

Lockdown & Out in Pychester, by Richard Barnes

A Personal View of a Year in the Church of England

An affectionate satire on a fictional diocese.

Chapter One – But what can he do?

In a Diocese not so far, far away, the Bishop of Pychester and the Church of St Pythagoras & All Angles ‘do Church differently’ in this time of Covid-19 & Lockdown. Humour can be risky, so please pardon any offence, but here goes...

The performance of Beethoven’s Missa Solemnis by Pychester Symphony Orchestra & Chorus in the Cathedral on Saturday 14 March 2020 is moving & prophetic. The Agnus Dei feels like he couldn’t bear for the music to stop. They’re playing extra time. We think it’s all over – it is now!

Lent 3 is ‘normal’. Fr Basil & the Choir sing Solemn Mass at St Pythag’s; the Howells’ Anthem is so beautiful. ‘Like as the hart desireth the waterbrooks... when shall I come to appear before the presence of God?’ Indeed.

Basil’s wife, Mother Helen, shepherds her flock at Little St Pythag’s, the Mission Shed down by the Riverside on the Allotments. They do Earthy Churchy, ‘you O Lord are the apple blossom of my eye’. Mutual flourishing.

Mothering Sunday but not as we know it - well-distanced private prayer in worried churches, flowers left outside to be taken from Gopak tables. Who would believe you’d be seeing Gopak coming into the PM’s Rose Garden in 2 months’ time?

Lockdown Monday – Bishops still have their Palace Chapels, but CofE clergy are banned from our Churches, for the first time in 800 years, people say. Only the peregrine falcons locked down on their eggs in the Spire notice Fr Basil re-lock St Pythag’s with a substantial package cradled in his arms.

Archbishop Justin Pediment, as they call him, insists it’s ‘like the earliest Christians’, but historians know it’s not, and tell him so. #ChurchAtHome tweet the opportunists with glee. #ChurchAtIKEA more like.

Bishops and others who remember the 6 Million Dollar Man from their teenhoods say, ‘We have the technology; we can rebuild the Church.’

Vicarage studies & kitchens across Pyfordshire become ad hoc recording studios, lest those helpful advisers at the Old Deanery try to centralise Worship & Liturgy. Most people, even those who don't go to church, want to see their local Vicar – Prayer in the Community.

As Mtr Helen streams Morning Prayer for the Annunciation to St Pythag's Facebook page, the Church's much-loved statue of Our Lady of Walsingham has miraculously appeared in the Vicarage study.

Philosophers & quantum physicists may ponder whether or not unobserved Crosses & Statues were veiled this year, but if Passion Sunday feels this isolated, how will Holy Week feel, behind closed doors for fear of the virus.

With Confirmations postponed, nothing to bless, Suffragan Bishop Cindy House furloughs herself and returns to nursing, Stabat Mater Dolorosa juxta Covid lacrimosa. Better to be clapped as an NHS hero than criticised every week for passing on orders from Lambeth HQ.

Time for Bishop Ric Shaw to put weeks of prayer into practice with 20/20 foresight. Did you notice him in the streamed Chrism Mass, blessing a fourth oil alongside the 3 traditional ones – the new oil of hand sanitisation. He is also aware that Easter Communion will not happen for most, but what can he do?

A few Maundy Thursday streamed services encouraged folk to put their own bread and wine in front of their tablet or smartphone – isn't this what Jesus would do? But Bishops frown, theologians tremble, and it isn't repeated – well not openly.

Wisely very few priests stream family foot washing – just too creepy.

While Comms Teams all over England are spinning #ChurchAtHome as the best thing since unconsecrated sliced bread, Bishop Ric hears the lament of his people longing for the Blessed Sacrament. But what can he do?

He feels like Pilate, washing his hands, saying the Lord's Prayer, his mind wanders – lead me not into temptation, but deliveroo ... – what if... a swift Ad Clerum wings its way to clergy across his diocese – numbers, addresses, is it possible, is it legal?

With commendable imagination, an Easter Vigil is live-streamed from drawing rooms & gardens around the Cathedral Close. Like a safari supper without food or fellowship. The Dean reads those fierce Old Testament passages 'horse & rider cast into the sea', the Precentor Exultets 'This is the unprecedented night...this naughty world...the work of

bees,' but the Paschal Candle is ready on the Palace patio, waiting for Bishop Ric to bless the fierce new fire and light a gentle flame for the Diocese.

'Mrs Bishop', author of racy ecclesiastical novels, looks on. Be careful, darling. The Bishop of Bristol's Candle has just toppled over into the Palace fish-pond - gone viral on Twitter. She wonders what it could mean.

The Paschal Moon rises behind the ancient Cedar tree, seed brought back from the Lebanon by a Crusader the legend goes; more likely a Victorian plant hunter. Deep roots, firm trunk, the canopy battered by storms, broken and growing in different directions now, but still one tree – an image of the Church, or of a Marriage?

Ric could still light her candle if he wanted to, but he's weighed down by the cares of the world and crowing corvid voices on every side.

Justin can't see the problem. We may have the technology, but we've lost the theology, she muses. You didn't always understand what Rowan said, but you knew it was beautiful & holy.

