



# WELCOME TO ST PETER'S ASH



*THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY AT ST PETER'S IS CALLED TO CELEBRATE, LIVE AND REFLECT THE LOVE OF GOD IN JESUS CHRIST*

**23<sup>rd</sup> AUGUST 2020**

**TRINITY 11**

<u>READINGS FOR TODAY</u>	PARISH OFFICE: Monday & Friday 9 – 30 am to 11 – 30 am TEL:01252 331161; e- mail: <a href="mailto:office@saint-peters-ash.org.uk">office@saint-peters-ash.org.uk</a> BOOKINGS OF WEDDINGS & BAPTISMS – phone for an appointment on 01252 321517 or 01252 331161 WEBSITE: <a href="http://www.saint-peters-ash.org.uk">www.saint-peters-ash.org.uk</a>
Isaiah 51 v 1 - 6 Romans 12 v 1 - 8 Matthew 16 v 13 - 20	



I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven

READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK – TRINITY 12

Jeremiah 15 v 15 - 21; Romans 12 v 9 - end;  
Matthew 16 v 21 - end

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PLEASE PRAY FOR THE SOULS OF THE RECENTLY DEPARTED, ESPECIALLY: IRIS DAY; DAPHNE SHENTON

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There is a free national phone line 'Daily Hope' that offers music, prayers and reflections as well as full worship services. Available 24 hours a day on **0800 804 8044**

DON'T FORGET OUR ST PETER'S PRAYER CHAIN

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If you would like emergency prayer for yourself or somebody else please phone: 01252 322292 or 01252 323037 – this is a confidential service.  
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COLLECT FOR THE WEEK – TRINITY 11

O God, you declare your almighty power most chiefly in showing mercy and pity: mercifully grant to us such a measure of your grace, that we, running the way of your commandments, may receive your gracious promises, and be made partakers of your heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

## CARE AND SHARE

Our initiative to help those who may be short on food supplies in the current crisis. Food is being left outside church for people to take for themselves, or to share with others who they know are in need.

If you would like to donate any tins, packets, UHT milk etc. please leave it on the doorstep of the Rectory. Thank you.

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CHURCH SERVICES

We are pleased to say that there are two services of Holy Communion once again, every Sunday. An 8 am Holy Communion in St Peter's Centre, and a 10 am Family Communion in church.

We are unable to have both services in the same building at present, due to issues relating to the cleaning that would be necessary between the services. (The usual second Sunday pattern of Morning Worship at 10 am followed by Parish Communion at 11 – 15 am will NOT be happening at present for the same reasons.)

On Wednesdays there will be a service of Holy Communion at 9 – 30 am in church. Unfortunately, there can be no coffee and chat after this service at present.

Social distancing and Public Health requirements will be met. Please see our website for details.

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PCC MEETING – the next meeting (online) is on Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> September at 7 – 30 pm.  
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Bookings for Baptisms, Weddings and Banns can be made by appointment only on Wednesday evenings – phone the Parish Office on 01252 331161 or e-mail on:

[office@saint-peters-ash.org.uk](mailto:office@saint-peters-ash.org.uk)



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## Morning Prayer at 10 am on Sunday

*If there is more than one person present, someone may wish to read the parts marked (L), everyone says the rest together. You can say alternate verses in the Psalm and in the Canticles. Please have a Bible to hand. You may wish to light a candle.*

(L) O Lord, open our lips

All: and our mouth shall proclaim your praise.

- 1 The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, ♦  
slow to anger and of great kindness.
- 2 He will not always accuse us, ♦  
neither will he keep his anger for ever.
- 3 He has not dealt with us according to our sins, ♦  
nor rewarded us according to our wickedness.
- 4 For as the heavens are high above the earth, ♦  
so great is his mercy upon those who fear him.
- 5 As far as the east is from the west, ♦  
so far has he set our sins from us.
- 6 As a father has compassion on his children, ♦  
so is the Lord merciful towards those who fear him.
- 7 For he knows of what we are made; ♦  
he remembers that we are but dust.
- 8 Our days are but as grass; ♦  
we flourish as a flower of the field;
- 9 For as soon as the wind goes over it, it is gone, ♦  
and its place shall know it no more.
- 10 But the merciful goodness of the Lord is from of old  
and endures for ever on those who fear him, ♦  
and his righteousness on children's children;
- 11 On those who keep his covenant ♦  
and remember his commandments to do them.

