wedding), that means we cannot serve you coffee after morning worship but if it's an integral part of a qualifying group you may eat and drink! Your Vicar is not being awkward when she refused you coffee. Only last week I was advised that our Parochial Council could not gather face to face to meet but this week I'm advised they may. Interestingly some individuals who dine in restaurants, receive visits from their children and grandchildren and shop in busy places remain nervous despite our rigorous cleaning and social distancing measures. What more can we do to make people feel it is safe to return to church and to meet in our buildings? We do not have the footfall of the Co-Op and we clean, disinfect and socially distance. Many will die of complications following flu this winter as they always do, some will die of unexpected heart attacks and strokes, others will be involved in tragic accidents; fear may not kill us but it's certainly affecting our mental health and our community's well being.

Perhaps I'm utterly deluded but I sense we are at a point now when we are having to ask ourselves "what risks should I take and how should I live for the wellbeing and health of my family as well as myself?". Today, for the first time in many months, our girls went to meet school and college friends - tomorrow they will go to the hairdressers for the first time in months and next week they will be back in class - it's hard to evaluate how much damage has been done to our children by denying them the opportunities to learn and socialise.

The story of the life, death and resurrection of our Lord speaks to me of a man who was willing to risk himself so that others might live - it's a tale of undeserved forgiveness as Sunday's gospel story (Matthew 18.15-20) makes clear. Even if your Christian friends hurt or offend you, even if as you struggle to find a way through and can't face seeing them for one reason or another as Paul puts it "Owe no one anything except to love one another" for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law"

With my prayers for your well-being  
And my love in Christ

**Vicki**  
**X**