Easter Morning Eucharist, streamed from Bishop Ric's Chapel, 5000 seems the right number of individually wrapped Communion wafers to consecrate. By next Sunday, his 'Deliveroo' Deacons will have distributed them to the faithful, and he will lead a unique post-Easter Liturgy of the Pre-sanctified. Pychester doing Church differently.

Sermon prologues also adapt to the times. As the Venerable Alan Bennett, Archdeacon Beyond the Fringe, might say, "Isn't the Christian Life a bit like a Zoom Meeting? Jesus sends you the email invitation but you still have to click on the link. It may seem like he has forgotten you, left you in the waiting room of doom, but have faith and you will see him through a glass screen darkly, and he knows your needs in prayer even if your mike is muted."

So, as Basil & Helen take their turn on the Pychester Churches' weekly rota for online Compline, like the Two Ronnies, 'it's a quiet night from me' – 'and a perfect end from him'.



Chapter Two - Previously in Pychester...

Bishop Ric thought outside the pyx to give Easter Communion to his flock; St Pythag's went online from Morning Prayer to Choral Compline; I spread some 'fake news' about the Bishop of Bristol's Paschal Candle (for prophetic effect).

We return to the City & Diocese of Pychester in late April 2020.

Bishop Ric has a spring in his step, but don't panic Mrs Bishop, Felicity Shaw – yes, he has a new woman in his life, but she is Julian of Norwich, 14th century mystic, the warmest and wisest companion for Lockdown with her 'Revelations of Divine Love'.

His 'Deliveroo' Deacons & Low Sunday Communion were a great success, approved of by nearly everyone, unlike his previous innovations...

The Digital Outreach Development Officer's Minster Model for the Nether Pyke group of rural churches had not been a success. Broadcasting worship from Upton Pyke to video screens in all the other little medieval gems, with Communion by 3-D printer, was, let's be polite, rather ahead of its time.

The "VestMe" app designed for Sunday School use was more popular, with children of all ages dressing that smart casual Minister on the screen in all the proper (or improper) Vestments for the Liturgical Season, even down to their Maniple.

His Mission Sheds Initiative was more of a Curate's Egg. Felicity called them his 50 Sheds of Pray, but wisely this was dropped long before Lockdown. Like many church things, they need a good Priest or Reader to make them work well, not another diocesan DODO.

How are things faring across the Diocese?

At St Pythag's Basil & Helen tick off the perils of home broadcasting - the candle-singed elbow, the lampshade Fez, the Teletubby Cross or pot-plant on the head, the Transfiguration look with the bright window behind one.

For those without home-brew worship there's a weekly Diocese Service, but where should it be pitched? Broad uniformity or a chance to explore our rich diversity? It tends towards the latter, with brash evangelical, catholic faff, mildly radical, respectably charismatic, even BCP Matins taking their turn – all bases covered.

As the restored King Charles might have said, "Oranges are not the only fruit, and Protestants are not the only Christians." But is there now anything to hold it all together?

Down at St Simon Says, the Minister wonders how to control his large flock when they are not under his eye in Church being preached at. Austin the Curate is live-streaming another Talk on ‘The Temptations of Lockdown’, just getting to the recapitulation in this Sonata-form 30-minute performance, when his study door opens and in marches his nappy-clad 2 year old singing ‘Daddy I need a ...’ and the neo-Puritan collapses into giggles – he’s only human after all, and half his viewers were getting another coffee anyway.

Up at St Peter Gallifray (of the Cock crow), Fr Anthony’s study is bigger on the inside as he streams Sunday Mass from his ad hoc High Altar built over the repurposed drinks cabinet. He’s rigged up a fan to waft incense across.

Over at Dontellim Pyke and the other Pykes, the video screens are silent in the empty buildings, but the new Vicar’s “Let’s get digital” online & telephone Services, and being visible in the villages, are holding Communities together - #RuralMinistry.

Out in the sticks, St George Nitcombe Regis is in Interregnum (again), so in the Community Shop talk turns to the Diocesan Services they’ve been tuning in to on their smartphones or binder-twine broadband.

“Those evangelicals, eh. So many words, to say so little. I so really would just love more silence.”

“Some space to think whether you agree. Mind you, just as well internet doesn’t do smell yet, all that incense the other week.”

“But there was beauty and theology. Can’t be doing with this New Wave.”

“New Wine, you mean, in middle-aged, middle-class wine-skins.”

“Yes, Matins and an intelligent Sermon’s what we need at the moment.”

Rogation Processions, limited to 2 people, are prayed, recorded, posted and watched – the fields, farms, factories, furloughed and key-workers of the county feel a deep need of God’s blessing and providence at this unprecedented time.

Ascension Day, but no balloon flight (tethered in these environmentally conscious times) of Jesus above the Mission Shed at the Allotments this year. Fr Basil spices up his YouTube Service with a clip from Dr Who ‘Planet of the Ood’. Oodkind is freed from slavery, the Doctor & Donna Noble depart in peace, and, as the TARDIS ascends from the mountaintop, the Ood sing their Song of Freedom – in Latin, making the Anglican Choral Tradition radical & mainstream, not elitist.

We may not be driving a Sabbath day's journey for our spiritual therapy, but what is the carbon footprint of the myriad online Services that ascend into the Cloud of servers, and drop their blessings on the smartphones & tablets of the righteous, the unrighteous & the self-righteous alike, whose laptop runneth over.

