

7th January 2021

Hope on the Horizon Covid-19, National Lockdown and 2021

Happy New Year! For many of us, 2020 was a year of unprecedented challenge. At the start of this New Year, we are praying that 2021 will gradually see our freedoms restored as the vaccines against Covid-19 are rolled out across the country. We rejoice with church members who have already received a vaccination.

However, as you will know, 2021 is beginning in a very difficult place, with a new variant strain of Covid-19 driving up case numbers alarmingly, and the NHS under enormous strain. We pray for all front-line keyworkers, particularly those working in healthcare and education. This week, the government has initiated a third national lockdown, leading to the closure of schools (except to vulnerable children and children of keyworkers), and non-essential shops. The urgent message is to stay at home, except for certain exempted activities such as food-shopping and exercise.

Rather to our surprise, we discovered this week that the government has included public worship as one of those activities exempted from the 'stay-at-home' order. This is a marked change from the two previous lockdowns, and indicates that the government now views public worship as 'low-risk' and arguably an essential activity (discuss!). This is credit to the care that we and places of worship all across the country have taken to ensure that our premises are as Covid-secure as possible.

However, the Directors of Public Health in Lancashire have today issued a letter in which they 'strongly advise all faith communities to pause communal prayer and worship during the lockdown period, to reduce the possible spread of the new Covid variant.'

In view of the rising case numbers across the county, and in the light of this clear request from the Directors of Public Health in Lancashire, we have taken the decision to cease our offers of public in-person worship, as well as other face-to-face midweek activities, while still offering the opportunity to come to church for private prayer. Our online presence remains a key priority, and if you haven't yet engaged regularly with our YouTube services, we would encourage you to do so at the start of this New Year.

This is a headline summary of how some of our plans have been adapted this week in the light of the third national lockdown, and local advice within Lancashire.

Sunday Services:

- 945Live will continue on YouTube, but broadcast from home rather than in church
- 10am online YouTube service will continue to be streamed from church, but with reduced numbers in the building
- 11am-ish Sunday Zoom Chat continues online – access details are in Connect
- 11.30 on-site Holy Communion service will close for the time being.
- Families at 2 + 4 has been postponed for January, and is under review for February
- The planned 7pm re-launch of in-person worship has been postponed, and the 7pm will remain online for the time being – watch this space for further details.

Mid-week activities:

- Worship on Wednesday and the Virtual Coffee and Chat (Mondays) continue online on alternate weeks – details in Connect each week.
- Daily prayer continues online: 8am morning prayer using Lectio 365, and 9.30pm night prayer using compline – both on Zoom, details in Connect
- Open Church: the church is open for private prayer 1-3pm on Mondays and Fridays
- The Alpha course has just started on Zoom (Thursdays, 7.30pm) – it's not too late to join!
- Little Fishes toddler group has returned to meeting online, at least until Feb half-term
- Lyrics and Lunch, a support group for those with dementia and their carers, has been paused for the time being, as its members await the vaccine
- St Thomas' Pre-school continues to open daily, as instructed by the government
- Refresh (Yrs 4-6) has returned to meeting on Zoom, at least until Feb half-term
- Youth provision will continue online, though members of the youth team will carry out doorstep visits in the coming weeks.
- Students have been asked not to return to campus, and will continue to meet online.
- The Ark team will continue to provide packed meal parcels for the homeless community from Edward Street
- All other midweek activities (Life Groups, PCC, various leadership team meetings, etc) will all take place online.
- The Heart of the City building project continues on-schedule (target completion date 1st October), with foundations laid and retaining walls being poured this week.

Thank you for your patience, prayers, and continued support throughout the pandemic. We start 2021 knowing that hope is on the horizon, and that the time will come when we will be able to gather together again, in-person and with a new church centre. We look forward to that time, but as we wait, we give thanks that we have hope in Emmanuel, God with us.

God bless you all.

Jon Scamman

Vicar