



**THE PARISH CHURCH OF  
ST MARY THE VIRGIN & ALL SAINTS  
POTTERS BAR**  
The Walk, Potters Bar  
Herts, EN6 1QQ

Vicar: The Revd Stefan Chrysostomou  
Tel: 01707 859028  
Email: [vicar@stmaryspb.org.uk](mailto:vicar@stmaryspb.org.uk)  
Website: [www.stmaryspb.org.uk](http://www.stmaryspb.org.uk)

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

**Re: the use of face coverings in church**

Dear friends in Christ,

As I anticipated last Sunday, a statement issued by the Church of England was released last Thursday regarding the use of face coverings when attending worship in church. There is a four page document specifically about this which is available on the Church of England's dedicated Coronavirus webpage (<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2020-07///COVID%2019%20advice%20on%20face%20coverings%20v1.0.pdf>), but the following is the main summary paragraph, which I quote in full:

*We strongly advise that face coverings should be worn by all those attending a place of worship, including ministers, worshippers, staff, volunteers, contractors and visitors, where there may be other people present; remembering that they are mainly intended to protect other people, not the wearer, from coronavirus COVID-19 and that they are not a replacement for physical distancing and regular hand washing.*

This obviously applies to us, and we must respond appropriately. As I made clear in both speech and writing when we first reopened for public worship on 5<sup>th</sup> July, everyone attending worship at St Mary's has been free to wear a face mask or other appropriate face covering for as much or as little of their time in church as they wish, according to their own level of comfort and freedom of conscience. We are now asked to make the wearing of masks the default option, and it is clearly expected of us that we will be wearing masks for the entirety of our time in the church building, save on the rare occasion that any of us be in the building by ourselves.

However, as has already been pointed out by senior clergy in various dioceses, this is **advice**, not law. For the avoidance of doubt, no law has been passed making face coverings inside a place of worship mandatory, and in this regard we differ significantly when compared to shops and retail stores where masks are now officially required by all visitors. It is therefore an **expectation**, but not a requirement, that you wear face coverings when inside church from now until further notice. You are indeed "strongly advised" to do so, but after discussion with Richard Osborn and Mark Jones we do not consider it to be within the power of the Incumbent and Churchwardens to insist or enforce this advice.

Therefore, nobody will be refused entry or evicted from St Mary's for not wearing a face covering. Indeed, I believe this would be contrary to the freedom all people have under UK law to be able to freely attend their place of worship. I also note that there are already certain exemptions from this new standard given in the Church's policy document on face coverings, including for children under eleven and for those who are unable to wear a mask due to physical or mental illness or disability, or for those to whom wearing a face covering causes "severe distress". Clearly the "spirit of the law" is for us to comply with this advice, rather than seeking out ways to legitimately deviate from it, but I feel it is important to make clear that while we may for the sake of brevity talk about now "needing" or "being required" to wear face coverings in church, this is technically not a "must" but a "you really should" situation.

One area where I, with the agreement of the Churchwardens, am encouraging us to deviate from the official guidance is with regard to those who are fulfilling a role in church which is much aided by being able to see a person's lips move. I am thinking of readers, intercessors, preachers and myself as presider. We all know that being able to see the lips of the person who is speaking move makes a big difference to how easy it is to follow along with the service, and this is especially true for those who are hard of hearing. Where audibility is already a struggle, covering one's mouth as one speaks exacerbates the problem to an extent that I am unhappy with. Given the measures that we have already taken to enforce social distancing in church (which the evidence suggests is at least as important as face coverings to hindering the spread of the virus, if not more so), I am not convinced that those who are offering the ministries mentioned above need to do so with their mouths covered, as this would serve to further distress and potentially exclude the harder of hearing among us. I am therefore asking that those who are giving the Bible readings, leading the intercessions, giving the sermon, singing in a solo capacity or presiding over the act of worship to remove any face coverings for the duration of that task. In practical terms, that will mean that I will not be wearing a mask for the majority of the service, except for the distribution of communion, which has been my practice ever since our return to church. If anyone who currently carries out these roles in the service is unhappy with this, I would ask them to speak to me about it.

No doubt there will be some among you who will be relieved that the Church is taking a more forthright approach in its encouragement of the use of face coverings, and will be feeling safer as a result. Others I know will feel this to be an imposition, or will point out that other enclosed spaces of similar sizes to the average church are not required to promote the use of face masks. Ultimately we are encouraged to see the wearing of a face covering as an act by which we live out the command to "love thy neighbour", knowing that a face covering offers a greater level of protection to those around the wearer than to the wearer themselves.

God bless you all, and please continue to pray for me, as I pray for you.

Yours in Christ,

**Fr Stefan Chrysostomou**

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

Feast of St James the Apostle, 25<sup>th</sup> July 2020