



**THE PARISH CHURCH OF  
ST MARY THE VIRGIN & ALL SAINTS  
POTTERS BAR**

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To the Parish and community of St Mary the Virgin and All Saints, Potters Bar.

**Re: Covid-19 and the coronavirus, the suspension of public worship.**

Dear friends in Christ,

It is with a heavy heart that I write to you to confirm that, as we reflected last Sunday might happen, the advice of the Government and the Archbishops of Canterbury and York is such that, effective immediately, public worship at St Mary's is now suspended until further notice. This also extends to our Lent groups and services.

This advice can be found on the Church of England's official website, <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-churches>. This page will continue to be updated with the latest information and advice from those tasked with leading us through this difficult time.

This therefore means that, with great sadness, there will not be an act of worship for you to attend on Sundays or during the week, until such a time as both Government and Church advice changes to allow this. I am actively exploring ways that some form of our worship can continue, albeit behind closed doors, which you will be able to experience from the safety of your homes via the Internet. These may include the Daily Offices, the Eucharist, or something else. The Church of England is strongly encouraging as many churches as possible to do this, and I hope to have more to say on this soon. Please be patient with me: the advice we are being given changes daily, and even in writing this I am acting a bit premature, as Bishop Alan has not yet given his own formal directions to the Diocese, though they are unlikely to deviate from the national advice. The Bishop's "Four Golden Rules" do make for encouraging reading, however, and can be found at <https://www.stalbans.anglican.org/coronavirus/>.

All of this pains me greatly. For a start, the idea of celebrating the worship of the Church in our church but behind closed doors feels instinctively wrong in all sorts of ways, as the liturgy belongs to all of us. Indeed, the Greek word it originates from, *leitourgia*, can be translated as "works of public service". But I also must make this very clear, and I shall be bluntly loving in what I now say: I do not want to take any of your funerals! I of course shall do, and it will be my duty and privilege and honour to do so. But it is not my desire, because I am not ready to lose any of you. Therefore any steps that we can take as a church to keep our congregation safe and well are steps we simply must take.

As the Archbishops spell out in their letter, this is not the Church of England retreating or accepting defeat. We are part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, of which Christ said the gates of hell would not prevail against it. What I said last Sunday I make no apologies for repeating again: we remain the Body of Christ, separated for a time by distance, but always and forever one in Him who is the Head of the Body, Jesus Christ. Though we are many, we are and always will be one body, and though we may not at this time share in the one Eucharistic bread, the daily bread for which we pray in the Lord's Prayer can be found in God's written word, the Bible, which we are blessed enough to always have free access to in this country.

So if we must stop breaking bread, let us be all the more ready to break open our Bibles, so that we may be fed and nourished by the Word of God in Scripture. And let us build into our lives more sustained and intentional patterns of daily prayer, knowing that as we pray, however we pray, we are joining in with the worship of the whole company of heaven, all the angels and saints. No Christian ever prays alone; they are joined in prayer by the angels and saints in heaven, and by those who share our faith on earth, our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. There are many good prayer resources available online, and I will share as many as I can find with you whenever I can. For a start, I can recommend the material gathered together at the Church of England's website here: <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/coronavirus-liturgy-and-prayer-resources>.

We have been asked to keep our church buildings open for people to enter in to and pray privately as much as possible at this time of crisis. Our Watching and Welcoming ministry has been doing this for some years now, and one of the challenges facing us in the weeks ahead is how we can continue to be open for at least as many hours as normal, if not more, while also understanding that many of those on the rota for this ministry are members of those groups whom the Government is strongly encouraging to stay at home. I hope to be able to give guidance on this matter soon.

Finally, I again strongly encourage you to care for one another pastorally in all the ways that are safe to do so. Phone one another, text each other, email and write letters to each other. I will be attempting to coordinate some of this form of pastoral care with the church Pastoral Group, but please continue to do so amongst yourselves naturally too. Find out if anyone you know, church members or not, are struggling and offer what support you can. Those who are or soon will be self-isolating will likely become frustrated and lonely, so please exercise your God-given gifts for compassion and reach out to them. Find out if they need practical help and offer as much as you can and feel able to. Do not put yourselves in unnecessary risk, but neither give in to the culture of fear and panic which is so strong right now.

Above all, remember the words of our Lord at the conclusion of St Matthew's Gospel, "I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Yours in Christ,

**Fr Stefan Chrysostomou**

*Vicar of St Mary the Virgin and All Saints, Potters Bar*

The Feast of St Patrick of Ireland, 17<sup>th</sup> March 2020