

The Benefice of Peover

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Temporary Pause of Face-to-Face Communal Worship:

To the Parish of St Oswald's Lower Peover.

Firstly, I would like to take this opportunity to wish you all an incredibly happy new year! It has been a challenging time for us all over the past months, dealing with the global pandemic and probably no less a challenge, coping with the uncertainty of getting a new vicar! I would like to thank you all for your pro-active and prayerful support of both Saint Oswald's and on a personal level, me too.

Despite the challenges, we have managed to not only keep the church open over the past few months but have also seen a tangible growth in our regular number of worshipers, which I hope has been encouragement and blessing for us all.

Advent and Christmas for me was bittersweet, I was deeply aware of the deep sense of pain many of our faith family felt being unable to be with loved ones (I myself didn't get to see my brother, his family, nor my mother who remains in a nursing home in North Devon) yet on the other hand I was deeply moved by the way the village embraced our Advent and Christmas activities so joyfully. The highlights for me must be the Mid Night Mass and our Christmas day All Age Celebration. Two vastly different services but both hugely joyful and well attended. Thank you to everyone who played a role in making these services happen.

It is the joy of these services and the growth of joy that we have seen in our church family over the past weeks that makes writing this letter to you even more difficult.

Difficult but I'm afraid quite necessary.

As we are all aware, the global covid-19 pandemic continues to plague our nation in the most horrific manner. And this week the nation has yet again been put under national lockdown to protect the NHS and the most vulnerable of our society.

The Church of England although not currently asking all churches to shut as before, continues to ask local leadership to prayerfully consider the delicate balance of providing services and support alongside best protecting the communities where we live.

With this in mind the PCC of St Lawrence's our Sister Church in Over Peover concluded a week ago that to best protect that community they would *temporarily pause* communal face to face worship (*Suspend all services-apart from Weddings, Funerals and Baptisms which may be required under our pastoral code*) This was discussed, and agreed with Archdeacon and is to be reviewed at the end of January when we have a better understanding of the second covid variant and success of the vaccination schemes locally.

Since then, of course the situation has continued to develop further and I have become increasingly aware of the hesitancy and concern exhibited and vocalized by members of the congregation about keeping face to face worship going at St Oswald's.

It had not been my intention to pause any of our activities at St Oswald's but having heard so many concerns and becoming ever more aware that perhaps asking groups of people (many vulnerable) to gather together in the midst of a national lockdown which under all other circumstances forbids such mixing. I felt it was right to discuss service provision with the Ministry Team and the Standing Committee.

The opinion of the above groups was that we should, (*as has St Lawrence's done already*), best protect not just our most vulnerable but all church members, by temporarily *Pausing* our face-to-face worship services at St Oswald's too.

I therefore asked the PCC for their endorsement of the proposed *temporary 'pause'* of face-to-face communal worship at St Oswald's. **In short, the majority opinion of the PCC is that St Oswald's (although sad and painful) should now temporarily move into a general pause of face-to-face worship. This will take place with immediate effect.**

I understand that this decision will undoubtedly cause grief and upset to some, however I hope that although we may personally wish that this decision had not been necessary, that we can all respect the PCC for coming to this difficult conclusion in the most challenging of circumstances.

This said: I would remind everyone, that this decision in **no way** means that the church has closed.

All other church activities, our outreach, our pastoral care, the provision of sacred space, and the support we give to our charitable interests and our schools will continue.

I would wish to formally re-assess the situation again at the end of January. It is the hope that by then, or by Ash Wednesday at the latest, we will not only have begun to see the benefit of the current 'lock down' and the roll out of the vaccines, but be better placed to confidently stop the '*pause*' and return to face-to-face worship once again.

In the meantime, what will be available? It is likely that we will be adding to the list below, but the following if not already in place, will be asap.

Access to Sacred Space: That until it is deemed safe to end the '*pause*' or should the government choose to close church buildings again, St Oswald's will be continuing with our '*open church*' for private silent prayer not only on the regular Wednesday mornings but also additionally on Sunday mornings too.

Pastoral support: Although Ann and I as your ministry team are always available via email or telephone, I will also be physically present during the '*open church*' sessions should anybody need extra support. The details of additional times will be confirmed and added to the church website shortly.

Sacramental provision: Sacraments will remain available to the sick and the dying: Please contact the vicarage directly should this be required.

Teaching and Worship: The church website remains one of our primary sources of communication: The website will be updated on a regular basis bringing you not only weekly theological reflections but also associated links to Church of England and Diocesan Spirituality and Worship resources (*which though not the same as being together, we hope will prove to be a comfort and support until we do get to physically meet again*).

Please continue to look after yourselves and each other during this difficult time and until we physically meet again be assured that you remain in my heart, thoughts and my prayers.

Faithfully Yours in Christ,

Fr Murray.