All Glory to the Father and to the Son  
and to the Holy Spirit;  
as it was in the beginning is now  
and shall be for ever. Amen.

*This hymn is said or sung:*

All my hope on God is founded;  
he doth still my trust renew,  
me through change and chance he guideth,  
only good and only true.  
God unknown, he alone  
calls my heart to be his own.

Human pride and earthly glory,  
sword and crown betray his trust;  
what with care and toil he buildeth,  
tower and temple fall to dust.  
But God's power, hour by hour,  
is my temple and my tower.

God's great goodness aye endureth,  
deep his wisdom, passing thought:  
splendour, light and life attend him,  
beauty springeth out of naught.  
Evermore from his store  
new-born worlds rise and adore.

Daily doth the almighty Giver  
bounteous gifts on us bestow;  
his desire our soul delighteth,  
pleasure leads us where we go.  
Love doth stand at his hand;  
joy doth wait on his command.

Still from earth to God eternal  
sacrifice of praise be done,  
high above all praises praising  
for the gift of Christ, his Son.  
Christ doth call one and all:  
ye who follow shall not fall.

(L) The night has passed, and the day lies open before us;  
let us pray with one heart and mind:

All: As we rejoice in the gift of this new day,  
so may the light of your presence, O God,  
set our hearts on fire with love for you;  
now and for ever. Amen.

(L) Let us confess our sins in penitence and faith.

*Pause to call to mind our sins*

All: God our Father,  
long-suffering, full of grace and truth,  
you create us from nothing and give us life.  
You give your faithful people new life  
in the water of baptism.  
You do not turn your face from us,  
nor cast us aside.  
We confess that we have sinned  
against you and our neighbour.  
We have wounded your love  
and marred your image in us.  
Restore us for the sake of your Son,  
and bring us to heavenly joy,  
in Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

*All say The Gloria:*

Glory to God in the highest,  
and peace to his people on earth.  
Lord God, heavenly King,  
almighty God and Father,  
we worship you, we give you thanks,  
we praise you for your glory.  
Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father,  
Lord God, Lamb of God,  
you take away the sin of the world:  
have mercy on us;  
you are seated at the right hand of the Father:  
receive our prayer.  
For you alone are the Holy One,  
you alone are the Lord,  
you alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ,  
with the Holy Spirit,  
in the glory of God the Father. Amen.

*We now say the collect for Trinity 11 (see above):*

*Read Isaiah 51 v 1 – 6 followed by Psalm 138 concluding with:*

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit; as  
it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever. Amen.

*Read Romans 12 v 1 - 8*

(L) Alleluia, Alleluia,  
I am the light of the world, says the Lord.  
Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness  
but will have the light of life.

All: Alleluia.

*Now read Matthew 16 v 13 – 20. Here are some thoughts on today's readings from Revd. Carol:*

Who would have thought the simplest of statements from Peter would end up with him being the rock on which the church would be built and given the responsibility of the keys to heaven!

What on earth was Jesus playing at?! After all Peter was not known for his tactfulness, and, dare I say, gentle, steady nature. Rather, he was the hot headed one who opened his mouth and said whatever came out, rather than taking stock and thinking.

Yet Jesus has bestowed these great things upon Peter, though I do not think Peter, or the other disciples would have quite understood the implications of it at the time. Why did Jesus react in this way towards Peter and his words of Messiahship and Sonship?! Well, when Jesus asked 'who do you say I am?', everyone else had been speculating that he was John the Baptist or one of the prophets of old returned, but Peter actually said exactly what he saw and believed – it came from the heart and Jesus knew that insight could only have come from God. It was not something that Peter had spent time speculating on like those around him, he felt and believed, and said it how it was.

It all sounds very simplistic I know, but, actually, if you think about it, all we have to do to be given a way into heaven and the opportunity to help build Christ's church here on earth, is to quite simply recognise and acknowledge that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. When we do that and live out our life of faith, we can begin to have an impact on the world around us. Friends and family notice a difference and we may even think and do things in a different way - a way that shows that God's kingdom is not something far away, out of our reach, but is in fact here on earth.