From Ascension to Pentecost the Archbishops' Prayer & Evangelism effort is rebranded #ThyKingdomZoom. But it's overshadowed by a hideous quake in Minneapolis and a tsunami is heading our way. It will put down the mighty from their plinths, the activists say.

Trinity Sunday sermons discuss the social distancing or not of the Angels in the Rublev Icon. Is the Holy Trinity a household 'bubble'? The Candle in the Wind or Window as a symbol of Trinity - the wax, wick & flame.

The Bishop's wife has been voting for her favourite Anthem in the Twitter World Cup. "Faire is the heaven...in full enjoyment of felicitie." The Cathedral Choir always sing with a twinkle in their eye when she is there.

The Choir! What will become of Joel the Organist and his young men & maidens, old men & children, furloughed now; choirs like galaxies red-shifting into the unknown. Surely, surely they will be back by September, by Michaelmas, all ye angels of God pray for us.

Meanwhile virtual choirs great & small have sprung up, where time & technology allow, like Gerry Anderson Stingray Conventions – "Can you hear anything, Phones?" "Sure thing, Troy. A strange enchantment. Sounds like 'Aqua Marina, gratia plena'!"

After weeks of silence, the Cathedral Organ is coaxed back to life. The temptation is to celebrate with a splurge of Full Org, as in the Wesley, #AllTheStops, but it needs a subtle re-awakening with gentle touches. Rank on rank the pipes of heaven spread their vanguard.

His eyes stray to an old graffito on the organ case. KP♥CB 1669. Kendrick, least-known of the Purcell brothers, had been studying in Rome during the Plague & Great Fire in London. He returned with the latest worship songs of Giovanni da Kendrica and was appointed chapel musician to Catherine of Braganza, Charles II's neglected spouse. Kendrick took a shine to her meekness & majesty, so the King sent forth the word, and young Kenny was banished to Pychester. The Choir, abolished by the Puritans, had not been reformed as the Dean planned a 'new musical offering'. So Kenny Purcell rebuilt the Choir.

Corpus Christi is less of a spectacle this year but, if anything, more popular. Jesus is out of the box, out of the building, and Blessing the

Community, loving the whole wide world though it is merely a hazelnut in the palm of his hand. For, as Mother Julian revealed “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.”



Richard Barnes – 23/08/20.

Chapter Three – Sanitise thy going out & thy coming in

Mid July of this unprecedented Year of our Lord 2020. St Swithun’s Day to be precise. Or is it St Swithin?

Government & Church Guidelines have been studied, Risk Assessments made, a Parochial Church Zoom Meeting held and the Church of St Pythagoras & All Angles is open for Services.

Our Lady of Walsingham teleported back from Vicarage study to her little shrine when clergy were first allowed to pray solo again (with the host of heaven) in our churches.

So today, for the first time in 4 months at St Pythag’s, it’s Matins & Low Mass, Fr Basil, but not as we know it. There’s the narrow path of the one-way system, the holy hand sanitiser, the herring-bone pattern of 2 metre spaced seats in the pews, three times as many people as usual for a midweek service, but seats to spare

It’s easier for a small congregation to go through the eye of a covid needle than for the rich crowded Resource Hub to bob up & down at their packed gathering.

Like riding a bike, the words & actions are rusty and a little wobbly, but soon the feel of the Liturgy returns. We’re all equal too, young & old, sprightly & infirm, the priest brings Christ to us where we are in the wood of the pew, the touch on the lips, the sweetness in the mouth, after all these months of isolation from the Sacrament, something in the eye.

Next week, 22/7, St Pythagoras as well as Mary Magdalene, we meet & welcome our new Curate-to-be, Lee, wife Abi and son Magnus.

Time moves on. Face coverings become mandatory (unless you are exempt and strong enough to face down the stares). So for many of us, we see this dystopian world through the soft focus of steamed up glasses.

Like the motor industry, the Church is rapidly developing a hybrid future, online and inchurch, but where does that leave those with no suitable

vehicle? There's no 'one size fits all', so Bishop Ric leaves it to each minister and PCZ to plan their Covid Secure re-opening, or not.

Another full moon rises over the blasted cedar in the Palace garden. Well the same moon a few orbits later. Has anything changed?

Bishop Ric & Felicity are in the Dining Room tonight. Keeping up appearances once a week. No entertaining the great & the good these days. No networking across the Diocese & County except by Zoom. No bubbly – 'bubbles' has a new meaning in the Covid Dictionary.

Weighed down again, Ric? What's it this time? The Welby soundbite? ... review all our monuments and remove some of them...

Partly that. It's the clergy-hours it will take, hundreds of hours just in our diocese, reports no one will really read. They have the living to minister to. Most can delegate to Churchwardens or local historians, but it doesn't address the present injustices.

So do these activists audit their own ancestry and education? Even God only visited sins on the 3rd & 4th generations – not the 8th, 12th & 16th. What else troubleth thy soul? Aha! It's 'Every Diocese should have one!' isn't it? Porridge & au-pairs?

Kind of. The Resource Hub Church Plant juggernaut is heading to Pychester. The Boys from Brompton want a 'failing' church near the Student ziggurats to turn into a clone of Holy Trinity Trumpton. No bishop may say 'no' to the HTT franchise these days. So I'll have to sacrifice some gays & polys.

