

Pastoral Letter 5

Dear Friends

As I write this message the nation is gearing itself up for the weekly ritual of showing gratitude to our health and care workers, public servants and those in key industries fighting against the coronavirus; hearts gladdened by the news of thousands of NHS volunteers coming forward. People across the nation will be banging pots, trays and pans, clapping and cheering in unison as we burst into a mighty applaud, once more, at our doorsteps, gardens and balconies.

This has become a profound weekly observance at 8pm every Thursday celebrating the key workers helping the ill and vulnerable across our land. In return our NHS workers have been applauding us, the general public, for keeping the government's rules about staying at home. Folks have posted videos on social media during the nationwide clap and genuinely been glad to set eyes on neighbours whom one might not normally see.

This weekly ritual is a testimony to the altruism that resides in the UK and a welcome contrast to the depressing stories of people hoarding loo rolls, paracetamols and flour together with irresponsible behaviour such as pilgrimages to the seaside during lock-down.

The Church Times newspaper recently provided an editorial article expressing how the nation is proud of its 'clappees' but also drew attention to the fact that reports of the sacrificial efforts of key workers can leave others feeling forgotten. For as people applaud the labour of those who are, rightly, deemed vital for the survival of the nation, we need to recognise, too, the day to day work of those who, in normal circumstances, keep others safe, cared for, employed and fruitful, but are currently unable to do so.

This is true of a number of colleagues in our own school community and in institutions and companies throughout the country who have been placed on furlough. For them, work that, until recently, formed an essential part of their identity and dignity, ordinarily essential for others well-being, may not be seen as key, or rendered impossible by the restrictions on travel and social distancing.

This includes not only paid work, either. Churches, temples, mosques, synagogues and other institutions can all survive losing the use of their buildings. But it is harder to sacrifice the work of its volunteers throughout the world who enable service (and faith) to be expressed.

Such demonstrations of God's love through the care of individuals include countless practical acts of service. Indeed, many people will be tempted to feel that they have been demoted and forgotten. In this emergency, when the impulse to reach out to those in need is strongest, they have become observers – 'clappers' – of the work of others. By no means have they become redundant, however. Through prayer, thoughtfulness, acts of kindness, generosity, humour and goodness they are continuing to provide a vital service to many people.

Last Thursday (Maundy Thursday) before the national applaud began many priests celebrated the Eucharist alone in a locked church or at home recalling Christ's Last Supper. The connection between the ritual of the national applaud and that of the sharing of communion is poignant. For at the Last Supper Jesus got up from the table, poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciple's feet, wiping them with a towel. He did it so unobtrusively that at

first they hardly even noticed it, thinking perhaps that a servant was doing this for them. But when they recognised it was Jesus, that he had become their servant, they looked at him in disbelief. For a moment they had to receive from him; something they were not very good at. Like most of us, they were always happier to be in control; happier to define themselves by having power over others. What Jesus did that night was so obviously 'other' that it silenced them.

During my visit to the church of St Gregory of Nyssa, San Francisco a few years ago for Easter I welcomed the opportunity to be part of the Maundy Thursday service. Normally the presiding priest is privileged to wash the feet of twelve volunteers during that liturgy to recall how Christ washed the feet of his friends. However, at St Gregory's each member of the congregation washes the feet of each other as a sign of corporate love and affection. I must admit I found the business of having my feet washed by 'strangers' very daunting. Feet are more private than hands; gnarled, sweaty and not necessarily things of beauty to behold!

But Jesus knelt before each one of his disciples and, holding their feet tightly he washed them and looked into the face of each disciple. With his eyes he declared 'I know you; I want to do this thing for you because I love you'. Furthermore, he affirmed 'I have given you an example that you also should do as I have done to you. I give you a new commandment that you love one another'. This is what he did. He showed them what love looked like.

I believe this is the example we're all beginning to embrace and perfect at the moment – whoever we are, whatever we're doing at this time in our school community, where we live and in our world.

May God give us his strength and blessing.

With my prayers and good wishes

Father Andrew Hutchinson