

Parishes of St John XXIII & St Joseph's, Birtley

Incorporating:

Our Blessed Lady Immaculate, Washington; Our Lady Queen of Peace, Penshaw;
St Bede's, Usworth; St John Boste, Oxclose; St Joseph's, Birtley

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In the Partnership of Benedict Birtley, Chester-le-Street, Houghton-le-Spring, Penshaw,
Sacriston, Washington

4TH SUNDAY OF LENT - 21/22 MARCH 2020, YR. A

Frs Mark, Martin and Jim write:

There is absolutely no doubt that we are living in unprecedented times. Some of us are still young enough to not remember the Second World War... but it's interesting to hear older people saying that the presence of the Coronavirus reminds them of how everyone had to pull together to resist a terrible threat. This threat is more discrete and less obvious than any other invader, so we need to be very vigilant and do everything we can to minimise its spread. In St John's Gospel Jesus said that he came to bring the 'fullness of life' to everyone. So, we take care of ourselves and each other...particularly those who are vulnerable and in need.

We are very aware that we are not able to celebrate Mass and other Sacraments together at the present time. We are also aware that many parishioners are feeling deeply sad that we can't gather to pray and worship and give thanks to God for everything that is good in our world. But this doesn't mean that we can't still thank God, hold each other in prayer and do whatever we can to help those around us to continue to live as full a life as possible. Our priests will be celebrating mass every day, and you will all be in our prayers. We don't know for how long we will be living like this, but please join us in our prayers for one another.

Bishop Robert has written to us to say: *I am sure that all of us, both clergy and people, are asking many questions following the latest directives we have received from the Bishops' Conference. We are living in challenging times and our faith and confidence in the Lord will be tested. It is through prayer that we learn to trust more deeply and ask God for the grace of healing and to strengthen us and give us the resolve and generosity to do all that is expected of us. Therefore, it is important that we are especially close to our people at this time. We can see from the media that there is a certain panic in the population and fear of what is to come. I can only ask you to be especially vigilant and aware of the needs of your people in particular the elderly who could easily feel abandoned. We know the steps and the sacrifices we must take in order to play our part in slowing down the Coronavirus pandemic, saving lives and enabling the NHS to do its work.*

Just so everyone knows what our Bishops are saying, this is a brief synopsis of their letter to us all...:

'In response to the Coronavirus pandemic, so many aspects of our lives must change. This includes the ways in which we publicly express our faith... Churches are not closing, they can still be a point of prayer. However, the celebration of Mass, Sunday by Sunday and day by day, will take place without a public congregation. We want everyone to understand that in these emergency circumstances, **the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days is removed...**The second vital aspect is our care for each other...the effort of daily kindness and mutual support will continue and increase.

Celebrations of Mass: priests will continue to celebrate Mass...without the faithful on a daily basis. Information about the live-streaming of the celebration of Mass will be made widely available in our dioceses so that the faithful can participate in the prayers of the priest at home.

Baptisms should be deferred until such time that the public health advice is that congregations can gather safely.

Sacrament of Reconciliation may be offered on request as long as hygiene and social distancing are observed. There can be no Services of Reconciliation.

First Reconciliation and First Holy Communion should be postponed.

Confirmation should be deferred.

FOR THE LATEST INFORMATION PLEASE GO TO ANY OF THE FOLLOWING WEBSITES:

Parish of St John XXIII - www.washingtoncatholic.org.uk; **Parish of St Joseph's** - www.stjosephsbirtley.co.uk

Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle - www.rcdhn.org.uk

You can find regular prayers, reflections and images on our social media pages throughout the liturgical year. Use **@ParishStJohn23** on Twitter and search for "**Parish of St John XXIII**" on Facebook. If you have any issues, comments, suggestions, or would like to support this work, please email: SJ23Social@disciples.com.

Fr Jim O'Keefe	0191 416 3805
Fr Mark Millward	0191 416 3583
Fr Martin Wheaton	0191 410 2923

Deacon Frank O'Neill	0779 115 5845
Deacon Peter Lavery	0730 505 9297
Deacon Chas Ferguson	0783 663 1963
Deacon Tony Joy	0779 989 3419

Matrimony should be deferred if possible... if not possible only the celebrant, bride, groom, immediate family and Registrar – if necessary.

Anointing of the Sick ...no pastoral visits should be made to people who are self-isolating...offer phone support. Priests are given guidance as to how to anoint the sick person when necessary.

Sacraments of Initiation at the Easter Vigil...the bishops are giving further thought to Holy Week in general, so we will know more later.

Funerals. Our bishops are totally aware that this is a very sensitive issue. They suggest that they should take place at the graveside or at a crematorium. Arrangements should be made for a Mass to be celebrated *in memoriam* (in memory) when congregations are allowed to gather.

This is all very different from our usual way of celebrating and living as Catholics. It is very clear that not coming to celebrate mass together on a Saturday or Sunday is not a sin, the exceptional circumstances we're in make that impossible – actually it is not a sin whenever it is impossible!

