



RE-OPENING OF CHURCH BUILDINGS FOR SUNDAY WORSHIP

Last Friday, 5th June, it was announced that Ireland is progressing to Phase 2 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society outlined by the Government. This is good news, mostly because it means progress is being made in defeating Coronavirus and also because it means we are a step closer to normal life resuming.

This is a time for optimism, while at the same time acknowledging the tragedy of COVID-19 and the major challenges which lie ahead – especially for those whose health or livelihood have been endangered by the pandemic. It's also a time to be thankful to God for sustaining us through this crisis, and to thank everyone who has worked tirelessly to get us to this point.

The Taoiseach also announced that the reopening of churches for public worship would be brought forward to Phase 3, beginning on 29th June. This is also good news, and it raises a number of questions which are addressed below:

WHEN will services in church happen?

The first Sunday in Phase 3 is 5th July, so we propose to hold our first in-church worship services from that date. We need to remember that this could be delayed if public health advice changes. We will not be opening before we are advised that it is OK to do so.

WHICH churches will be open?

Our hope would be to reopen all four churches in our group of parishes. This will reduce the overall amount of travel and keep numbers lower at each service, helping with physical distancing. It will also underline the equal importance of our four parishes.

WHAT will it be like?

In some ways, coming to church will be very different to what we were used to before the lockdown. There will be hand sanitiser at the door. Some pews will be blocked off to maintain 2m physical distancing. We will need to fill up seats from the front and exit from the back. We will use the screen or printed service sheets rather than prayer books and we will not be able to shake hands or give hugs! The offering plate will not be passed around and there may be regulations regarding singing and face coverings (we are awaiting further clarification on these). Baptism and Holy Communion will be subject to further guidelines which have not yet been released.

On the other hand, church will be the same as ever: we will gather to worship God, to confess our sins, to hear his word and to bring our prayers and praises to him. The fundamental things will be unchanged and it will be the same God: the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit, whom we will be worshipping. He is the same yesterday and today and forever (Hebrews 13:8).

WHY are we doing it at all?

You may be asking why we are going to all this trouble to have services in the church building when we could just continue to worship online as we have been doing since March. There are three main reasons:

Firstly, the importance of gathering 'in the flesh.' Good as our online worship has been, it lacks the reality of face-to-face fellowship which we experience when we gather in one place. In a world that is increasingly disjointed and fragmented, there is huge value in coming together as the household of God, not just staying as isolated households in our own homes. Secondly, the importance of our witness in the community. Opening the church buildings sends out a message that Christ and his church are alive and active. We have not closed down and gone home: we are here in the community, for the community. Thirdly, reopening gives the opportunity for those who are not technologically connected to receive teaching and to join in prayer.

WHO is it for?

As always, our services will be open to everyone. The exception is that you must NOT come if you have COVID-19 symptoms (a fever, any kind of cough, shortness of breath or breathing difficulties, loss or change to your sense of smell or taste).

Those who are elderly or medically vulnerable should think carefully before attending. Not everyone will be ready to return to church at the same time. For some it will be wiser to wait a few weeks or months before joining us. Our commitment is that we will not pass judgment on other people based on whether or not they come – everyone has to make up their own mind.

WILL there still be online services?

The live-streamed services have been a blessing and have enabled us to reach out to a much wider audience than our normal congregation. We need to continue to offer a way for people to join us virtually once we reopen. Probably this will mean that one of the Sunday services will be live-streamed from the church building, depending on technical factors like the ability to get a good internet connection. We will probably also offer at least one live-streamed service midweek e.g. Wednesday evening.

HOW can I help?

Please pray for this whole process: it is the most challenging situation we have faced as a group of parishes for several years and we need the Lord's help to get us through. We also need unity, patience and a willingness to serve. Our parishes have risen to the challenges of lockdown in a wonderful way; now we need to rise to the next challenge – coming out of lockdown. With God's help, we can do it together!

As well as prayer, there will be a need for people to prepare the buildings and to assist before, during and after services. We also need people with relevant expertise and knowledge e.g. people in healthcare professions and people whose businesses have stayed open or have reopened during the pandemic. The Rector, Churchwardens and Select Vestries will have particular responsibilities but there is a role for everyone. All feedback will be gratefully received as we begin making plans, and we should all listen out for updates over the next few weeks.

Let's move forward cautiously but optimistically, remembering our motto verse for this year: *Therefore my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.* (1 Corinthians 15:58.)

Archdeacon David Huss, Rector
9th June 2020