

You will have heard many homilies on the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul highlighting the differences between the two saints. Today I would like to focus on an experience they had in common, of being imprisoned and yet in their imprisonment having an experience of the closeness and care that the Lord had for them.

In the case of Peter we see this explicitly in the First Reading. He is rescued from prison by an 'angel of the Lord'. He thinks it is a dream and it is only when the angel has left him that he realises that 'it is all true' and that 'the Lord really did send his angel' to save him from what Herod had planned.

The Second reading presents Paul writing from prison to Timothy. Although he recognises that on this occasion he is perhaps near the end of his life, he is able to look back how on previous occasions the Lord has stood by him and rescued him from the lions mouth. He now expresses his confidence not that the Lord will preserve his life once again but rather that the Lord will bring him safely to his heavenly kingdom.

I wonder if we look back over the course of our lives will we identify moments when the Lord has 'sent his angel to save us' or 'rescued us from the lion's mouth'. Perhaps like Peter it is only afterwards that we were able to realise that it was the Lord's doing and not our own. Or maybe there are moments in our lives where we might wonder, 'where was the Lord when I needed him?' It is good to bring such moments to the Lord in prayer asking him to shed his light on them even now so that we may understand them in a new way. It may well be that the Lord was closer to us in those moments than we realised.

There is more to explore but I also today want to share with you a letter issued by the Catholic Archbishops of England (Westminster, Liverpool, Birmingham, and Southwark) about the resumption of public worship in Catholic churches in England. You can find the full text in our parish newsletter but I quote some of it here now:

On Tuesday we heard the announcement that places of worship will soon be able to reopen for prayer and services. We welcome this news with great joy. We can look forward again to celebrating the central mysteries of our faith in the Holy Eucharist.

We want to thank everyone within the Catholic community for sustaining the life of faith in such creative ways, not least in the family home.

With the easing of restrictions on worship with congregations, we tread carefully along the path that lies ahead. Our lives have been changed by the experience of the pandemic and it is clear that we cannot simply return to how things were before lockdown. We remain centred on the Lord Jesus and His command at the Last Supper to "do this in memory of me."

It is important to reaffirm that, at present, the obligation to attend Sunday Mass remains suspended. A significant number of churches may remain closed as they are unable to meet the requirements for opening for individual prayer. Fulfilling these requirements is a precondition for any church opening for the celebration of Mass with a congregation.

Please be aware that there will be a limit on the number of people who can attend Mass in our churches. This will be determined locally in accordance with social distancing requirements. We therefore need to reflect carefully on how and when we might be able to attend Mass. We cannot return immediately to our customary practices. This next step is not, in any sense, a moment when we are going 'back to normal'.

We ask every Catholic to think carefully about how and when they will return to Mass. Given there is no Sunday obligation, we ask you to consider the possibility of attending Mass on a weekday. This will ease the pressure of numbers for Sunday celebrations and allow a gradual return to the Eucharist for more people.

Moving forward, there will still be many people who cannot attend Mass in person. We therefore ask parishes, wherever possible, to continue live-streaming Sunday Mass, both for those who remain shielding and vulnerable, and also for those unable to leave home because of advanced age or illness.

When we return to Mass there will be some differences in how the celebration takes place. For the time being, there will be no congregational singing and Mass will be shorter than usual. None of this detracts from the centrality of our encounter with the Risen Christ in the Eucharist. We ask everyone to respect and follow the guidance that will be issued and the instructions in each church.

For our parish we are hoping that we will be able to resume public Masses from the weekend of 11/12 July. For those who hope to attend Mass in person there will be more details next weekend. Meanwhile livestreaming will continue and I reassure those parishioners who will need to continue to stay at home that you do participate in our Masses in a real way through livestreaming so please do not feel any pressure to put yourselves at risk in rushing back to join us.

Today is our parish feast day and it is an opportunity to recognise the essential contribution that we all make to the life of our parish. We continue to pray for one another, and I ask those who have 'joined' our community in the past few weeks through our live-streaming to spare a prayer for us today as we will also do for you.