We know that Peter went on to have an amazing earthly ministry. Indeed, it is through his faithfulness and his proclamation of the Gospel message the Christian church that we are part of today exists. As current day disciples our lives, just like Peter's, can have an impact here on earth and ultimately in heaven too. As Jesus' disciples today, we have the ability to unlock the gates of heaven by sharing our faith with others, we can unlock the reality of what Jesus has done for humanity through His death on the cross and we can help people to see that with Him in their lives, life can be less of a burden. If you like, we can help to unlock the shackles of life and help people to come to a place where they find the love and peace of Christ that we have.

Of course, it may be you don't quite feel that way at the moment, especially with all the problems in the world around us and particularly the way in which we are having to live our lives with the Corona virus. But actually, if we think about the time in lockdown, for many people it was a chance to step back from life as it is usually and take a bit of a breather. It was a time to reflect and think about the people and the things we really care about and for some, I know, it was a time to enjoy God's creation, by getting out in the garden, or going for walks during the daily exercise time. There are those of course who have suffered because their living conditions are not that great to start with, either a house of violence or living in a high rise block of flats, or were having to 'shield' completely on their own, or maybe the job they had before this all started has now been taken away from them.

It is these kinds of things in our community we should be looking out for, for the vulnerable and isolated. As a church we are doing a small bit to help those who are struggling

financially by providing the 'Care and Share' food. It is very much appreciated by those who come along and are able to get a meal from it. But we can also be doing these things individually. By doing so we are living out the reality of what Jesus' love and compassion in our own lives is like, and in turn that does give a little glimpse of what it is like to be a keyholder to heaven. Because that is, as I said earlier, what we all are, keyholders to heaven in our acceptance and acknowledgment that Jesus is Messiah, the Son of God, our Saviour. We don't have to be a special person, with a special calling or talent – just look at the example of Peter and the other disciples, they were far from extraordinary people, it was the way they went on to live out their lives and speak the Gospel that was extraordinary. We can just be ourselves but trust in God, follow Jesus and allow Him to reflect His love through us - we can open the gates of heaven to those around us. AMEN

*Now pause for your own reflections.*

*We say the Apostles' Creed:*

I believe in God, the Father almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.  
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried;  
he descended to the dead.  
On the third day he rose again;  
he ascended into heaven,  
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,  
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.  
I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic Church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting. Amen.

*We now say together:*

*All:* You have set us free to worship you without fear,  
holy and righteous in your sight.

- 1 Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel, ♦  
who has come to his people and set them free.
- 2 He has raised up for us a mighty Saviour, ♦  
born of the house of his servant David.
- 3 Through his holy prophets God promised of old ♦  
to save us from our enemies,  
from the hands of all that hate us,
- 4 To show mercy to our ancestors, ♦  
and to remember his holy covenant.
- 5 This was the oath God swore to our father Abraham  
to set us free from the hands of our enemies,
- 6 Free to worship him without fear, ♦  
holy and righteous in his sight  
all the days of our life.
- 7 And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the  
Most High, ♦  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,
- 8 To give his people knowledge of salvation ♦  
by the forgiveness of all their sins.
- 9 In the tender compassion of our God ♦  
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,

10 To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, ♦ and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

*All* Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever. Amen.

*All:* You have set us free to worship you without fear, holy and righteous in your sight.

*Our prayers, today, are written by Fr Keith:*

Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for revealing to Peter the true nature of your Son. May we, who have been called to be your witnesses today, be as bold as Peter in proclaiming that same truth to others. Bless our Bishops, Andrew and Jo, and all who lead our church, help them, at this difficult time, to make the right decisions about the future. Strengthen our sisters and brothers who are being persecuted for telling the truth, may they know the power of the Holy Spirit supporting and encouraging them to keep faithful.

Lord, in your mercy. Hear our prayer.

Heavenly Father, we pray for all in positions of authority in the world, that they may work for the common good and not just themselves. Give wisdom and courage to all who are striving for justice and peace, especially in Belarus and Lebanon at this time. Help us to play our part in making life more secure and fulfilling for all, and teach us how to use the gifts you have given us in nature, more sustainably and fairly.