Polys?

Praying old ladies. It's either St Francis' Church or St Michael & All Angels. Mick & Angie would sound a bit 70s for their rebranding exercise.

True. While Francis of Assisi is just asking to be a carbon copy of HTT. They'll probably call it St Frank's or Re-Frank. It'll be another "I'm sorry I haven't a pew" righteousness club, Bonhoeffer's Costa Discipleship Coffee Bar. What do people see in that predictable spontaneity that they don't get from the salvation narrative of the Eucharist?

Now then, dear. It appeals to a lot of young, and wanting to be young, people. It's Christianity for today's culture, all celebrities, peer pressure, and Netflix viewing, with a side order of Jesus.

Forgive us our cynicism as we forgive those who trespass upon us. But cheer up. Your new Bishop's Chaplain caught a couple of good typos in the draft, or was it daft, Ordination Service.

Yes. All please satanize your hands as you enter the Cathedral.

I liked, The Bishop will lead the newly ordained in prosecco.

The non-residential training at St Muscularius College down at Pykemouth has given us a broader range of Deacons to ordain than one might have imagined. I think God may be using the success of the HTT-franchise to diversify it.

He winketh at their iniquities, you mean.

If you must, my dear. Thank you for saying the things I'm not allowed to. I do miss our dinner parties.

Curate-in-training, Lee, didn't learn much about Mary's Assumption at St Muscularius. 15th August is a Saturday this year and St Pythag's must be virus-free for Sunday Mass, so we've gather down at Little St P's, on the Allotment, socially distanced families & bubbles. The highlight, literally, is the lantern ascent (tethered, of course) of our littlest statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary and a couple of corn-dolly angels. It's a theological extrapolation, a beautiful ritual, a foretaste of heaven. But as even celebrity Christians come to know, in this world what goes up must come down. This year Mary lands in the vines growing on the Mission Shed. Hail Mary, full of grapes.

Apparently the Church of England thinks we will be tired of Sundays after Trinity by now, and has invented "Creationtide" from 1st Sept to 4th Oct (St Francis of Assisi). All very worthy, but don't we have something called "Harvest Festival" already, and the Creation should be our concern 12 whole months, not one in twelve; but if it helps your prayers.

Maths teachers prepare for the new term. If C is a circle of radius 19 with centre O , draw a tangent VID and drop a normal from it. If lockdown flattens the curve, give a hand-waving argument to show that a new normal may be constructed at some time t in the future. What happens if lockdown is relaxed?



Richard Barnes – 27/09/20.

Chapter Four – A Zoom of Bishops

Apologies, dear Reader, that last month's instalment made rather more assumptions than just the Assumption of Our Lady into Heaven; that any jewels were uncut and unpolished, hidden in rough-hewn ore. As usual the

ingredients had been mulling in the slow cooker of my mind for a while, but they were ladled onto the page rather hurriedly.

In the Palace kitchen, Felicity, the Bishop's wife, is watching the soup and Bishop Ric gently simmer. It's nearly lunch break in the House of Bishops' latest Zoom Meeting. The Agenda is an autumnal alphabet soup of CofE acronyms – BCP, IICSA, LLF, BLM, R&R, V&S, PANTS. Acronyms to sweeten the bitter taste of critical and contentious reports.

First, do we need a new BCP – Book of Covid Prayer – to gather all this year's new Resources?

Secondly, the abuse scandals, an appalling read. At last some honesty & openness instead of cover-up & reputation management.

LLF, Living in Love & Faith (why not Faithfulness?), will be coming out in November, with resources for understanding gender & sexuality better, even though society and most of the church have moved on or moved out..

Later an Anti-Racism Commission.

It's all 20-30 years too late really. It's not that the Church is worse than other organisations – just that we are institutionally institutional.

From previous embarrassment Ric makes sure he's muted, but that doesn't stop Felicity coming and waving her ladle at the HoB to remind them it's lunchtime. She glances at the screen.

What's PANTS? Patristics and New Testament Studies?

No. I just made it up to see if anyone would ask what it stood for.

And did anyone?

Of course not. One has to be seen to be totally on message these days.

R&R, Renewal & Reform? Is that still rumbling around, it's so 2010s.

Still rockin'n'rollin', but the new ABY's 2020 Vision & Strategy is the new 5 year plan.

The Press Release will be as bland as blancmange – the bishops reflected and affirmed... - but it's an important meeting.

Still, we have a good crop of Ordinands for mid-September. The Deacons went in 4-by-4, in 4 separate Services. Bishop Cindy's back to share the Liturgy so we can try to keep it personal. Cathedral intimacy rather than majesty.

Just different ends of the same spectrum, dear. Ordination book? How about C S Lewis, "Till we have faces"?

In Quires and Places where they sing, music has gradually returned. First a Cantor, now a gallop. With many churches adopting a 3-day eventing pattern, Sunday plus a midweek Service, equestrian metaphors come to mind. Not to forget the supreme Three Day Event of Crucifixion, Descent and Resurrection.

At the Cathedral, the spaced Procession of clergy, servers & choir requires the precision of dressage; the Nave Choirstalls have been separated and now look like a show-jumping course.

