

Since, uniquely (owing to the restrictions of the Coronavirus Act) our last APCM was in October, I'm only reporting on the intervening months rather than a whole year.

Only a short time after the last APCM, there was another government-imposed lockdown throughout November. During this time, thanks to Mark Elvers's good offices, we continued to live-stream our services. Heidi Elvers has taken on the task of responsibility for conforming to Coronavirus regulations; this has meant we can open the church for services. The Elvers children cheerfully assist wherever they can. Mark also has done many background duties, such as tending to the oil-filled candles, in addition to his duties as churchwarden.

On-line viewing figures can only tell us how many devices were used, not how many people; the numbers of those views vary from Mass to Mass, but are very encouraging; they show both those who joined in live, and those who watched it afterwards. As I am part-time and there is only one weekday service, it is my practice to celebrate the saints' days that occur on a Thursday, or to transfer solemnities and major feasts either to the nearest Sunday (if in Ordinary Time) or to the Thursday. You may be delighted to learn that the highest viewing figure was, remarkably, for St Josaphat! Who knew that this gentleman was such a popular saint? His feast fell on Thursday, 12th November.

On-line streaming has opened up our mission quite unexpectedly, obeying Jesus' command to put out into the deep and cast our nets for a catch: the deep is the World Wide Web, and the net turns out to be the Internet, thus fulfilling an unexplained vision the Lord gave me just before my licensing as vicar. If it hadn't been for Coronavirus, we might not have begun this venture, which illustrates the saying that it's an ill wind that blows nobody any good. The good that it has blown is to the vulnerable, to the curious (who can view our services anonymously) and to those who could not, for various reasons, have been physically present in church. Examples have been:

- Remembrance Day attendance by 40F (Maidstone) Squadron of the Air Training Corps, of which I am the Chaplain.
- Funerals. Not only has this meant attendance by more than the physical legal maximum (30), but it has also enabled people from further afield to pay their respects.
- The Christmas Carol Service and the Crib Service were pre-recorded and live-streamed at their usual times. We would have been unable to run them in any other way.

Because of the current regulations, nobody can be present with me in the sanctuary except those part of my household "bubble". Elizabeth, therefore, has learned to be a thurifer and has combined that role with that of altar server. Between us we carry out the necessary preparation and clearing up that would normally be done by the sacristan. Canon Law obliges us to provide a service of Holy Communion in every parish church on all Sundays and greater holydays. This obligation has had to be suspended during the current crisis – although every effort must still be made to conform to it. The restrictions, however, have prevented visiting priests from celebrating Mass when I'm absent. During those times – mostly annual leave – Eleanor has provided a Service of the Word.

One might think that there's not much attraction in attending a service in church when you have to sanitise your hands; register your presence for track-and-trace; wear a face-covering; refrain from singing (we listen to the hymns) and sharing the Peace. Whilst lower than in normal times, the head-count for physical attendance is encouraging and shows a modest increase, with the addition of new members. Although some of our members have contracted Coronavirus, there have been no fatalities, for which we thank God. It should be noted that our compliance with the regulations provides a place of far greater safety than does a shop. Indeed, no transmission of the disease has so far been traced to the church. This is significant when you know that we are among only 20% of churches in this diocese that have been open to the congregation throughout the crisis – apart, of course, from the compulsory times of closure.

New members include children. We are able now to provide some of the facilities from before the crisis (these are kindly provided by the Mothers' Union), thus enabling families to remain throughout the service, whilst giving children something suitable to engage their attention.

As we look to the future, we pray for God's guidance and help to establish St Michael and All Angels' for many years to come as the vibrant catholic witness to this county town of Kent and the surrounding area.

Fr Neil D. Bryson SSC, Associate Vicar