**How the Parish of St James’s flourishes during and after Covid.**

“It is said that before entering the sea a river trembles with fear. She looks back at the path she has travelled, from the peaks of the mountains, the long winding road crossing forests and villages and in front of her, she sees an ocean so vast that to enter there seems nothing more than to disappear for ever. But there is no other way. The river cannot go back. Nobody can go back. To go back is impossible in existence. The river needs to take the risk of entering the ocean because only then will fear disappear, because that’s here the river will know its not about disappearing into the ocean but of becoming the ocean” Kahil Gibran.

Fortunately we are now trying to come back to some form of “normality”. Experiencing Last weekend’s Jubilee festivities surely made us feel that things are now back to normal. As many of us return to our workplaces, are able to have haircuts whenever we want, have a visit to our local pub, can meet up with our family and friends, take a long awaited holiday and return to our place of worship, we will be filled with all sorts of emotions.

While some of us will have feelings of relief and joys as we gain back our independence, others will be more fearful, especially if they have been shielding or are in a more vulnerable situation. As Gibran says: a river cannot go backwards. It needs to wind its way to the ocean where it will disappear for ever. It is about becoming the ocean. The new normality is about moving forward: maybe having to look how we can do things in a different way. That is not easy and we can feel resentful and long for the old ways.

However before moving forward, it is good to reflect on how the pandemic has affected us as individuals and as a parish.

In March 2020, the parishes discovered some home truths. Some of us wanted to be in category one, frantically busy with the key workers. As it happened the churches were in lockdown too, in order to safeguard each other especially the vulnerable within our communities. This situation gave some of us priests a crisis of identity. Who am I now without MY church, not knowing what to do or how to be helpful. What have we learned in the last two years as parish.

The New Testament says little about buildings, not much about service times or style of music, and nothing about the liturgical year. But it says a great deal about eating together, washing one another’s feet, every member having a role to play, making sacrifices and God providing for the community as it faces each new challenge, necessity is the mother of invention and those who have found a way through the last two yes have been those who have improvised, adapted and enjoyed the challenge of making old things work in new circumstances.

I have been inspired by the way some of our parishioners have taken it on board to reach out during the pandemic to those whom we thought were on their own and vulnerable. Phone calling each other was a daily thing. Shopping to the vulnerable and making sure that all was well was another daily occurrence. Organising walks in the woods was another activity to make sure that none of our parishioners were feeling abandoned or isolated. I wish to thank you all those who were involved in such a beneficial service for us.

As you all know, in September 2019, we had just launched the web streaming in our parish thanks to the benefactor Mr Hugh Owen who started us off and of course Roger Wright who took on himself especially during lockdown to make it his ministry to keep it going.

With the web streaming we were not only able to cater for the spiritual needs of our community and feeling a sense of togetherness even though we were distancing ourselves, we reached out towards the larger virtual community which some found our parish as their spiritual home during lockdown. Here I wish to thank all those who emailed and called me to help me feel that I was not on my own celebrating masses and which gave me a sense that I was doing my little bit during the crisis.

Another great initiative in the parish was the buying of Zoom licensing which kept the Catechetical classes going, the regular PPC meetings going, the different groups in the parish going especially the courses organised by Esther Theodore – the Evangelisation Pillar lead. During lockdown there was on line – the School of Ignatian Spirituality, the Creativity and Prayer group, two Alpha programmes and two Journeys of Faith courses. I wish to thank Esther who was the Evangelisation Pillar lead during Covid, James and Emerald for their enthusiasm and generosity of spirit to keep the spiritual nourishment in the parish going. Although we all feel zoomed out now, however I cannot but thank God for this very special tool to keep us as a parish going. It was a significant part of keeping the parish together and alive. Thank you for the CWL who used to meet every Monday evening on zoom to keep an eye on each other. Thank you so much.

I need to thank individually – Suzanne who for a long time was the only person I saw in the morning and for working all through the pandemic, the safe guarding team Kate and Paul and of course Sean and the PPC. For a long time I felt that I was being carried by these very generous people. They helped me to make the right decisions about the parish and not to feel alone with such massive responsibility to navigate the parish during a pandemic. So thank you so much.

I don’t want to forget the great work done by the sacristans – Breda/Geoff, Tricia, Romilly and Marie, the ushers that worked so hard to keep the church clean once we opened up for Masses again. You have been a major part of keeping the church safe and welcoming people back to church.

I also need to thank Cheryl for keeping some of the Social activities in the parish going. The Easter Egg Hunts and the Christmas Fayre in the garden in December. Thank you.