Lord, in your mercy. Hear our prayer.

Heavenly Father, we pray for this local community. Be with those who are still isolating and all who are anxious about the future. Give strength to those who are having to look for new jobs, and are experiencing strains in their relationships as a result. May we never forget the victims of violence and abuse, help us as individuals, and as your church, to do more to support them and all who feel their voices are not heard.

Lord, in your mercy. Hear our prayer

Heavenly Father, you sent your Son to heal the sick and bring fresh hope to the afflicted. Strengthen, we pray, those to whom you have given the gift of healing today, may they bring comfort and renewal to those they treat. Be with all who are caring for sick loved ones at home, may we not forget them, and may they be able to access the support that they need.

In a moment of silence, we bring before you, all who we know to be sick and suffering at this time, praying for healing and inner peace.

Lord, in your mercy. Hear our prayer.

Heavenly Father, through the resurrection of your Son, you opened to us the gate of everlasting life. We pray for the souls of all the faithful departed, especially our sister Iris, and ask that they may know that rest and joy that you have promised for all eternity.

Lord, in your mercy. Hear our prayer.

Heavenly Father, we rejoice that we are members of your one church on earth and in heaven. We ask the prayers of Mary, Peter and all the saints who surround us like a great

cloud of witnesses, and we commend ourselves and each other to your unfailing love, saying:

*All:* Merciful Father, accept these prayers, for the sake of your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Now, as Jesus taught us, so we pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.....

*This hymn may be said or sung:*

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation!  
O my soul, praise Him, for He is thy health and salvation!  
All ye who hear, now to His temple draw near;  
Praise Him in glad adoration.

Praise to the Lord, who o'er all things  
so wondrously reigneth,  
Shelters thee under His wings, yea, so gently sustaineth!  
Hast thou not seen how thy heart's wishes have been  
Granted in what He ordaineth?

Praise to the Lord, who doth prosper thy work  
and defend thee;  
Surely His goodness and mercy shall daily attend thee;  
Ponder anew what the Almighty can do,  
If with His love He befriend thee.

Praise to the Lord, oh, let all that is in me adore Him!  
All that hath life and breath,  
come now with praises before Him;  
Let the Amen sound from His people again,  
Gladly for aye we adore Him.

*Let us pray:*

*(L)* God of glory,  
the end of our searching,  
help us to lay aside  
all that prevents us from seeking your kingdom,  
and to give all that we have  
to gain the pearl beyond all price,  
through our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

*All:* May the Father from whom every family  
in earth and heaven receives its name  
strengthen us with his Spirit in our inner being,  
so that Christ may dwell in our hearts by faith;  
and may the grace of God Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be  
with us and remain with us now and always. Amen.

May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy  
of God, rest in peace, and rise with Christ in glory. Amen.

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## Evening Prayer for this week

O Lord open our lips,  
and our mouth shall show forth your praise.

O God make speed to save us.  
O Lord, make haste to help us.

- 1 Bless the Lord, O my soul. ♦  
O Lord my God, how excellent is your greatness!
- 2 You are clothed with majesty and honour, ♦  
wrapped in light as in a garment.
- 3 The sun knows the time for its setting. ♦  
You make darkness that it may be night.
- 4 O Lord, how manifold are your works! ♦  
In wisdom you have made them all;  
the earth is full of your creatures.
- 5 When you send forth your spirit, they are created, ♦  
and you renew the face of the earth.
- 6 May the glory of the Lord endure for ever; ♦  
may the Lord rejoice in his works;
- 7 I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; ♦  
I will make music to my God while I have my being.

*All* Glory to the Father and to the Son  
and to the Holy Spirit;  
as it was in the beginning is now  
and shall be for ever. Amen.

*This hymn may be said or sung:*

Through the night of doubt and sorrow,  
onward goes the pilgrim band,  
singing songs of expectation,  
marching to the promised land.

Clear before us through the darkness  
gleams and burns the guiding light:  
trusting God we march together  
stepping fearless through the night.

One the light of God's own presence,  
o'er his ransomed people shed,  
chasing far the gloom and terror,  
brightening all the path we tread.

