



Diocese of Plymouth
From the Office of the Bishop

“Return from Exile”

A reflection by Bishop Mark following the announcement of the resumption of Public Masses

My dear friends,

*“Rejoice heart and soul, daughter of Jerusalem.
Shout with gladness, daughter of Sion.” (Zechariah 9:9)*

These words of the prophet Zechariah echo in us all. They are from the first reading we will hear, when we are able to return to the public celebration of Mass next weekend. In it, the prophet is describing the time of the return of the Jewish people back to Jerusalem following many years spent in exile, in Babylon. With this return from exile the people were able to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. They had the possibility once more of worshipping God in that holy place.

These last months have been an exile for us, too. An exile even from our own churches. An exile from the regular celebration of the Sacraments. An exile from the normal pastoral life of the Church. It is no wonder that our hearts, too, are filled with deep gratitude to God that this ‘return from exile’ is coming soon. How we look forward to being able to be physically present at Mass once more, and especially to be able to receive Him again sacramentally, in Holy Communion. We know that the steps we must take in this return are to be gradual. The obligation to attend Mass remains suspended during this uncertain time. That will remain so for some time.

It is important for us to be conscious of our fellow-parishioners and their needs, not just our own. If you can attend Mass on a day, other than Sunday, then please do so. This will enable those who are working or unable to attend Mass in the week, to come on Sundays as our churches can only hold limited numbers, with the social distancing measures that are required. Our priests will be doing all they can in the provision of Masses. Many of them are

looking after more than one church, so simply multiplying Masses over a weekend is not an easy option, in most places. I am sure you understand this. I know that you will support our priests in their efforts and will want to be at Mass, if you are well and able, and will accommodate the slight changes to timings or organisation that need to be in place.

Thank you to all those who have been volunteering as stewards in their local parish. It is important that we all continue to support one another and work together. There are some changes within the celebration of Mass itself and your local parish will share these with you. I hope they do not feel too intrusive. You will appreciate that they are necessary to keep everyone safe.

Many of our priests will be continuing with the live streaming of Mass, at least on a Sunday. This has been an important experience for us all, I know. One person, who wrote to me about it recently said,

“As an old person living alone who is shielding, I have hugely appreciated the daily masses online..... Can I beg you not to stop them when public masses can be said again? Please remember people shielding have to stay in until 1 August. Even then some of us....are scared....Please do not abandon us.”

I know our priests will do what they can to reach out to the vulnerable, the sick and housebound. To those who will be staying at home, I want to reassure you that the parish will try to include you, in whatever way is possible, in its celebrations, and maybe particularly through the newer forms of media. Soon, our priests will be able to visit people in their homes once more, to pray with you, to bring you Holy Communion, to celebrate the Sacrament of the Sick with you or your sick relatives.

A few weeks ago, I celebrated the 30th anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood. Neither at that time, nor during the past 30 years, did I ever imagine that we would have witnessed the suspension of public Mass for three months. The Gospel on my ordination day, is the one that we have for next weekend, when we resume the public celebration of Masses. It is from Chapter 11 of the Gospel of St Matthew.

At that time, I chose it for three reasons, and I hope you do not mind me sharing them with you, as they seem so apt for us at this time. Firstly, in the Gospel reading Jesus speaks of His Father revealing his mysteries to “mere

children". This emphasis on littleness and humility, is so important for all of us, as disciples of Jesus. It is still so relevant for us today. Ours is a humble diocese; great in generosity and loving service, yet relatively small in numbers. It has always amazed me how much is done, how much influence and impact there is by a parish in its local community, when there is a relatively small proportion of local people going to the church.

That may well be the case, and perhaps more so, in the weeks and months ahead. When other countries have returned to the celebration of Mass, numbers seem to be significantly reduced, at least to begin with. Much of that is perhaps due to fear and understandably so. We all know how deadly this virus can be. Whether it is a sign of a greater shift in people's practise of their faith, we do not know. We shall have to wait and see. Yet this should not trouble us. The Gospel reminds us that the Lord bestows His gifts most especially on "the little ones...to mere children." Let us always strive to be small, little before God, because then indeed He will continue to bless us.

Secondly, the Gospel situates Jesus' life in His loving relationship, with His Father. We hear Him say;

"Everything has been entrusted to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, just as no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him." (Matthew 11: 27)

If the last few months have taught us anything, it is the reality that as human beings we are not masters of our world. Nor should we see ourselves as merely victims of a blind fate. I think that is potentially one of the most damaging aspects of these past months. Because this virus seems to be able to hit any of us, at any time, we may be tempted to believe that our life, and a possible immanent death, does not matter. Am I just another statistic?

In the face of these troubling realities, it is important to be reminded that God is *our* Father. He looks at each of us with the self-same love with which He looks eternally at His Son. This is the consolation and immense power of our faith. In our closeness to Jesus, we are brought into the very life of God Himself – Father and Son and Holy Spirit. And if this is true for us, then it is also an offer - a truth - available to every human being. Each one is infinitely loved by our God, desired by Him, and looked upon by Him with a continuous loving gaze. I hope in these months that we can more consciously

live beneath that loving gaze. To do so, enables us to live more generously in service and love of others, especially the poor, the sick and the vulnerable.

Finally, I chose this text all those years ago, and find it now resonating so much because of Jesus' tender invitation:

"Come to me all you who labour and are heavily burdened and I will give you rest." (Matthew: 11:28)

There will be a lot of activity in these coming weeks as we return to some kind of "new normal" in the celebration of the Sacraments and in our pastoral life. There will be much to be done, whilst also maintaining a care and an outreach to those who are most vulnerable and who will need, or feel safer, staying at home.

Jesus shows us that our deepest desires and longings are rooted in a relationship with God the Father, which Jesus has gifted to us. It is in living close to Jesus, making our way to Him, that we are given the rest for which we all long.

That is why being able to be in His Risen presence at Mass, is such a gift to us. It is why being able to receive Him in Holy Communion once more, satisfies our souls. It is why after this long exile, we sing of His praises and His mercy, as we return to be more fully with Him.

*"Rejoice heart and soul, daughter of Jerusalem.
Shout with gladness, daughter of Sion."*

Mary, Mother of the Church, Pray for us.
St Joseph, Guardian of the Church, Pray for us.

Please pray for me.

God bless you.

+Mark O'Toole
Bishop of Plymouth,
27th June 2020