



And this new evangelism must begin amongst the poor, because that is the place from where renewal always springs. Dioceses are going to have difficult decisions to make about deployment and pastoral organisation in the years ahead, but such decisions must honour our commitment to inner city, outer estate and post-industrial communities. If now becomes the time when we disproportionately withdraw people or buildings from places of poverty, then God is dishonoured and the Gospel is fatally undermined.

The lesson of history is clear and consistent. An evangelism that prioritises the powerful does not work and cannot last. Instead we need to hear the voice of the breathless. We need to speak good news to the poor. Our best leaders, our richest resources, our finest theologians, our most engaging preachers must be offered to the places where life is hardest. Only then we will re-engage a nation with the person of Jesus.

Next, over the breathless, we must breathe out the **Spirit's breath of justice**. The COVID pandemic has laid bare the harsh levels of social and economic inequality which so damage our common life, which deny opportunity, which take away hope and which lead to countless costly social ills from poor health to spiralling prison populations. The action of local churches in addressing inequality through acts of charity has been heroic in this pandemic. But charity can be a fool without justice. Foodbanks, for example, merely prop up innately unjust structures unless we campaign to change those factors which have rendered them necessary: low pay, unfair benefits, family breakdown. As UK churches, our voice in naming injustice and calling for political and economic reform has for too long been inconsistent and disjointed. We need a united Christian voice: perhaps a new ecumenical body, which can campaign consistently and vigorously. But if we are to address injustice nationally we must name it within our own structures. The vast wealth disparities between dioceses cannot be acceptable in the future as some dioceses go to the wall whilst others fall back on eye-watering levels of historic wealth. Harder still will be naming and addressing the deep-seated racism that still exists within our own common life and which prevents so many BAME Christians from breathing. We have no authority to name injustice nationally if we are so wantonly failing to put our own house in order.

And third, over the breathless, we must breathe out the **Spirit's breath of peace**. The fallout of this crisis is likely to be deep and sustained economic depression with concomitant pressures on relationships at every level. The church, filled with the Spirit, is called to model the new humanity. We are challenged to live differently under the bonds of love, valuing every human person as a child of God. That is the peace that the Spirit breathes.

If we are to do that effectively, we urgently need to do better at living with difference. We must find ways to conduct debates such that they do not destroy relationships and leave us too exhausted to engage with the world. A nation that is crying out for breath cannot afford the luxury of a divided and quarrelsome church, obsessed only with its own internal wrangles. Those who look to us seeking the breath life should find a community of peace. Without that all our words and prayers will be hollow hypocrisy.

'I can't breathe.'

It is the ultimate cry of despair. As those filled with the Spirit's breath, if we can hear and respond, then perhaps this terrible crisis can be the dawn of a new age of faith.



PASTORAL LETTER OF THE RIGHT REVEREND JOHN ARNOLD

My dear brothers and sisters, I want to write to you and assure you that my thoughts and prayers are with you all, at this time.

There are many resources available on the Diocesan website and being circulated among parish communities, by Catholic organisations and among small groups. It has been very encouraging to see so many positive and practical initiatives during these difficult times – not least in the live-streaming of Masses, liturgies, and devotions. My thanks and sincere appreciation to all who have been so imaginative in minimising the impact of physical isolation and allowing people to feel included and a part of community in so many different ways. This includes the contact by phone and other initiatives for those who do not have access to the internet and live streaming.

All churches were closed in March by government directive out of concern for the safety and well-being of people. Public gatherings were banned as an attempt to limit the danger of contagion. And safety must continue to be our priority as we move towards the re-opening of churches. Even when churches are allowed to re-open on Monday 15th June, not all churches will be able to re-open at once. It is intended that several named churches, spread around the Diocese, will be ready to open for private prayer, and are currently being prepared. Other churches will follow as quickly as it can be assured that they are able to fulfil the conditions for cleanliness, and social distancing. All parishes will be assisted in these preparations. It is likely to be several more weeks before we will be able to celebrate Mass publicly and, even when that is possible, social distancing will limit the numbers of people able to attend – even in our largest church buildings. We must all be patient. We are under no obligation to attend Mass during this time, and making spiritual communion is a powerful way to welcome Christ into our lives at home.

During this time, we have every reason to be grateful to all who have been working on the frontline, in hospitals, care homes, in the community and emergency services and all those ensuring vital supplies. Many of them are our own parishioners. It is real faith in action.

It is important that we continue to remember those who have died and those who have lost loved ones during this time. It must be particularly difficult to have the funeral of a loved one under present circumstances. In addition to any individual Requiem Mass or Memorial Service for those who have died during this period, it will be important that each parish has some form of special Memorial Services to which all the bereaved are invited as an opportunity to support each other in faith.

Food for Thought post-Covid.
As we, please God, move towards normal, what will 'new normal' look like?
What have we missed?
What have we learnt?
What opportunities for the Church, ie us, in the days, months, years ahead?
Will we rise to the challenge of a 'new mission' for a 'new normal'?

Please read the following resources and reflect, prayerfully, as to our next steps.