Now is the time to dust off those Venetian Polychoral Masses by Gabrielli et al for 3 or 4 quartets placed in different corners of San Marco's.

At St Pythag's and the like, it's 4-in-hand, a voice at each corner of the choirstalls relearning to sing with one's ears, and if you listen very carefully the congregation may be humming quietly behind their masks.

Newly minted Deacon Lee, the Uhura of the Deanery, is settling in at St P's, bringing strong communication skills, both personal and technological.

There is a paradox in prayer as well as in worship. The informal, ex tempore type requires more concentration by the people, leaving less 'bandwidth' for personal response. The more formal, liturgical frees one to take a more personal route, and not be lost when one returns to the script. Best of all is writing or reverencing an egg tempera Icon.

There is of course no formal liturgy for the "All God's Creatures" Gathering, formerly known as the "Pets' Service" before animal rights came to the fore. So its spontaneity needs thorough preparation and prayer. St Francis falls on a Sunday this year, All life is welcome at Little St Pythag's, the Mission Shed on the Allotments Down by the Riverside. An outdoor Service so no special Covid precautions, but if you bring a small horse, please Mascarpone. Fortunately viruses are not living creatures, so no need to bless the Covid.

The Youth Church, 'Unleashed', at St Geoffrey Arches Church, is also adding a midweek 'Gathering' (as we should now call our Services – though is it not a fair paraphrase of 'ecclesia'). Socially distanced, it's branded 'Unsquashed'. They serve their demographic with dedication too.

Bishop Ric presides at the Patronals for St Michael & All Angels and for St Francis. Prepare ye the way for the Holy Trinity Trumpton juggernaut, the Chinos for Chasubles Resource Church is on its way. Church planting is nothing new – Celtic monks, St Augustine of Canterbury, Victorian Anglo-Catholic slum priests – but Ric still worries this seems more like

church poaching. And the Team Ministry post for that old Council Estate is still vacant.

In 1993 we started singing “Beauty for Brokenness (God of the Poor)” and prayed for social justice. And good, holy people still hum it as they volunteer in the Pychester Foodbank.



Richard Barnes – 27/10/20.

Chapter Five – Lockdown 2, here we go again

It's mid-October at St Pythagoras & All Angles on the hill above the River Pyke. As Dr Neil Lithic, archaeologist & church historian, likes to point out, this had been the site of Pychester's earliest Roman Camp, something the Victorian neo-Gothic Church there continues to this day.

Fr Basil and Curate Lee are enjoying the new normal, readying Vestments for St Luke's Sunday. Quite a polymath, Luke, the blessed physician, traveller with Paul, writer and evangelist, by tradition a painter too. Plenty for young Lee to preach about, and pray about in these Coronatide times. For progress with research & testing of vaccines, for those whose illnesses or needs have been leapfrogged by 'the Virus'.

Congregation & clergy have adapted to the Covid-secure Mass – the masked Liturgy, sanitised, distanced but real presence of the Sacrament after months of fasting.

Plans are in hand for an All Souls' Requiem, still just a Choir quartet, but a few movements from the Faure to leaven the Plainsong.

Hand sanitisers patrol like mini-Daleks in church, shop & pub to exterminate the Virus, but by early November the writing is on the wall. Church closed except for Private Prayer. Our Bishops are still doing 'Strictly' or 'Dancing on Ice' – spinning on a sixpence with a fixed smile to face in the opposite direction again and say it is a wonderful opportunity...

March – Churches closed, clergy banished to kitchens & studies, a chance to 'Do Church Differently'.

July – Churches can re-open, Covid-secure worship in our wonderful sacred spaces – 'Hybrid Church, inside & online'.

November – Churches re-closed, except for Private Prayer, so give thanks for small mercies. 'Doing Church the Same, Digitally', and if we're honest that's what people really want.

LockDown 2 - Here we go again! Private Prayers welcome, but many are modern day John Kebles, multi-tasking their private prayers alongside the trivial round and common task, to furnish all we need to ask, in the home, the street, the essential Waitrose shop, as well as in Church.

It's the minor ministries who are locked out again, sacristans & servers, sidespeople & welcomers, flower arrangers & refreshers - no Faux-Bourbons for choristers, no tea-lubricated pastoral conversations.

But it's 'Be Kind' month, so we're all pulling together, and the Big Three, Canterbury, York & London realise this time that the Sacraments are important to many Christians, and some need a time of Lament before adapting to the new, new normal.

As a distraction, News Media give us saturation coverage of the US Presidential Election – and it's a really great election with so many votes that both candidates clearly won, if you only count their ballots.

In Bishop Ric's kitchen, he catches the end of a BBC Interview with a young intelligent Republican. 'So if Biden wins, you would accept him as your President?'

'Of course. Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's.'

'Thank you. Always good to end an interview with a classical quote.'

The BBC wins another Award for Religious Illiteracy. What would Lord Reith think?

Another fortnight, another game of CofE leapfrog. Never mind 25 years of the Disability Discrimination Act, they're still at the back of the queue behind the neurodiverse, BAME, gays, women.

LGBT+ have their moment in the limelight as LLF comes out. Initial thoughts on LLF – it stands for Living in Love & Faith. There are summaries and comments a plenty:-

Church Times – it's soft, strong and very long (I may have misquoted). And at 450 pages plus indices, it is.

