

On the way ahead

After the critical battle of El Alamein in 1942 Winston Churchill famously observed “Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.” Where exactly we are in the appalling COVID-19 pandemic is unclear but certainly people are beginning starting to think not just about the end, but what lies beyond.

I’m in touch with people in a variety of church fellowships both in France and elsewhere and I’m beginning to hear some of the questions that are being raised about that future. First, two pieces of bad news. First, it’s difficult to see how we’re going back to what we were: the world has changed. Second, not every church is going to survive. The many churches that were already struggling with high upkeep costs and small, elderly congregations are going to face a very difficult time indeed. One factor that, at the moment, is difficult to assess is whether people who have lost the habit of attending their local church will choose to return. That is made hard to predict because of the way that the present crisis has forced the creation of ‘online churches’ some of which will probably persist in some form or another beyond the present crisis. I think what we have achieved here in Lorgues at very short notice is actually quite impressive – well done Peter – but there are some churches, gifted with professionals in the technology industry, who in several continents are building an excellent and powerful online presence. If their online churches continue after the pandemic, they could present a challenge to many established ‘physical’ churches. You can well imagine someone saying, as they lie snug under their duvets on some cold winter Sunday, ‘why should I struggle to attend my freezing mediaeval local church when I can sit on my sofa in my dressing gown with a cup of coffee and watch a lively online service?’ It’s a good question.

Nevertheless, I feel that some churches are going not just to survive but to thrive. Here I think there will be three important factors.

First, churches that thrive will be those that have something to *communicate*. They are churches with something to say and that something is the good news of Jesus Christ. This present crisis has had one benefit in that it has made people ask questions about the meaning of life. We need to be more than social clubs: we need to have a message.

Second, churches that thrive will be those that *connect*. There has been a long standing and unfortunate tradition in some parts of the Anglican Church of using language and terminology that is centuries old. In the post-COVID world we will have to recognise that the church is not a museum. We need to speak words and share concepts in a way that people hear and understand us.

Finally, I think that the churches that thrive will be those that have proved that they are a *community*. One phenomenon that has emerged in the present crisis is a realisation that we need other people. The trend for individualism that has been such a major factor in the last seventy years seems to have been reversed. I have no idea what Sartre meant when he wrote ‘Hell is other people’ (“L'enfer, c'est les autres”) and I’m not sure he did, but I think after living in confinement for weeks, many people feel strongly that the absence of others is more characteristic of hell rather than heaven. Community counts. Always did, always will do!

How in the context of Lorgues communication, connection and community work out is not easy. But they are things that we need to think and pray about and now's the time to start!