Worship at St Thomas during a Pandemic

Dear Friends in Christ,

Many of you are understandably curious about the thinking behind our remote worship and when that might end. I offer the following to help us all think these questions through. There are five sections: Background, Worship Survey, A Theology of Technology, Holy Eucharist, and a concluding Pastoral Reflection.

Wishing you every blessing,

The Rev Dr Guy Collins. Rector

Background

The 1979 Book of Common Prayer envisages two pillars of Christian formation: Baptism and Eucharist. These have been the bedrock of the worshiping community at St Thomas for the last forty years. During the early stages of the pandemic we canceled Baptisms and suspended Eucharists. Following the recommendations of the Center for Disease Control, the State of New Hampshire and the Diocese of New Hampshire we suspended in person worship. At the time of writing we have been worshiping online and with telephones for three months.

Right from the start, we chose live interactive worship (rather than pre-recorded worship that is passively viewed). It is a decision that presented many technical difficulties, but in overcoming these we have continued to experience the rhythms of worship in communion with one another.

As other institutions begin to open up at different paces, we are mindful that much of what we valued before the pandemic remains deeply problematic for the foreseeable future. Coffee hour, sharing the peace, singing together, large worship gatherings - and many of our intimate small group ministries - remain unsafe in their physically present forms.

The Diocese of New Hampshire has produced extremely helpful guidelines to help us understand the conditions necessary before we may re-open the physical building of the church. Among these guidelines is the knowledge that in the early stages of reopening no church in NH will be allowed to welcome vulnerable people (those over 65 or with underlying medical conditions). The demands of physical distancing would require everyone to be both wearing masks and keeping a minimum of six feet around them. Churches will also be required to confirm that congregants are healthy, practicing hand sanitizing, and providing extra cleanings between each service, while keeping records of the names of every worshiper for contact tracing. The State of New Hampshire has
produced its own guidelines that closely correlate with Diocesan ones, explicitly restricting the numbers of people allowed in church and what we can do during in-person worship. These guidelines are designed to keep us safe. However, since a large proportion of our parish would not be allowed to come to church in the first place, any ‘early’ re-opening would offer a deeply diminished experience of church. We would also have to find a way of restricting attendance. And we would find ourselves in the unenviable position of having to police the physical distancing, health and well-being of parishioners. In these circumstances most of what parishioners value about the thriving experience of coming to St Thomas pre-pandemic would not be possible, or at best, a mere shadow of its former self.

**Worship survey**

Within this context we crafted a worship survey that included questions about parishioners experiences of online worship over zoom. Much of the survey was aimed at addressing whether the move to trial three Sunday service worship times was an improvement on the previous two Sunday service times. 150 respondents took the time to share their thoughts. These respondents made it clear that they valued the increased opportunities to participate in Christian Formation and Adult Education of the new schedule. There were, however, a wide variety of different perspectives on the service times of 7.30am, 9am and 11.15am. Overall, a majority of respondents (75%) noted that this trial schedule was either ‘better’ (30%) or ‘about the same’ (45%) compared to the 8am and 10am model. These findings will be studied closely over the summer as we reflect on what this means for our worship and education schedule this fall.

In regard to online worship, respondents were asked what they missed most about the remote worship experience (broadcast live from the rectory, with parishioners joining in from their homes). An overwhelming majority (71%) missed being in the church building; 60% missed the sense of community; 57% missed the choirs and organ.

The survey also asked about the Eucharist, specifically, whether parishioners would prefer to participate in Eucharist online (to which they cannot be physically present and cannot physically receive bread and wine) compared to Morning Prayer. Some 40% of respondents declared no preference. About a third of the parish expressed a preference for returning to Eucharist. 28% of respondents expressed a preference for Morning Prayer.
Further analysis of the data behind those who expressed a preference either way revealed that by a small percentage more of 9am and 11.15am respondents expressed a preference for Eucharist. Similarly, again by a very slight margin, more 7.30am Rite I worshippers expressed a preference for Morning Prayer.

**A Theology of Technology**

Since the earliest Christian times, technology has been used to proclaim Christ crucified and risen. We are so familiar with much of this technology that we do not even think of it as such. The ability to read the written scriptures, the very books in which our prayers and liturgy are bound, the candles that illuminate our services, the bread and the wine we consume at Eucharist. All of these are technologies of the soul. To these we might add visual technologies that are more obviously ecclesiastically significant, many of which St Thomas possesses in abundance: icons, stained glass, altar furnishings, crosses and vestments.

The history of the church is the history of our use of technology to mediate the divine, and to heighten the experience of God’s grace. At key points in history many of the technologies we take for granted today were deemed dangerous or heretical by the church: the iconoclasm controversy of the early church, the translation and dissemination of the bible into the vernacular, and the destruction and removal of images at the Reformation stand out.

Technology can be a barrier to worship (e.g. the unsilenced cell phone ring tone). However, it is more frequently a channel of grace. Visual technologies have, in particular, been essential to passing down the story of Christian faith when literacy was low and when few comprehended the official Latin language of medieval worship.

As written literacy has improved, our visual literacy has diminished. The meaning and symbolism of biblical paintings, stained glass and icons are not as familiar now as they once were. In the same way, the dominant language of the Western church (Latin) is no longer the prime mediator of God’s Word.

Theologically, the church has always changed and adapted in the light of the availability, acceptability and ubiquity of different technologies. Without the printing press the Reformation would have been very different (if at all). Without stonemasons and architects there would be no cathedrals or parish churches, no spires pointing out the transcendent.
While most members of St Thomas grew up at a time before the internet, the pandemic has revealed a high rate of internet fluency amongst parishioners. A mere ten years ago worshiping online from home would simply not have worked for most of us. Thanks to hi-speed internet and high definition videoconferencing the vast majority of St Thomas parishioners have been able to see and hear one another during worship and in chat rooms after services.