LGBT+ activists – ignored and disappointed yet again - long grass.

Evangelicals – will 'engage' and 'contend' for the traditional position.

So the balance is probably about right.

Fr Basil's metaphor for LLF is a visit to a National Trust Garden; it marvels at God's beauty in nature, forgetting the design & maintenance by gardeners over many decades, studiously ignoring the naked statues that adorn the scene, and actually most people are already in the Tea Room.

I really did so just want to Be Kind to Evangelicals this Chapter; some of my best friends are Evangelicals.

But just a week after LLF, the Church of England Evangelical Council ‘engaged & contended’ with a slick & divisive 30 minute video ‘in response to LLF’, clearly months in the making.

As Jeanette Winterson might have said - Evangelicals are not the only Christians, and Conservative Evangelicals are certainly not.

What Evangelicals are good at is applying their resources quickly and effectively. Thus they are running an online Pychester Carol Service on the weekend of 5th & 6th December. ‘Glory Streams’ will feature the obligatory worship band, but also the Cathedral Choristers, the University Gospel Choir and the all girl folk trio Willowherb.

As Advent draws nearer, Bishop Ric wonders whether he will need to use ‘Deliveroo’ Deacons for Christmas Communion. People across Pychester Diocese wonder, will Midnight Mass be in Church or on YuleTube.

Zoom! Zoom! Merrily on high, rather than Ding! Dong!

Adam lay ybounden,... Two thousand millimetres thought he not too long.

Hark? Un-mute the Herald Angels.

Silent Night. Holy Night. Glories live-stream from Heaven afar.

O Zoom! All ye faithful.



Richard Barnes – 22/11/20.

Chapter Six – Beautiful Stories

Nothing can quite compare with Christmas Eve 2015 in Pychester, when Mary and Jo had their baby in the Choir Vestry at St Pythag’s during Midnight Mass.

See

https://www.stmichaelsmountdinham.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/A_Pychester_Christmas_orig.pdf

But for our more recent incumbents, Fr Basil & Mthr Helen, the Covid Christmas of 2020 at St Pythagoras is as good as could be hoped for and more.

The delayed Advent non-Procession tries a stereo effect with hymns & carols from a Quartet in the choir stalls and, looking from afar, the plainsong O antiphons from a few voices at the back of the church.

That modern Sacrament, the Christingle, an outward & visible sign of inward & spiritual grace, is celebrated down at Little St P's Mission Shed , the open air liturgy rising above the noisy River Pyke. As the Sun sets on Christmas Eve the many families there use smartphones and binoculars to view the conjunction of Jupiter & Saturn above the South-west horizon and marvel at the tenacity of the Wise Men.

Midnight Masses in all Churches great & small across the Diocese are full to their Covid-secure capacities. Many a well-spaced, sanitised choir sings 'Tiers and smiles like us He knew' and 'Whence is that goodly fragrance flowing, cleansing the virus all away.'

At St Pythag's Basil celebrates Mass while Helen plays the Organ. Could it have been the other way round? Not yet.

The promise of Five Gold Days becomes an oven-ready partridge with Sage stuffing. The over-inflated balloon of hope hits the holly prickles of data with a loud bang. The media say "We've saved Christmas!" – forgetting it is Christ's Feast that saves us – but at what cost?

The 'Intinction Rebellion' of Communion in Both Kinds at the Cathedral is short-lived, as most clergy don't have the juggling skills required.

Meanwhile Gems mined from Nativity Plays do the rounds:-

Who sent the Angel Gabriel? – Virgin Media.

Why was Mary special? – She was hand made by God.

What did the Innkeeper say? - Sorry, Bethlehem's in Tier 4 so you can't stay here.

Why was Herod angry? – Because it was a fake prophecy, and he demands a recount in Bethlehem.

Early in January Bishop Ric reads a letter from Dr Rose Trellis of Ottery St Pycrust.

"This 'Living in Love & Faith' book is hard going. 400-odd pages on Identity, Gender, Relationships & Marriage, and no pictures. Not as much fun as The Joy of Sexagesima. All very worthy, but I hope your Cathedral discussion groups will be more stimulating.

As for that CEEC Beautiful Story film, my husband was so disappointed it was not about Football.

I find the best way to watch it is to mute the sound and enjoy all those fit young men, with those emphatic hands nailing their arguments and failing to bless. I can't be doing with their smug smart casual certainties and buttoned-down doctrines. The real world and the Bible are more interesting and varied than that."

The House of Bishops January Zoom is serious and grim, as Covid continues its cruel slaughter of the innocents. Even the Freshest Expression of Bishop no longer views Lockdown as an opportunity to 'do Church differently'.

What is the 1st Lesson from 2020 for the Churches? Some may find Celebrity Preachers aping 'Live at the Apollo' (minus the swearing) scratch their itch, but most still want their local church and minister who knows their needs. But who is more cost-effective the cash-strapped dioceses ask?

Bishop Sarah's Covid Recovery Group now has Guidelines for Lent and even Easter, only 2 months away. Someone managed to educate the neo-Puritans at Lambeth Head Office about the need for Liturgy.

Prayer has been answered, not by signs & wonders, but by scientists, of all faiths and none, developing vaccines; their work rooted in the observations & experiments 220 years ago of Dr Edward Jenner, son of a Gloucestershire manse, after seeing a fair maid in a lowly milking parlour.

