

## Reopening the Church after Covid

Epistle      [Romans 8:1-11](#)

Gospel      [Matthew 13:1-9,18-23](#)

We're together for divine worship for the first time in nearly a third of a year. The last time Churches in England were shut for this length of time occurred during the reign of King John over eight hundred years ago! The church survived it then and our Church will survive it today.

Much has changed. All of us have suffered over these months. Clearly, the nature of that suffering will differ. Some of us will have lost loved ones; some have been ill; some have lost work or income or self-confidence or sleep; all of us will have worried.

We're restarting Church after a long time away. One reason for coming to Church is to connect with God. God never changes but we *have* changed. If nothing else, many of us will have grown out of the habit of worshipping together.

If our lives and situations have changed, then we will be connecting to God while looking at Him from a different angle ... and in consequence the encounter could look and feel quite different. We need to expect that difference *and then accept that difference*. We must not let our love for God change because we have changed. As the saying goes, 'Love is not love that alters when it alteration finds.' But while the *fact* that we love God cannot be allowed to change, the details of the way we love God will probably look quite different. Discipleship always responds to circumstance.

The lives of Church members have changed. The way we express our love for God will change. And if we, the jigsaw pieces that is Church have changed, then the fit between the pieces may seem jagged. There never was a time when Christian love between Christian disciples was needed so desperately.

There's almost a divine irony that we accompany the re-launch of worship in Church with today's Gospel passage that we heard a moment ago: the parable of the sower. Most of us probably know the parable too well. It's like a well-rehearsed joke so we laugh before we hear the punchline. Therefore, today we'll look at it through a different lens: what is Jesus saying about the way our faith can cope when our faith changes?

The parable talks about God taking root in the soil of a human soul. It's usual to read the parable as a way of differentiating between different kinds of people: some are like a rocky path and some like shallow soil; some are like rocky soil and some like good soil. I think it's more useful to read it as though we are the soil but at some times the soil that is our soul is shallow; when we're honest, the soil that is our soul is sometimes like rocky soil.

God never changes so the seed in the same parable will be the same in every instance. The point of the parable is therefore that as we change as people and so the receptivity of our souls to God also changes. *It's the soil that varies; the parable is about us.* In other words, we can analyse the parable much as a gardener would analyse a bed of soil, working out how to make it fruitful, and therefore how to deal with whatever prevents it from being fruitful.

Read that way, it's saying that sometimes we let the cares of the world stunt our faith; at other times we let the devil steal away our faith; and at yet other times we let God grow abundantly. We allow it or we don't.

Rather than labour the point further, let's look instead at the second reading from St Paul's Letter to the Romans. It says, 'Those who set their minds on the flesh live according to the flesh and those who set their minds on the Spirit live by the Spirit.' Combining the two passages suggests that we are spiritually fruitful in proportion that we keep our minds centred on God and we are not fruitful when we let our minds wander. Today (as always) the powers of darkness are trying to take our minds away from God. They want us to centre our minds on ourselves, on the world, on Covid, on fear, on anxiety, on anger, on the what ifs and maybes and buts and anything at all so long as it is not on God.

Viewed this way, the task of the Church as we re-convene becomes very, very simple. We are to keep our minds in the Spirit come what may. Individually, that means putting God at the forefront at the expense of self. And corporately, as a Church, we are to encourage one another to look to God, serve God, make way for God, wait on God, acknowledge God, ask for God. That's what a Church does.

In practice, that looking to God means a radical recommitment to the Gospel. What will it look like? I'll fess up straightaway: I don't know. To be frank, our finances are completely shot after four months away. We need a fortune. Keep your mind in the Spirit then decide what God is calling you to do. Without betraying confidences, some Church members will not be able to join us for divine worship owing to illness, depression, or whatever. Keep your mind in the Spirit then decide what God is calling you to do. We will need to change the way we do quite a few things in the Church if only because of social distancing. We'll need to adapt, adopt, be adept. Keep your mind in the Spirit then decide what God is calling you to do.

At the end of time, or when we face our loving God in judgement, he will read our lives and decide whether we have been fruitful. Will He discern a hundred-fold increase on the seed he sowed in the soil of our lives? Or will it be sixty-fold, or thirty-fold? In effect, I'm asking, to what extent did we set their minds on the Spirit?

If all of us do indeed keep our minds on the Spirit then the Church—this collective of believers—will survive because we'll all be going in the same spiritual

direction, serving the same God, serving each other with the same God-given love.

So I'll return to the beginning. We've had a Church here in Clarksfield 109 years and a Church in Waterhead for 173 years. We've only been away for a tiny, tiny fraction of that time. Much has changed but God Himself has not changed. Our job is to serve Him and to love Him. If we do so, the rest will be history—his-story. It will be a long history for the Church and an eternal history for us.