The limitations on our personal freedom should not restrict, in any way, our lived practice of our Faith. On the contrary, we are being called to re-visit and develop our private prayer, our understanding that – wherever we are – we are the Church, members of the Body of Christ. We are invited to build that sense of “Church at home”, renewing the reality stated in St John’s Gospel “Remain in me as I in you” (Jn 15:7), and “He is with you, He is in you” (Jn 14:17). Christ lives in us wherever we may be. I am so impressed by the many creative ways that people have found to encourage each other in prayer. Hopefully, this will continue in our journey ahead, centred on Christ and guided in prayer.

Pope Francis is adamant that we are best able to express ourselves as Church when we can come together for the celebration of the Sacraments, to pray together and then to go out as missionary disciples, especially to the poor and the marginalised. But Pope Francis also recognises that this is not always possible but that does not restrict us from being Church and “ambassadors for Christ” (2 Cor 5:20). And during this difficult time of not having access to our churches and while we are unable to participate fully in Mass and other liturgies we can be in solidarity with those many Catholics throughout the world who, because of persecution or military conflict, are unable to receive sacraments for years on end. There are many people, in the squalor of refugee camps, who have no access to a place of prayer or sacrament. But they are very clearly Catholics to be admired for their strength of Faith.

We must now be absolutely sure to think globally and understand the impact that we have on one another throughout the world, and how we depend on others as they depend on us. We can no longer simply look inwards to our own needs and welfare. In these last three months many of us have been living our lives quite differently with our walking and cycling, reduced shopping. Is this a sign of a “new normal”? The pandemic has taught us that we are all so closely connected, across all nations, which is a lesson that Pope Francis has been teaching, particularly in his encyclical letter “Laudato Si”, where he appeals to us all to recognise our duties to all our brothers and sisters and our care for our common home. It is said that we are the first generation that has learned about the damage that we are doing to our environment and we may be the last generation to be able to avoid irreversible damage for future generations.

The recent violence in the United States is a further reminder of our need to think globally and to recognise the dignity of every person of whatever colour, creed, or gender. We are privileged to be entrusted with the challenge which, with the grace and power of God, working in us and through us, we can achieve for our children’s future. Let us make the pandemic a steppingstone to a brighter and safer world for all.

Governments will need to collaborate, globally. Industry and technology must develop in more environmentally sustainable ways. Every one of us must be determined to promote that global thinking and care in our homes and parishes and communities.

“Stay with us, Lord, on our Journey”

We ask the intercession of Mary, Our Mother, in a prayer of St Pope John Paul II ‘Mary, woman clothed with the sun, help us to fix our gaze on Christ amid the inevitable sufferings and problems of everyday life. Help us not to be afraid of following him to the very end, even when the cross seems unbearably heavy. Make us understand that this alone is the way which leads to the heights of salvation. And from heaven, where you shine forth as Queen and Mother of Mercy. Watch over each one of your children.’

Yours devotedly,

John



A thought-provoking reflection on the last words of George Floyd, ‘I can’t breathe’ in the light of the pandemic was written by Philip North, Anglican Bishop of Burnley. It is printed below and over-leaf:

‘I can’t breathe.’

Following the lynch-mob style killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis Police, his dying words have become the cry of dispossessed and impoverished BAME communities first in the States and then across the globe. Long decades in which they have suffered on a daily basis from structural racism, inequality of opportunity and the denial of their personhood has exploded into a mighty welling up of anger which has left the Trump administration floundering and governments around the world struggling to keep up.

‘I can’t breathe.’

That is also the cry of COVID patients, a condition which fills the lungs with fluid such that the breath is forced out of a person. At first we were told this pandemic would be a crisis for everyone. Already it is revealing itself to be a crisis for the poor. Those from urban areas and BAME communities are dying in hugely disproportionate numbers. And as the massive economic impact of lockdown reveals itself, it will inevitably be the poor who pay an unfair share of the cost, for the impact of crisis is always delegated to those who are already deprived.

‘I can’t breathe.’

Unspoken, spoken then hashtagged, this is becoming the cry of all who feel constricted and suffocated by poverty or injustice.

‘I can’t breathe.’

Those are not recorded amongst the last words spoken by Jesus from the cross, but they might have been, for crucifixion, like COVID, works by forcing the air out of a person’s lungs. Every breath becomes such unspeakable agony that eventually the body has to give up trying. On the cross, Jesus identifies himself with all who cry out, ‘I can’t breathe.’

Yet his breathlessness has purpose, *‘It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you,’* Jesus says at the table of the Last Supper (John 16, 7). By undergoing breathlessness, Jesus unleashes for us the irresistible, life-giving breath of the Spirit who renews all creation.

The Spirit’s breath, released at Pentecost, is the gift that Jesus gives to his Church. So in a post-COVID world Christians must be utterly single-minded in breathing that breath over a world that cries out, ‘I can’t breathe.’ Nothing else will matter.

First, over the breathless, we must breathe out the **Spirit’s breath of life**. During crisis, through generous service and imaginative use of the online environment, we have made contact with a new fringe. What we need now is a new evangelism in which we live and speak the Gospel with joy, an evangelism motivated not by institutional survival but by the passionate desire that people might breathe.

I CAN’T BREATHE