



St Mary and  
St John the Divine

BALHAM

15 March 2020  
Third Sunday of Lent

Dear Friends,

I am writing to inform you about the different ways we are responding here at St Mary's to the health crisis triggered by the spread of Coronavirus (COVID-19). This is a time of anxiety and confusion for many, and it is important that as a Christian community we do what we can to help slow the rate of infection, as well as remain a calm and prayerful presence to those around us.

On Tuesday, 10 March, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York issued guidance to all clergy regarding the conduct of public worship. Specifically, they instructed that:

- **the administration of the chalice should be suspended during Communion. Communicants will therefore be invited to receive in one kind only (host/wafer);**
- **all worshippers should refrain from handshaking and other direct physical contact during the Peace;**
- **clergy should refrain from direct physical contact as part of any blessing or 'laying on of hands'.**

In keeping with the logic of this guidance, yesterday the clergy and churchwardens agreed to implement additional measures to reduce the spread of infection during worship, including the way that stewards, sacristans, and servers carry out their roles.

We also agreed the following policies, subject to review:

- **all non-worship gatherings at St Mary's are suspended until further notice (social events, study groups, Place of Welcome, lectures, concerts, etc.);**
- **the kitchen facilities are now closed and all catering is suspended (including coffee/tea service after Sunday service, Lent lunches, etc.);**
- **there will be additional cleaning of toilet facilities, crèche area/toys, pews, and other frequent 'touch points'.**

I recognise that some of the restrictions will be difficult and unpleasant for us, but the clergy and churchwardens have together concluded that they are the best course of action at present. Meanwhile, we are evaluating ways in which the church can offer both practical and pastoral support to those who may need it in the weeks and months to come. If, for whatever reason, you feel you may require special assistance as a result of the virus outbreak, please add your contact details to the special **Parish Support List** we have initiated for this purpose, or contact me or the churchwardens.

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The Revd Dr Robert Tobin



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There is currently a great deal of information and advice circulating about how to minimise the risk of contracting Coronavirus. As always, the best thing any of us can do is follow the hygiene guidance from Public Health England: wash your hands frequently and well, dispose of used tissues promptly, and stay home if for any reason you are feeling unwell. For Christians, a crisis such as this also serves as a reminder that we are called by Jesus to keep faith and bear each other's burdens. In that spirit, I commend to you these 'Coronavirus Golden Rules' recently produced by the Bishop of St Albans:

**Golden Rule One.** Each one of us can think about how we can protect and support our neighbours. So much of the public rhetoric is sowing fear about the danger of other people. So, taking all the official precautions, offer help and reassurance to others – and don't demonise anyone or any group.

**Golden Rule Two:** Think about who may be suffering more than me. For those of us who are healthy there is much less to worry about, but the elderly, the housebound and those with chronic health conditions may be very anxious.

**Golden Rule Three.** Don't give into panic and start hoarding food. There is plenty to go around, so practise the Christian discipline of sharing. Ask your neighbours what they need, and do your best to help them get it.

**Golden Rule Four.** Live today to the full. None of us ever knows what the future holds. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6. 25–34), Jesus challenged his followers to live each day fully and not to be afraid. Every time we are tempted to give in to fear, we need to make a conscious choice to respond in trust and openness.

If you have any questions or concerns you would like to raise, please feel free to be in touch with me or either of the churchwardens. And please pray: pray that our decisionmakers may have wisdom, that our health professionals may have endurance, and that our own community of St Mary's may serve as a sign of God's loving presence in a troubled time.

Yours faithfully,

The Revd Dr Robert Tobin  
Vicar

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