

Emerging into a New Place



On Sunday June 28, we in Kempsey celebrated the Eucharist together for the first time since March 22. We gathered, not in All Saints Church, but in the Church hall. During the intervening time, we had been through Holy Week, Easter and Pentecost praying alone at home or watching live-streamed services on our laptops or phones.

Being unable to meet for worship with other Christians was hard, but it did not stop us from being active members of Christ's body in the world. Instead, perhaps because of our isolation, we were more aware of the needs of others and responded to them in the best way we could.

That first Sunday back was somewhat strange. There were no hymns sung, no wine given during Communion, and we sat on our sanitized chairs in four square metres of splendid isolation! When sharing God's peace we could only bow or wave to one another. Yet we were there, the body of Christ, meeting together. After the service there was no chatting over hot cups of tea or coffee, instead we just smiled, exchanged a few words and went home.

Attending the Sunday services that have followed, we knew what to expect and could enter more deeply into the worship, at least this was how it was for me. I could appreciate praying with others and receiving Christ's Body in Holy Communion. We are not where we were before the virus, but in a new place, socially distant from one another.

In the past we could comfort a friend in distress by putting an arm around them. Now we must refrain from touching others, even when it is what we want desperately to do. By sharing in their pain in this different way, it could be more meaningful for us. Has such a change, the potential to deepen our faith in God's love and increase our understanding of Christ's suffering for us?

When healing people, Jesus often touched them, laying hands on them or taking their hand and lifting them up. On other occasions Jesus healed a person by his voice only, pronouncing them healed, even at a distance. When Jesus was confronted by the Centurion's request to heal his servant in Matthew 8:5, it was the Centurion's faith in Jesus' healing power to act at a distance that enabled the healing to take place. The daughter of the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:28, was healed when Jesus responded to her mother's faith and persistency with affirming words.

Participating and connecting with others using Zoom and Skype, reminds us that God is with us and working in and through us wherever we are. Regulations about distances to be maintained between people can never keep God and God's love from being present and active in our inmost beings and relationships. As Paul affirms in Romans 8:38-39, nothing can separate us from God's love, but it is experienced differently in different situations.

When we are forced into isolation, separated from our families and friends, it can be a desert time of distress and grief allowing depression to seep into us. It can also be a time of reaffirming our faith in God present with us and in us. If at these times we receive God's care and compassion unexpectedly through another person, it is particularly appreciated. We can also find comfort when we in turn minister to

others in prayer or any other way open to us. By phoning or sending an email to someone who might be sad or lonely we can share God's love in our world today.

We are in an unstable new place and we do not know for how long. In NSW we think restrictions are coming to an end and then hot spots emerge and we are back to more lockdowns and border closures. Our own physical, economic and emotional problems may have been put on hold, increasing our stress level, as we live one day at a time, meeting and responding to demands as they arise.

When in Matthew 14:13 Jesus heard of the beheading of John the Baptist, he departed in a boat to a deserted place to think and pray. But his plan was frustrated. The crowds pursued him by walking along the shore, and were waiting for him when he arrived. He could have rejected them and hurried off elsewhere, but instead he stayed, fulfilling their needs by healing and even feeding them. Only after this work, did Jesus go up a mountain by himself to rest and pray to God. We, too, can gratefully accept a desert space that may have opened up for us, to find and talk with God, care for ourselves, and relax in God's love.

The empty hall looks desolate and unfruitful, but when the body of Christ meets there, Christ is present feeding, strengthening and guiding his Church with his Spirit. In this unsettling time and new place, we can feel empty and long for the past to return. But in our tiredness and barrenness it may be easier for us to be open to receive God's love and to share it with others, especially in a world where poverty, anxiety, grief and depression are rife. By receiving care and giving of ourselves for others in unpromising places we are truly following Christ and embodying his life where we are, becoming with Christ food offered to all for fullness of life.

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