



THE BISHOP OF EBBSFLEET

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**The Bishop of Ebbsfleet's
Pastoral Letter May 2020**

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Dear friends

Your clergy and churchwardens will be receiving from your diocesan bishops and area deans many communications in connection with the impact of the pandemic on parish and diocesan life. Your clergy, readers, and church officers, will also be trying, I know, to serve you as best they can, by whatever means is available to them. Some may be very active on social media, and in a position to stream worship; others may not. Some may be maximizing their contacts with schools and local social projects; others may be using this time of need to make new connections that the church had lost or never had. Some may be at home even shielding for themselves or serving as carer for a member of their household. There is no one pattern; each parish is different. Please pray for your priests and deacons, and their families, as they are (I know) praying often for you. Pray also for one another; phone one another up; encourage one another; and share speak words of faith and hope.

What can I do? Well I too am housebound. Most importantly I say Mass for you all at 7.30 every morning. I continue the work of oversight as much as I can, liaising with parishes and dioceses, helped by my assistant Mrs Catherine Williamson who's working from home. I try to respond to as many writing requests as I can, and find ways of being in touch with the clergy and supporting them individually. I hope increasingly that will be in groups. There are an increasing number of connections from Christians in other churches overseas too. I shall continue to produce a homily for each Sunday through the website and through Facebook page. As soon as limitations on access to churches is eased I hope to stream more often. But for that I wait on the bishops, and they on HM Government, and of course everyone awaits changes in the course of the virus.

But for this we're at a very difficult moment, very hard to judge and communicate. There's a famous Italian dish, "Cacio e pepe". It's just pasta, pecorino cheese and pepper. Deceptively simple, but it's a finely judged thing. A small mistake of timing, and it's a dreadful disaster. That's something of what the Church faces. We all want to have access to the Mass, and even sooner to share in Mass prayed in our churches online. We all want not to jeopardize the efforts of national health experts and government. We all want the bishops to ease the limitations on the Church. But *no one* wants an uplift in the number of new life-threatening infections. So please, dear friends: stay safe, support safely whoever you can, and pray without ceasing.

And it is that last point to which we need to give as much of our time and energy to as possible if the Church is to resume her life and mission properly when we are able to live freely. Pray without ceasing, said St Paul. "Prayer from *our* human point of view is about faithfulness, sticking at it. I may not quite know what is going on; as prayer deepens ... I *may* feel that absolutely nothing is happening; fine. Just stay there and if in doubt say, 'O God, make haste to help me!' Prayer is your promise and pledge *to be there* for God – who is there for you." Bishop Rowan Williams, *Being Christian*, SPCK: London, 2014, £6.55 from Amazon)

The clergy are discovering new meaning in their prayers and reading of the Scriptures. I hear stories of the same for many lay people, even if it is hard without the ‘food for the journey’ from the Eucharist (see Elijah’s story in *I Kings* 19:4-8). I know some of you have been given a copy (whether in print or electronically) of a little booklet I prepared for the laity to start at Easter – *Prayer for the Long Haul*. I compiled it especially for those who do not already have a daily pattern or book for prayer. It is available from your parish priest (or churchwarden if your parish is in a vacancy), and on the Ebbsfleet website. (You will also find the Stations of the Cross I prepared for Good Friday.)

The month of May gives us the *perfect opportunity* to give more time to prayer: partly because it always falls in springtime and Eastertide; partly because between Ascension Day and Pentecost since ancient times the Church has prayed for the Holy Spirit (*Lk* 24.49, *Acts* 1.4), and in recent years Archbishop Welby has asked us to pray at that time in a global wave of prayer for Christian mission: ‘Thy Kingdom Come’. www.thykingdomcome.global This year it runs from 21-31 May.

The month of May is specially dedicated to Mary, and contemplating Jesus through Mary's eyes, especially appreciating the prayer of the Holy Rosary. So I want to encourage you, especially those who have never or rarely used the Rosary to take it up, even daily – perhaps like Sarah and me during our daily exercise walk – entrusting to the Virgin’s prayers all the needs of health and care workers, of suffering humanity, of the Church (perhaps on the joyful, sorrowful and glorious mysteries respectively). Fr Robert Llewelyn says in a recent new book, “See the Rosary as a piano, and the Hail Mary as a tune. A piano takes many tunes and you can choose your own for the rosary ...” [*Why Pray?* (DLT: London, 2019) £6.29 from Amazon] It would be especially good opportunity for children to learn to say the Rosary with their families.

There are many resources on the internet to help you. Pope Francis has written two prayers for this year.

<https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2020/04/25/0245/00535.html#eng>

A particularly beautiful new prayer has been added in recent years (at the end of each decade): “O my Jesus, forgive us our sins, save us from judgment, and lead all souls to heaven, especially those in most need of your mercy.” It could be added especially as a prayer for those who are suffering and dying.

But we are all immensely grateful that the Bishop of Fulham and some of his colleagues in London have produced some resources for The Society, before the current restrictions on the use of churches came into place: <https://bishopoffulham.org.uk/praying-the-holy-rosary/> It is being expanded by other resources:

a pastoral introduction: <https://bishopoffulham.org.uk/marys-month-may/>

a ‘How to pray the Rosary’ video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R6AmaVaY8-I>

a live-stream at noon on Fridays during May: <https://www.facebook.com/BishopOfFulham/>

One reason why the Rosary, like the prayer rope used by Eastern Christians to help them say the Jesus Prayer, is so rich a way of praying is because it enables an understanding of prayer as St John of the Cross said, ‘*more than feelings*’. What he is saying is prayer is not about how you feel about it, but about a habit of being: about sinking your identity into something deeper which is going on all the time, whether or not you think you are consciously praying. You may – especially at the moment -- be feeling terrible (for yourself, or on behalf of others); or you may be feeling nothing in particular, but God may be *very* active.

Sarah joins me in sending the assurance of prayer for you and yours, every day

+ Jonathan

GOSPEL PASSAGES FOR THE COMING WEEKS

3 Sun	<i>4th of Easter</i> John 10.1–10	17 Sun	<i>6th of Easter</i> John 14.15–21
4 M	John 12.20–26	18 M	John 15.26–16.4a
5 T	John 10.22–30	19 T	John 16.5–11
6 W	John 12.44–50	20 W	John 16.12–15
7 T	John 13.16–20	21 T	<i>Ascension Day</i> Luke 24.44–end
8 F	John 14.1–6	22 F	John 16.16–20
9 S	John 14.7–14	23 S	John 16.23b–28
10 Sun	<i>5th of Easter</i> John 14.1–14 (*5.19–29)	24 Sun	<i>7th of Easter</i> John 17.1–11
11 M	John 14.21–26	25 M	John 16.29–33
12 T	John 14.27–31a	26 T	John 17.1–11a
13 W	John 15.1–8	27 W	John 17.11b–19
14 T	John 15.9–11	28 T	John 17.20–26
	<i>This is also St Matthias's day</i>	29 F	John 21.15–19
15 F	John 15.12–17	30 S	John 21.20–25
16 S	John 15.18–21	31 Sun	<i>Pentecost</i> John 20.19–23

*If you have read John 14.1–14 on Fr and Sat the passage from John 5 may be read instead