Felicity, the Bishop's wife, looks up from editing "Reverend Spooner's Lockdown Cookbook"...

Passing the buck to the PCCs & Clergy now, whether to open or close?

They didn't like being told to close last year, but we're not passing the buck. They understand their local risks and vulnerabilities. They have various options for pivoting Worship & Prayer.

Spoken like a true bishop. It's the Servers I feel most sorry for when Public Worship is stopped. Do you think God did a Risk Assessment before Creation?

No, Love takes risks – as we know. But... Hopefully this new variant tsunami is nearly past and we can all get back in the sea of faith in our churches soon.

So, 2020 in one word? Perhaps, Dis-con-nec-ted. Let's hope & pray that during 2021 people can gradually come together and begin to reconnect, with themselves, their support networks, activities and churches, with God and the world.

As the new banner adorning the East wall of St Pythagoras Church says, “Try Reconnecting”.



Richard Barnes – 25/01/21.

Chapter Seven – Layers of Imagination

Meet old Peregrine Stoop, Tenor when St Pythag’s sings and author of many a piece in “New Loaves” their Parish Mag. He’s daydreaming at his desk, adrift on the Sea of Retirement with a lifetime of memories welling up from forgotten depths.

Authors have Layers laid down by family, friends, colleagues, interests, activities, responsibilities, joys, frustrations – but he’s feeling the rawness of layers stripped away by age, lockdowns and mediocre health.

Time to try that Christian arithmetic; count your blessings, discount your disappointments, multiply by love and divide your burdens by the cross of Jesus. But he still feels a bit short-changed. Just as well that God doesn’t deal in performance related Grace.

Strange times, strange dreams. He woke the other morning from Psychological Geologists hitting him with ideological hammers, redefining his strata as cis-gendered, heterosexual, partnered, white, middle-class, Christian male – lowest of the low . If he were a statue, he’d need an explanatory plaque. But it was only a dream.

Time for him to put into port at Pychester. Take a trip of lockdown imagination up the River Pyke. Past the romantic ruins of Pintern Abbey, its heaven-vaulted quire silent for 480 years or so. Renaissance prince became blustering King. Six marriages that don’t get a mention in the CofE’s Living in Love & Faith story...

Onwards to the headwaters high on Pykemoor, where the stream of consciousness tumbles over the boulders of destiny. A fine mist of ideas refracts the frosty sunlight into a fleeting rainbow and his mind’s eye captures an image or two to be cropped, written and re-written.

Noah’s Rainbow, God’s Covenant with all flesh. Apt that it now covers our NHS. Also that it was taken up by Gay Pride, when the Church had wanted to limit God’s covenant, to exclude their flesh.

We still need Clergy, announces the new Archbishop of York, in response to newspaper leaks of wholesale reduction and retrenchment by a cash-strapped CofE. . Good to know. Don’t panic yet, Fr Mainwaring, it’s a misinterpretation of a work stream of a strategic review of options going

forward. But it does seem if you want to get on in today's Church of England, it's Vision & Strategy one needs not Theology or Liturgy. So forget about Stagers & Cuddesdon for your training, should've gone to SoulSavers or St Muscularius.

Let us not be too hard on our bishops this month. Bishops have layers too. Bishop Ric has many layers between the bland collegial uniformity required by the House of Bishops and his ruff-hewn Faith in Jesus which crystallised as a chorister. The public voice of comfort & hope, the pastoral care for clergy & people, the whoso layer (wife husband or significant other) that keeps one grounded, and his layer of fun.

This enlivened the House of Bishops February Meeting with a fun Richard Osman House of Games style Diocesan Answer Smash. The aim is to 'mash' a Diocese with another name taken from popular culture. Thus:-

Canterbury Tales of the Unexpected, Sheffield Wednesday, Chelmsford Anglia, Pychester-le-Street. You get the idea.

As a triple smash Bristol Rovers Return is rather good.

Also Durham Miners Gala, the topical Oxford Astra-Zeneca, and Leicester Square. Over to you.

There's not much new across the Churches of Pychester Diocese. They keep calm and carry on on the surface, while clergy, wardens & PCCs Zoom about in the layers below. While there are some wrong answers, people have learnt there is no single right answer to Church in a time of plague.

Each must find their own place or places on the spectrum of options – closed, online, private prayer, safe-enough Services or some other variant.

St Pythag's has spiced up its set of recorded and streamed Services with weekly Plainsong Vespers by shimmering candlelight.

Curate Lee's Just4Advent 'THRIVE' Sunday afternoon Zoom Service is after 3 months, well, thriving, offering an informal space for questions, prayer & reflection, without forcing answers on people.

As for the Zoom Ash Wednesday Service, DIY-Ashing is a new skill for most and there was no doubting old Peregrine's Penitence.

And so it is Lent, days of lengthening, branches budding, bulbs bursting forth, the sharp scratch of the Cross, and a stone's throw beyond, Jesus singing, 'You've got a friend in me.'



Richard Barnes – 21/02/21.

Chapter Eight – To a lively Hope

And so we come full circle, the Lockdown Anniversary, a Day of Reflection.

