

The Parish of Christchurch

*The Priory Church of the Holy Trinity, Christchurch
St George, Jumpers • St John at Purewell*



January 17th, 2021

Dear Friends,

The beginning of this New Year – normally a time of hope, optimism and positive resolutions – has felt very different. Day after day the news seems only to get worse, with the highest numbers of daily infections and, tragically, of daily recorded deaths since the pandemic first took hold. Here, the most recent statistics for infection rates in BCP are over fifty percent above the national average. And we have been warned that things are likely to get worse before they get better.

So what are we to do now? It goes without saying – though I'm going to say it nonetheless – that we go on doing all we can to keep one another safe. And I hope we will continue to pray, for the sick and the bereaved, for our NHS personnel, for our leaders, for those producing the vaccines, for those caring and providing for the hungry, the unemployed and the homeless ... the list could go on.

Ten months into the pandemic, and with so much uncertainty and cause for anxiety around, it's hard to avoid the impression that the prevailing mood at the moment might be expressed as "we just need to hold on": hold on to the promised rolling-out of the vaccines, to whatever regime we've adopted for exercise, mask-wearing, minimal contact with others, and the rest; hold on to hope that before long things will get better.

At this point, you might be expecting me to encourage us all to hold on to God – after all, he is described as "my rock, my fortress and my deliverer, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold and my refuge" (2 Samuel 22.2-3). Isaiah takes it further, encouraging us to "Trust in the Lord forever, for in God the Lord, we have an everlasting Rock" (Isaiah 26.4). Hold on to God – that sounds right, even necessary; and it resonates with many passages throughout the Old and New Testaments.

There is an echo of this in words quoted by King George VI in his Christmas broadcast in 1939, soon after the outbreak of World War II, in which he quoted "The Gate of the Year", by Minnie Haskins:

I said to the man who stood at the Gate of the Year,
'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.'
And he replied, 'Go out into the darkness, and put your hand into the Hand of God.
That shall be better than light, and safer than a known way.'

Hold on to God – "put your hand into the Hand of God" – is good advice, as far as it goes. If we leave it at that, however, we risk missing out on something profound and life-sustaining: hold on to God, yes, by all means; but remember that before we ever think of holding on to God, He is already holding on to us.

The image that expresses this perhaps most clearly is of the familiar sight of a parent (or grandparent!) and child crossing the road. Look closely, and we see that, no matter how confident the child may appear, it is the parent's hand that enfolds the child's, not the other way around; the parent provides the security, the direction and gives the confidence to go forward. So it is with us and God, even if we are not always conscious of it.

The psychologist Viktor Frankel concluded from his experience of being in a Nazi concentration camp, that the only freedom that such terrible circumstances could not extinguish was the freedom to choose a response to one's own experience. So may we, even if the darkest days of the pandemic lie ahead, choose day by day to begin each morning by saying out loud, "I am a child of God, and today my heavenly Father holds my hand in His."

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As you know, the Revd Jonathan Evans' final Sunday in the parish will be next week, 24 January. We shall be marking this at the Eucharist that morning at 10.00, which will be streamed online. Any further donations to his leaving gift should be made immediately.

Sadly, we are unable to mark this departure as we had wished, with a special Choral Evensong followed by a reception. For reasons we all understand, that cannot be. What we hope to do, therefore, when circumstances permit, is to enable that to happen later in the year by inviting Jonathan back to preach at an Evensong. It is, of course, very unusual to hold such a 'leaving event' months after the priest has left: but these are unusual times and so an unconventional approach seems called for.

Please pray for Jonathan, Alice and their family in the coming days as they prepare for the move.

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Sadly, a few weeks later, on February 14, we shall also be saying farewell to Heidi Haagensen, our Children and Families Worker. Heidi has done a wonderful job since arriving in the parish in May 2018, both in working with the young families, children and young people in the Priory and St George's, and also more widely in the parish: indeed, I said from the outset that the majority of Heidi's work would not be immediately visible to the congregation. At heart, her role has been a pioneering one, in our schools, through holiday clubs, developing Open the Book, her Christmas and Easter Walks, and a wealth of online provision since the first lockdown in March 2020. Her work in Christchurch has been transformative and I know from many of you just how grateful we are for what she has done.

We want to give Heidi a tangible token of our thanks. If you would like to make a contribution to her leaving gift, please follow the following guidance:

- **by bank transfer**, please use: Account Name - P.C.C. of Christchurch No.2 Account; Sort Code 52-21-34; Account Number 52428001.
- Please use "Heidi" as the reference and email Ian Penny on prioryhouse@christchurchpriory.org,
- **by cheque**: please make cheques payable to P.C.C of Christchurch No.2. Account and mark for Ian's attention. If posted, to Priory House, Quay Road, BH23 1BU. Whether by post or by hand, please clearly mark "Heidi" on or in the envelope.
- **by cash**: please put in an envelope for Ian and bring to the Priory, clearly marked as above.

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In February 2003 I spent a month as the guest of the Seminary in Florence. Morning and evening, I had the great privilege of worshipping in Chapel with the staff and seminarians, praying with them, entering into the pattern and rhythm of their liturgies, and learning some of the songs used in their liturgies.

One of those songs came to mind this week. The refrain translates roughly as:

If you welcome me, Lord, I will ask nothing more,
and your way will always remain my way.
Whether in joy or sorrow, as long as you will,
with my hand in yours, I will walk.

None of us can know what the coming weeks will bring. But we may be sure that God is with us, come what may, because that is his promise. And our confidence may be renewed as we hear Jesus' words to us and to all his flock: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand" (John 10.27-28). In that we may trust; and on that foundation we may dare to hope. This is, indeed, the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

With all good wishes,

