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Dear Friends,

20 May 2020

I pray that you are coping well with the current lockdown and that your spirits are high. I would hope too, that those of us who are able to stay at home are praying earnestly for those who are unable to do so. There are many, even within our own community who work for the NHS, Public Transport, Refuse Collection, Shops, Care Homes, Community Care, Infrastructure, the Police, the Emergency Services, Post Office and Delivery Services and like it or not, Funeral Undertakers. Of course there are others whose work is unseen, but without which our situation would be much worse, local Councilors and Council staff, those who keep our water, gas, and electricity flowing, those who maintain telecommunications and Internet links, those who transport our food and those who manage our Banking.

There are bound to be many others who I have not mentioned but whom we rely upon for the smooth running of our society, even during times of crisis. It is perhaps not too much of an exaggeration to suggest that we are all learning, or rather relearning, that everyone is valuable. The Christian Faith teaches that all people are valuable, first and foremost because we are made in the Image of God, and are of great value to Him, and secondly because we all need each other. The distinction that society sometimes makes between 'important' and 'less important people,' is often neither thoughtful nor charitable, because during this pandemic, it has become clear to everyone that in some way, we all depend upon one another.

It is very likely that during this pandemic, everyone has had to face challenges, some more than others and as we approach the possibility of 'the lockdown' being eased or lifted, some will be pleased and others will be anxious.

For many, the idea of going back to what life was like before lockdown or even to the so-called 'new normal,' is not a prospect they relish, yet there are many who can hardly wait, and each will have their own reasons for or against.

Lockdown has brought to the fore and shone a light on many good things: neighbourliness, kindness, togetherness (despite physical distancing), and a reassessment of priorities. It has also shone a light on the murkier aspects of human behaviour, domestic violence and abuse, other crimes and disregard for certain people in our society, (shamefully, these have increased during lockdown). Though much of our society's efforts are concentrated on dealing with the current viral pandemic, we cannot forget that there are other forms of suffering.

No doubt we pray that the good attitudes and kind deeds that have come out of this pandemic will continue to flourish in our local communities and in society in general, and that life for everyone will improve. For those who have suffered and are still suffering from Coronavirus, or any other form of suffering, we pray that they will find recovery and relief, new hope, and strength. We pray too for those who grieve the loss of a loved one.

As we approach the possible easing of lockdown measures, the Church of Scotland is exploring how best to prepare for the re-opening of churches: consideration is being given as to when this will happen and what procedures will be put in place to ensure the safety of those who attend. You will be kept informed of any decisions and plans regarding the use of our church buildings. Please bear in mind, that it is entirely possible that any decisions made regarding an opening date for churches and the safety procedures put in place to protect those attending them, may vary from one locale to another in order to reflect the particular local circumstances.

When the Scottish Government relaxes the 'lockdown,' and the Kirk has given direction as to when our churches can reopen, it is likely that many people will still be anxious about going out and about. Church buildings must be safe places for those who gather in them, and instructions have been given on how to ensure our places of worship are kept safe and clean, however, worshippers must also 'feel' safe and secure, so if you are concerned about what measures have been taken to ensure our places of worship are safe e.g. physical distancing, cleaning, etc., please do enquire and attend when you feel confident enough to do so.

Once our churches reopen and we are able to meet together, albeit at the appropriate physical distance, the opportunity to meet for regular worship and fellowship will gladden our hearts. Hopefully we will have found a renewed determination to share the gospel with others, to remember the good lessons learned during the lockdown and have a renewed determination to do all we can to help those who have suffered and still suffer from domestic violence and abuse, crime, neglect and loneliness.

As Christians, our reverent worship of God ought to be accompanied with positive action in the world, and given that during this pandemic there seems to have been an increased interest in spiritual matters, (based on the number of people who have watched Religious Services on Television or online) the ground has already been prepared for us to sow the seed of the Gospel. Who knows what crops will grow when God gives life to those seeds?

Many of you have kindly enquired as to how life has been in the Manse during the lockdown; Louise and I have been well and we thank you for your concern and prayers. We thank God for the blessings of good health, daily provisions and a garden, all of which are privileges that many do not have, so we are humbled and grateful to the Lord. We are looking forward to seeing you all again and joining in worship with you whenever circumstances allow, and trust that you will be kept safe and healthy.

If you would like to know more about the Christian Faith, need some encouragement, or feel the need to speak with someone, you can communicate with your District Elder, or you can call me. May you be aware of God's near presence.

God bless,

James