Theologically, the church needs to recognize that once unimaginable technology is now a daily reality. With almost universal access to the internet, and telephones for those few not online, it has been possible for the whole parish to be together in real time for genuine worship. Although we are not physically present, this does not mean that the Spirit of God is absent.

The implications of this are only starting to be felt. At this early stage it is important to note that our shift to online worship has not diminished our ability to be faithful in our corporate worship life. Quite the reverse. It has enlarged our community by welcoming those who otherwise would not be able to enter the same physical space.

The Holy Eucharist

There remains a good deal of confusion in the wider church about the purpose and practice of Holy Eucharist. Some have wondered whether the Eucharist is valid if there is no chalice? Is the Eucharist real if many or even most of the people are not physically present? If we cannot all share bread and wine at the same time, should none of us? Is God calling us to abstain from Eucharist?

These do not seem to be questions. It may be more fruitful to ask not how the pandemic is limiting means to celebrate in the first place.

More critically, who is at work in Eucharist? Is it us? Or it is the Father, giving of the Holy Spirit? Why do Eucharist? What are we longing for? Why does it feel so strange that we are not able to share it?

To approach Holy Eucharist only in terms of human agency will be to continue to be confused about what the (very limited) circumstances are in which we may gather to celebrate Eucharist.
But there is a more ancient tradition that asks us to see Eucharist as the way God has chosen to make the church. To suspend Eucharist indefinitely in that context is to stand in the way of the workings of divine grace.

Many of the barriers to a swift return to Eucharist disappear if we remember that Eucharist is a mystery that is God’s. Eucharist is not something that depends on us for its validity. It never has. The longheld tradition of *ex opere operato* reminds us that God’s grace works through Eucharist even when the priest is not in a state of grace.

Eucharist is how God knits us together into the body of Christ. Even when we are not able to be physically present to one another, we can still witness (see and hear) the mystery of the grace by which God achieves this.

In every Eucharist in every church all of the people have *never* been present. And in no circumstances before the pandemic has that ever been understood to somehow invalidate the grace that God reveals through Eucharist. Many of the most spiritually moving Eucharists in my own life have been those with only a very few others present. It is not the number of people in the room that make a Eucharist.

Theologically and pastorally, it is desirable to celebrate Holy Eucharist (before the church building is open). This allows the people to experience the grace of God, and be present to one another. While Eucharist during a pandemic does not allow all the people to receive the bread and the wine, the absence of the consumption of that bread and wine does not eliminate the presence of God’s grace. God’s grace is no more limited to the bread and the wine, any more than God’s grace is limited to the hands of the priest, the passing of the peace or the singing of the choir. These are all physical manifestations of God’s grace. They are not its entirety.

The visceral experience of eating bread and drinking wine is surrendered as a matter of safety when Eucharist is celebrated during a pandemic. Nevertheless, the Eucharistic drama of the story of Christ’s life, death and resurrection remains undiminished. In some ways it is heightened, precisely because we remain unable to receive Christ physically in bread and wine. The longing of the heart for God is a vital part of sacramental experience, and that longing is increased not lessened during a pandemic.

A Eucharist makes it possible for the people to speak and hear again the prayers that give them strength. Through those prayers, which are more familiar and more attuned to the rhythms of our hearts, we will once again experience the transformation of God’s grace.

It is helpful to take an analogy from art history. The power of a painting or an icon does not consist in the power of being able to touch it. The sight of a holy image can move us without us having to be able to physically connect with the actual physical basis to that image. Theologically, Eucharist has always worked like an icon. It has been a window into the divine that draws the worshipper into a deeper communion with God.
If our faith is incarnational we will remember that God in Christ took on not simply flesh and blood, but the whole human carnal experience, one that includes sight and sound. At key moments Jesus used touch to heal. But more often, Jesus used the power of words, and the pictures those words painted. While we are unable to touch one another or the sacrament we are not unable to be touched by the wider glory of God’s creation. Eucharist has always pointed not to itself but to the God from whom Eucharist comes. To experience Eucharist again, but in a new and different way, is to be open to the renewal that comes from God.

**Pastoral Reflection**

St Thomas takes seriously our vision: ‘All Welcome – no exceptions – to worship, love, serve and grow.’ Alongside Baptism and Eucharist, this vision informs our return to Eucharist even before our doors can be opened. Worship in real time that includes Eucharist allows us to continue to offer to everyone the experiential heart of the faith that has been handed down to us. Without Eucharist it is difficult for us to pray the prayer of Spiritual Communion we have been praying week by week, a prayer premised on the celebration of Eucharist at the altar of the churches throughout the world.

Spiritually, Eucharist is more participatory than Morning prayer. Through videoconferencing technology it is possible to celebrate Eucharist as the work of both priest and people, a live and simultaneous sacrifice of thanksgiving and prayer. There is nothing virtual about this. Nor is it passive. For although the priest pronounces absolution, consecration and blessing, these acts are not done alone.

Through the dialogue of priest and people, we experience the manifestation of God’s grace. God’s grace is not limited to either the priest or the people. Instead, it is through their partnership that grace is encountered. Without being exposed to the Eucharistic dialogue, a significant channel of God’s grace is lost.

In this account it is not simply the bread and the wine that reveal the presence of Christ to us. The voices and faces of our fellow congregants joining in the ancient prayers of the church are also a mechanism through which God abundantly gives us the grace we so sorely need. Eucharist is always the work of the people. But in order to be understood as such, it must first be recognized as a work of God. Eucharist has always depended upon the willing and free participation of the baptized. None of that changes during a pandemic. What changes is how the imaginative use of technology can make our participation possible.