One the object of our journey,  
one the faith which never tires,  
one the earnest looking forward,  
one the hope our God inspires.

One the strain the lips of thousands  
lift as from the heart of one;  
one the conflict, one the peril,  
one the march in God begun.

One the gladness of rejoicing  
on the far eternal shore,  
where the one almighty Father  
reigns in love for evermore.

Onward, therefore, fellow pilgrims,  
onward with the cross our aid;  
bear its shame, and fight its battle,  
till we rest beneath its shade.

Soon shall come the great awaking,  
soon the rending of the tomb;  
then the scattering of all shadows,  
and the end of toil and gloom.

That this evening may be holy, good and peaceful,  
we pray with one heart and mind:

*Silence is kept.*

As our evening prayer rises before you, O God,  
so may your mercy come down upon us  
to cleanse our hearts  
and set us free to sing your praise  
now and for ever. Amen.

*A Psalm is said: Mon (St Bartholomew) 116; Tue 89 v 19 -  
end; Wed 91; Thurs 94; Fri 102; Sat 104, ending with:*

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;  
as it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever.  
Amen.

*Two Scripture Readings now follow (see below). Between  
the two readings we say:*

*All* The glorious grace of God  
is freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

- 1 Blessed are you,  
the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, ♦  
for you have blest us in Christ Jesus  
with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly  
places.
- 2 You chose us to be yours in Christ  
before the foundation of the world, ♦  
that we should be holy and blameless before you.
- 3 In love you destined us for adoption as your children,  
through Jesus Christ, ♦  
according to the purpose of your will,
- 4 To the praise of your glorious grace, ♦  
which you freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.
- 5 In you, we have redemption  
through the blood of Christ, ♦  
the forgiveness of our sins,
- 6 According to the riches of your grace, ♦  
which you have lavished upon us.
- 7 You have made known to us, in all wisdom and  
insight, ♦  
the mystery of your will,
- 8 According to your purpose  
which you set forth in Christ, ♦  
as a plan for the fullness of time,
- 9 To unite all things in Christ, ♦  
things in heaven and things on earth.

*All* Glory to the Father and to the Son  
and to the Holy Spirit;  
as it was in the beginning is now  
and shall be for ever. Amen.

*All* The glorious grace of God  
is freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

*Readings:*

Monday: Deuteronomy 18 v 15 - 19; Matthew 10 v 1 - 22  
Tuesday: Proverbs 8 v 22 - end; Mark 5 v 21 - 24  
Wednesday: Proverbs 9; Mark 5 v 35 - end  
Thursday: Proverbs 10 v 1 - 12; Mark 6 v 1 - 13  
Friday: Proverbs 11 v 1 - 12; Mark 6 v 14 - 29  
Saturday: Proverbs 12 v 10 - end; Mark 6 v 30 - 44

*Gospel Cantic: The Magnificat (The Song of Mary)*

*All* My spirit rejoices in you, O God,  
my soul proclaims your greatness.

1) My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit  
rejoices in God my Saviour; he has looked with favour on  
his lowly servant.

2) From this day all generations will call me blessed; the Almighty has done great things for me and holy is his name.

3) He has mercy on those who fear him, from generation to generation.

4) He has shown strength with his arm and has scattered the proud in their conceit.

5) Casting down the mighty from their thrones and lifting up the lowly.

6) He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.

7) He has come to the aid of his servant Israel, to remember his promise of mercy.

8) The promise made to our ancestors, to Abraham and his children for ever.

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever. Amen.

All My spirit rejoices in you, O God,  
my soul proclaims your greatness.

*Prayers of thanksgiving are made for the day that is ending. Intercessions are offered for the church, the world and for individuals, the sick and the departed.*

Our Father, who art in heaven ...

The Collect for this week (see first page)

Kindle in our hearts, O God,  
the flame of love which never ceases,  
that it may burn in us, giving light to others.  
May we shine for ever in your temple,  
set on fire with your eternal light,  
even your Son Jesus Christ,  
our Saviour and our Redeemer. Amen.

Lighten our darkness, Lord, we pray, and in your great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night, for the love of your only Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all evermore. Amen.