We all need to be very sensitive towards one another when we are not able to celebrate funerals together at a Requiem Mass. However, we will be able to pray for those who have died and celebrate their lives at a Memorial Mass once we are able to come together in the future.

This Week's Gospel Reflection (John 9:1-41):

If we had been together this weekend, we would have heard from the Gospel of St John about the man born blind. What a courageous man he was. In those days there was a presumption that someone who suffered from an illness had either sinned himself or one of his parents or ancestors had sinned. Thankfully we have moved a long way from that way of thinking! The man born blind was healed by a stranger – Jesus, someone he had never met. Jesus opened his eyes and enabled him to see things differently. He became a courageous spokesman, defending Jesus against the Pharisees who wanted him to condemn Jesus. We are all a bit out of our depth at the moment, wondering what to do, wondering what will happen. It is quite likely that we will all have more time on our own, wondering about family and friends, wondering how they are and if they are well. The man born blind was not phased by the opposition of the Pharisees, he stood his ground and was courageous in proclaiming his faith in the one who healed him.

Maybe over these days and weeks we need to see things as they are. The blind man began to recognise the one who cured him. Maybe we need to see those around us who are struggling and fearful and isolated and needy. Maybe we need to be courageous and careful and sensitive to those who are frightened. Maybe we don't need to be greedy! There's a fair bit of that around at the moment... Maybe we need to learn that we too need to witness to Jesus by using the phone to be in touch, writing the odd note to cheer someone up and basically bring a wee bit of fun into the lives of others. We certainly need to bring into our minds and hearts and imagination the needs of people around us – and one thing looks certain, we'll have a bit more time to do it.

Daily Mass: Daily Mass will be live-streamed from **St Mary's Cathedral** in Newcastle each day Monday to Saturday at 12.00 noon and on Sunday at 11.30am. This can be found on the Cathedral's YouTube Channel (www.youtube.com/channel/UC12EvW0Egg-cFTh5i2y_EQw). The Cathedral will also be open for private prayer 8am – 5pm daily (Closed 11.45-12.30 daily and 11.15-12.15 on Sunday).

The following parishes have also indicated that they will be live streaming Masses. Please visit individual links for the latest news and confirmation of dates and times of these broadcasts.

Hexham, St. Mary's – Beginning on Sunday 22 March. Please go to their parish website www.stmaryshexham.org.uk.

Sunderland, Our Lady of Mercy Parish – Masses are currently being shared through their Facebook page using Facebook live.

Confessions: The Sacrament of Reconciliation may be offered by request. Please contact either Fr Mark, Fr Jim or Fr Martin to arrange.

Collections: As you will be aware there are costs associated with maintaining and running our Churches which continue during this time. Clearly it would be impracticable to provide facilities for collections and we would ask that you keep your contribution at home until the end of this crisis when normality returns. However, if you want to continue to support your Church you may wish to set up a Standing Order. This would be particularly beneficial and really help to keep the Churches running. A form with which to do this can be obtained from Audrey on 0191 4163583. Gift Aid will continue as normal.

Support Group: Many parishioners have already indicated that they are willing to help in some way during this time. It may include shopping for the elderly or infirm, collecting necessary prescriptions or indeed dropping off a copy of the newsletter. If you think you can help in any way please give your name and contact details to Audrey, Fr Mark or Fr Jim. Contact details are on the front page of this newsletter.

Keeping in Touch: It is really important that we can keep in touch with you. This newsletter will be available on our Parish Websites, however if you know of someone who does not have access to the internet, could you please make sure they are given a copy of this newsletter. Your help is greatly appreciated. You can request an email version by contacting Audrey on 0191 4163583. Also available on Church notices boards and outside Church on Sunday mornings.

Church Opening: Churches will be closed at normal Mass times. However, it is important that you have the opportunity to visit your Church for private prayer outside of normal Mass times so special arrangements have been made. During Tuesdays and Thursdays, Our Blessed Lady Immaculate and St Bede's respectively will be open all day from 9 to 5. The Church Narthex (porch area) at St John Boste will be open from 9 to 5 every day as will Our Lady Queen of Peace in the near future. St Joseph's will be open from 9 to 5 every day.

Coronavirus Help

If you are self isolating, are elderly or feeling vulnerable, we can help you. We are gathering a number of volunteers who can help in the following ways:

Pick up shopping/medication; Post mail/pick up packages;

Friendly chat on the phone

If you would like to use this service please contact Audrey Huntley on 0191 4163583 and leave a message or email sj23office01@gmail.com and we'll try to help in any way we can. If you are short of food and cannot afford to shop, we can still refer you to Washington Foodbank - please contact Audrey to find out more.

By contacting us you are agreeing that we can pass on your details to our volunteers in order for them to get in touch with you about the type of help that you need. You will agree to pay for any items.

Working Together in Christ