I also wish to thank the liturgy team who also through Jennifer’s lead kept the music ministry going on Zoom with the help of Geoff and Jonathan. Thank you.

I also wish to thank the communications team which kept on working in planning a new Briefly etc. Watch the space for that please.

Finally I wish to thank you parishioners to have kept the parish going financially in such a crisis. There still was needed maintenance on the church property on a lot of levels and we could not have done these without your help. Something to mention is the new heating system in the church which is eco friendly and the maintenance of the organ.

I am so proud that inspite of the pandemic, the parish did not stop catering for the spiritual and social needs of our parishioners. And this could not have been done if most of you were able to adjust to the needs of the new reality and find creative ways how to minister to each other. Thank you so much.

Times of hardship renew us - God’s people. It’s when things are difficult that we rediscover who God is and who we are. We find surprising partners and friends. We find the gifts God brings us through the stranger. We find a new joy in faith when it feels like it really matters, not just forever but right now. We realise our strengths when we face the realities of death, disruption and depression together. We get so deeply interdependent with one another that in 20years time you would bore your grandchildren with the spirit of the pandemic the way our grandparents bore us about not locking their doors during the war.

**The realities of the pandemic and the parish.**

I am not naïve to think that the parish has resumed its full capacity as before Covid though. We need to realise that:

1. There are those who are still reluctant to come into the enclosed spaces of our church.
2. Those who simply lost the habit of coming to church.
3. There are those who will have reassessed their pattern of life and priorities. The practice of faith within the community of our parish may not be among those priorities. A gap may have opened up or widened between the spiritual dimension of their lives and the communal expression of that spiritual quest.
4. There are those whom we might describe as the Covid Curious, those who have come into contact with the parish through our presence on web streaming. A contact we may be able to develop through our continuing presence across diverse media platforms.
5. There are also those who have moved parishes.

These are the realities of what is happening as Church after Covid and we need to accept some of these realities as out of our control whilst we need to find creative ways how to deal with others.

In facing these challenges, we as the parish of St James’s, are endowed with a treasure which serve to resource and enrich us. This is our primary school St James Catholic Primary School. We continue to believe that the school can indeed be a bridge back to the parish for a lot of young families. And I have personally witnessed this to be true especially during these difficult two years. We have this opportunity to enhance the relationship with the school. It is a great asset for us as parish.

Another very recent reality is that as St James we have the enrichment of a growing community of Asian descent such as people from India, Hong Kong, Malaysia and China. This is something to thank God for and we need to find creative ways how to help them to feel more welcomed and be integrated within our diverse parish.

In regards the Youth Ministry, as Bromley Deanery we have just employed a Youth Minister – Lolly Bell who I am sure will be an asset to work alongside James who is our Young Church pillar lead.

**Looking towards the future:**

I still believe in the dream that I shared with you in 2019. I still see St James’s to be a Sanctuary in Suburbia of Petts Wood. Especially after what we have gone through and the reality of war in Ukraine has convinced me that our parish needs to create a Sanctuary of Peace for us who live in Petts Wood.

Therefore, I wish to resume the idea of Home Masses which for obvious reasons did not have the possibility even to begin in March 2020. So all of you who wish to have a mass at home and invite family and friends please start thinking of letting us know.

I also wish to resume the Tuesdays evening surgery where I would meet people if they wish to speak to me for any reason. This time though we would introduce it by making an appointment with me beforehand through the parish office. This was a great way of meeting new parishioners in the parish and getting to know parishioners.

“The Sanctuary project” had to be postponed because of Covid and finances. I personally still believe in the project and I would like to see it developed and finished.

Another project which I wish to see done is the Sacristy Project and the renovation of the corridor that takes us to the Community Centre.

Another important project I feel is the creation of a Peace Garden in our garden where people would be able to come and just rest and regather in the beauty of Nature. I also wish that it would also include a place where our children and young people be able to plant their own vegetables and flowers.

Finally I wish to have a meeting with all the groups of the parish in order to connect with you all.

***I will allow the Pillar Leads to speak about their visions of the future.***

I feel fortunate to have so many volunteers in our parish doing different things. I wish in the coming year the PPC will have a more visible role within our community and that the communication between the PPC and the parish will be enhanced.

I wish to see creative ways in which to build on a vibrant, diverse community who because we are filled with gospel values, we would be fired up to be of service for one another and beyond. We can make it a reality together. We can continue to make a difference too!