May the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.

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## **Bishop Andrew's Lockdown Sermon** ***Romans 12:1-8, Matthew 16:13-20, 24.8.20***

*'So why do you people need so many crisps?'*

I'll never forget the first time that I took Adrine Kamuteera to the Sainsbury's in the centre of Cambridge. Adrine had just flown from her home in South-West Uganda to join her husband who was studying in England at the time; and, as someone used to growing her own food and to visiting the vegetable stalls in the village square, this was the first time she had ever set foot in a supermarket.

The hunt for millet (part of the staple diet in much of Uganda) was the first challenge. We eventually located it in the pet food aisle, for feeding to your budgies. Negotiating the check-out proved another problem: 'That's £14.53', said the check-out lady, to which Adrine – used to haggling in the market – responded, 'I'll give you £9!' But it was walking through the shelves of crisps, with many hundreds of varieties on offer, which provoked the most telling moment of them all. 'So why do you people need so many crisps?' asked Adrine quietly, to which – at that point – I couldn't come up with a sensible answer.

So why do we people need so many crisps? It's something to do with personal choice, of course, with a quest for the variety which our society describes as the 'spice of life'. It's something to do with our economic systems too, with the whole way in which capitalism, the market economy, operates. And once we have a taste for it, how difficult to go back to a world where choice is constrained, where millet rules the day. Hasn't our experience of the past few months taught us that even the tiniest of gaps on the supermarket shelves results in stiff complaints at the checkout, only mildly muffled by the facemasks through which they're issued.

Instead we have extended this doctrine ever wider, bringing more and more choice into every aspect of our lives – our lifestyles, our relationships, our worldviews, our identities, everything. Just dip your toe in the world of the social media for an instant, and you'll immediately pick up the one unforgivable sin in the society it reflects: any attempt, even expressed in its mildest form, to suggest there might be limits somewhere along the line: because this is the new blasphemy: a blasphemy against the worship of choice, and to question it at any point is to be rude or a hypocrite, a bully or something worse.

And yet unlimited choice really isn't good for us, and deep down we know it. For one thing it's destroying the planet. For another it's bringing increasing confusion, stress, greed and complexity and injustice in its wake. It's one of the ironies of our culture in the West that a time where choice is king has also proved a time of unease and unhappiness, and that was even before Covid reared its ugly head. Even developing nations – even Uganda, Adrine's home country – may lack many of the things we take for granted, but are spiritually and relationally streets ahead of life here in Britain. And I know, because I've been there.

So what's gone wrong? Simply this: that we've ignored the dark side of choice, and so have fallen prey to lives that are a whole lot more complicated and restless than they ever used to be. In the terms of British psychologist Oliver James, we've gone down with a nasty dose of 'affluenza'.

Imagine with me a values supermarket, where each of us dutifully dons our facemasks, selects our trolley, and starts to make our way along the various aisles. In previous generations, the products on display were rather few, but all well tried-and-tested. Yet now the shelves are full of a dazzling array of different possibilities, and it's only those older products that look increasingly dusty and out of place. In the relationships' aisle, lifelong faithfulness has been replaced by a series of alternatives, all of them enticing and cleverly marketed. In the beliefs aisle there is a huge variety of products on display, with an old box mysteriously designed in the shape of a cross, hidden behind a glossy new pick-and-mix counter of beliefs from all around the world. 'Make up a religion to suit *you*', is the seductive message on an advertising hoarding nearby: 'because you're worth it'.

Choice seems to be the only thing we aspire to, the one absolute. Yet somewhere along the line, as almost every social commentator agrees, we've got lost and confused and unhappy, the younger generations especially. And short of indulging in periodic bouts of nostalgia, we simply don't know what to do about it.

'Who do people say that I am?', asked Jesus in today's gospel reading. He'd deliberately taken his disciples on a two-day hike into the northern region of Caesarea Philippi just in order to have this conversation. Well, they replied, people are thinking of you as some kind of prophet: in fact you're really popular – you're up with the big boys, with Elijah, with Jeremiah, with John the Baptist. Everyone's talking about you. Everyone's popping you into their supermarket trolley as they make their way down the beliefs aisle.