Except for so many it is not a full circle. In the UK alone, a city the size of Pycchester has been wiped off the map by Covid-19, their breath of life sucked out, their orbit cut short, resting in the peace of God, but leaving behind a million scars of grief and loss.

It was a downward spiral of central incompetence,; Oxford PPE Degrees don't protect key-workers, doctors or nurses from virus laden aerosols.

The slow climb back has been led by local heroes and selfless scientists, not greed and arrogance.

The roadmap ahead will be a Roman Road, straight on the map like the Fosse Way, but when you travel it, a series of hair-raising peaks and hidden hollows, with blue signs listing how many accidents occurred there last year. But travel it we must.

The good people of St Pythagoras & All Angles return with gratitude to the bosom of their Mother Church on Mothering Sunday 2021. Fr Basil, in the Rose Red vestments half as old as time, celebrates Mass there for the first time since Epiphany. The 2 Cantors bounce the Propers between them, and sing a 2-part Covid customised version of 'The Lord bless you and keep you 2 metres apart, the Lord make his face covering to shine upon you...'

For St Patrick's Day on the Wednesday, it's a question of chasuble colour; White for Saint, or Green for Patrick, missionary to the Emerald Isle. Christian witness keeping education, care and community alight in the 'Dark Ages'.

Old Peregrine Stoop, returning from his A-Z Jab, walks through Pyncesshay shopping centre. The economic heart of Pycchester is a wilderness now. The writing is on the windows of the closed or closing shops. Percentages off like the countdown to oblivion, the parable of the talents gone into reverse.

Can economists think outside the spread-sheet? Can these dry bones live?

Jesus had a mere 40 days in the wilderness. We will have had 400 days and more of Covid affected lives and livelihoods, in so many ways.

Forty years long the Church of England has produced radical new initiatives – Partners in Mission, Decades of this, Fresh Expressions of that - all top-down and patronising, that excite consultants but never quite engage the Christian in the Pew.

Can retired management consultants make these dry bones live? Modern day Ezekials who ask are chided for disloyalty to the flag. Would Jesus have got Strategic Development Funding?

The Bishops, meeting by Zoom, put their hope in the latest strategy review. There are work-streams in the desert and task groups singing from Workstreams of Living water. There's no increase in the episcopal deterrent, no new mitre-heads. But there may be fewer Priests on the ground. Based in Diocesan HQs, agile techno-priests will be deployed to spiritual hotspots.

Verily & surely, if the past year has taught us anything, it is that, one way or another, what most people still really, really want is a local church ministering to the local needs of local communities. Prayer in the Community.

And so to Holy Week at St Pythag's. Two day temporal distancing, as well as 2 metre spatial, means that Services must alternate between the main Church and Mother Helen's Little St Pythag's Mission Shed by the Riverside. Can the two congregations learn to love each other's rhythm, ritual, language, this holiest of weeks?

The followers of Jesus the Gardener, who worship God on their Allotments, have kindly crafted some well-distanced Stations of the Cross around the site, so Spy Wednesday is observed there.

Maundy Thursday evening's Mass of the Last Supper is up at St Pythag's. In lieu of towels and foot-washing, a Maniple is worn. A few disciples stay to watch as Jesus takes another cup, the bitter cup of Gethsemane. How many have kept watch at a distance this past year?

Venerating the Cross falls by the wayside for hygienic reasons, so Good Friday's Service is an hour at the large Cross erected by Little St P's on the Allotment, and being outside some congregational singing is at last allowed. Were you there when we crucified our Lord?

On Holy Saturday, as 22 ancient Egyptian mummies cross Cairo in a spectacular procession to their new Museum home, we read again from Exodus of a proud Pharaoh stuck in his chariot. And wait expectantly for the suffering Servant who has freed us from bondage to sin and triumphed over death.

This Easter Vigil Mass is not quite how it usually is, but all are thankful it is happening at all this year in the sacred space of their Church building. Curate Lee holds the newly lighted Paschal Candle aloft and sings the threefold acclamation. "The Light of Christ – Thanks be to God!"

Easter Day Eucharist is appropriately in the Garden around Little St P's Open Shed, and many find their way there, perhaps for the first time, to recognise Jesus in the breaking of the bread.

We pray fervently that the Kitchen Sink Eucharists of 2020 will become the realm of wistful nostalgia and PhD theses.

Across Pychester Diocese, people are uniquely grateful to Bishop Ric for his prayerful imagination last Easter with his 'Deliveroo' Deacons bringing Easter Communion to the doorsteps of the faithful. Alleluia!

In his Easter 2021 Message, Bishop Ric commends to his people the Psalms in all their diversity of human emotion and longing, and God's faithful and dependable reply. In our joyful and solemn worship, we know that Christ is more than the Light Entertainment of the World.

Low Sunday in St Pythag's. Lo, Jesus meets us as we light a candle at the Easter Garden. The still small Choir and Organist reprise the original Hereford Cathedral performance from Easter 1833 of S S Wesley's great Anthem, when he had only the Dean's Butler and a gaggle of choirboys.

Blessed be the God & Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, which ... hath vegotten us again unto a lively hope by the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

For all flesh is as grass... the grass withereth and the flower thereof falleth away.

(silence, pull out all the stops. Full Organ chord, pause, ...)

But the Word of the Lord endureth for ever. Amen.



**Richard Barnes –
25/03/21.**

