



FACE TO FACE

To the members of the Family of St Asaph

A Pastoral Letter for June 2021 from Bishop Gregory

It is exciting to have started the process of meeting up with people face to face once again. People who have been familiar only on the screen, and often not even that, are suddenly able to meet with me once again. I have been to see my parents at their home in south Wales, even if hugging was still not permissible at the time. It is so much richer to be in one another's presence, to be able to take in the responses of gesture, body language and expression as well as the spoken word, unmediated by a screen.

Zoom – something of which I had barely heard at the beginning of 2020 – has served us well, particularly for business meetings, and I suspect that we'll be keeping the format. However, our meetings have become more formal, there is little or no side talk, certainly not the opportunity to catch up with items that are not strictly business, but about enjoying friendship and support, or at least only in a very diminished way. The time is fast approaching for friendship to resume.

So too, there should be excitement in our faith. The Christian faith speaks of an intimate face to face encounter with God, which is distinctive in the world of faith. "Now we may see through a glass darkly", wrote the apostle Paul, "but soon we shall see him face to face." (1 Corinthians 13.12). He is speaking of our appearance before God at the end of time, and the journey towards God in faith, but this final encounter is not the only intimate meeting with God that is described in the New Testament. "In many and various ways God spoke to our forefathers," wrote the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, "but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son." (Hb 1.2), and you can feel the excitement in the First Letter from John, "That One who was from the beginning, to whom we actually listened, whom we have seen with our own eyes, and touched with our own hands – he is the Word of Life." (1 John 1.1). Christians believe that in Jesus, God came among us, to be touched and to touch, to heal and to set free, to redeem and to bear witness to love. I do believe that, by God's grace alone, I shall see God face to face one day, but even now, I know that I am called into an intimate meeting with him in my heart – when God may minister to me, and I may lay the burdens of my heart before him. I am called to be a friend of Jesus – and you are as well.

In fact, if Jesus spoke true, we may find ourselves meeting him all over the place. "In as much as you did this for the least of one of my brethren" said Jesus of the service of generous love, "you did it as to me." (Matthew 25.40). If we rejoice over the resumption of face to face encounters, so too we should rejoice over the promise of friendship with God, that begins now, even if it will come to fruition in its fullness only in eternity.

Actually, it looks as if even the unlocking of our national lockdown may take some time yet. As I speak, the Prime Minister has dialled up his uncertainty: June 21st may not be the day after all, and the delta variant may cause further delays. Even then, I suspect that our diaries will not fill in the old way – I find my colleagues expressing caution still about the return to worship, the organisation of in person gatherings, and the cycle of committee meetings. The ending of lockdown will come not with the throwing of a switch: "Hey presto, we are back to normality", but with a slow testing out, of courage and caution in equal measure.

Like neighbours after a long and bitter dispute, we shall have to feel our way back to an equilibrium of contact with which we feel comfortable. Let us pray then for the organisers of meetings and events, and for the gift of wisdom. Let us pray that God will help us to go not too slowly, nor too fast; let us pray that medical knowledge and the science of immunisation may keep pace with the mutating virus, and let us pray that at each step, the relationships that we rebuild will be suffused with a deepened sense of faith, hope and love that enables us to see the face of Christ in friend and foe, in neighbour and in colleague, in stranger and in outsider.