'But what about you? Who do you say that I am?' And at that point Simon Peter took the plunge. 'You are the Messiah', he said, 'the Son of the living God'.

It's a key moment in the storyline of the gospels: the moment when the indefinite article 'a' turns into the definite article 'the'. Up till that point the crowds had been using the indefinite article about Jesus: he was a prophet, a teacher, a miracle-worker: top of the class in all those departments, perhaps, but in no way unique. But for Simon Peter that was no longer enough. Here in Jesus he had found the Messiah, the Son of the Living God: no longer someone who could be picked and mixed with others, but one completely on his own. So what was Jesus' first response to Peter's flash of revelation? It was the words, 'Happy' – or 'Blessed' – are you, Simon, son of Jonah'. Somehow, at that very moment – as the indefinite article was replaced by a definite one – Simon Peter took his first step along the road of happiness.

There is, we learn here, a different approach to the worship of choice; and the Bible calls it the way of covenant. It's a way that involves choice to begin with: when I chose to be a Christian, I entered into a

covenant relationship with God; when I chose to get married I entered into a covenant relationship with Beverly. But the difference between the two is this: that when I enter into a covenant I'm in it for life: for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death us do part. When I enter into a covenant it therefore guides, determines and provides helpful limits to my other choices. No longer is Beverly simply 'a young woman in my life'; from that moment on she becomes 'the young woman in my life'.

This Sunday happens to be Beverly and my 34<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, which is perhaps why the theme has popped into my head; and when we got married in Stourbridge on the 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1986, my best man (who's now the Bishop of Sheffield) made the point rather neatly by giving me a small toy dog with a little medal around his neck on which was inscribed the word 'Fido'. Up to this point, he told me, I had been a Rover, looking for a partner, metaphorically scanning the supermarket shelves to use a very clumsy analogy. But now I was to be a Fido, faithful to the wife I'd chosen and who had miraculously chosen me. And 34 years' later I praise God for a marriage which (like every marriage) has had some ups and downs, but which has brought with it a joy, a depth and a simplicity I would never have known had I remained a Rover!

The same is true of our covenant relationship with God: here too, having made our choice, we are called to be a Fido. There are plenty of riches within the Christian tradition for us to explore of course – and no shortage of challenges and adventures involved in the decision to live for Christ. But that decision sets right limits on our choices too. Our philosophy, our values, our lifestyle, our spirituality, our financial priorities: all will be led and guided by that central covenant commitment; and in that place we will find blessing, happiness.

So what was happening to Simon Peter there in Caesarea Philippi? Simply this: he was recognising the uniqueness of Jesus the Son of the Living God and committing himself wholeheartedly to live for him. In that sense Peter was not only the first Peter – so far as we know, no-one had been given that name before – but he was also the first Christian. It's no wonder that Jesus went on to say: 'On this rock I will build my church'. And Peter was fallible, of course – and his very fallibility gives the hope of a fresh start to all who have messed up their covenant relationships in the past; but that church has been built, decade after decade, century after century, as men and women, young people and children have themselves acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God: and even during this time of Covid - where so many of our choices have been restricted, sometimes cruelly so – how good to hear a steady trickle of stories of people connecting or reconnecting with the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and indeed renewing their covenant commitments to their marriage partners, their children, their closest friends through lockdown together, perhaps, or through the miracle of Zoom.

**So why do we people need so many crisps? It's a great question, leading us to reflect on the real blessings but also the shadow side of choice in a culture rich with salt and fat, where we feed good, nutritious millet to our budgies.**

**Who do people say that I am? It's another great question, as men and women push their trolleys down the beliefs aisle, if they venture to go down there at all.**

**But it's when Jesus turns to us with the final question, 'And who do you say that I am?' that it all gets a whole lot more exciting. And perhaps in the quietness of wherever we're sitting at the moment, we might wish to make or to renew our covenant commitment in the inspired words that fell from the lips of Simon Peter that day: 'You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God'.**

**And finally a few words from our epistle reading today from Romans chapter 12, where the apostle Paul spells out the implications of living in a covenant relationship with the Christ, the Son of the Living God:**

***'I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.***

**May it be so, Lord Jesus. Amen.**