

This article from Bishop Stephen Cottrell, Archbishop of York Designate, was published in the Daily Telegraph on Tuesday 12 May 2020.

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On the first Easter day, Jesus wasn't recognised. Mary Magdalene famously mistook him for the Gardener. Cleopas and his companion didn't know the identity of the stranger who walked at their side. Not being able to recognise things as they are, nor see where God is at work, is a common theme at Easter. As we approach Pentecost, it is still happening today.

During the coronavirus crisis, the Church of England has been accused of vacating the public square or of being absent. It was even implied that the decision to close churches for public worship was made by the Church, not the Government. Of course it wasn't. The church is following Government guidance. Since we are in the middle of the biggest public health crisis in a century it is incumbent on all of us to do the same. With regard to the main charge – the church's absence – I simply do not recognise it. The Church of England has been astonishingly present, albeit in many new and remarkable ways.

To test my hypothesis, I contacted a handful of clergy in the Chelmsford diocese where, until recently, I was the bishop. I asked them what they had been doing during the lockdown. Within moments I heard stories of a church in Ilford that has set up a daily food distribution point in the pub car park. This church is also working with refugees and asylum seekers. In Coggeshall, in rural North Essex, a telephone visiting service has been set up as well as telephone sermon and prayer lines. They have put baskets of home-made butterflies – a symbol of the resurrection – in the churchyard so that those taking their daily walk could attach them to a large wooden cross erected outside the porch. In Chelmsford, a brand new church that doesn't even have a building yet, has started a Zoom Bible study group. The local foodbank wouldn't exist without them. In Colchester, the parish priest has produced YouTube assemblies. The choir rehearses on Zoom and they run children and youth events online. Many frazzled parents and stir-crazy kids are benefiting from this ministry. I've even joined in myself.

These stories are being replicated up and down the country. Most astonishing of all, plenty of churches report very large numbers of people joining their streamed services. One bishop, who used to pray on his own each morning, now tells me he is joined online by many others every day.

Then there are the funerals we are taking – I have one this week – and the amazing work of healthcare chaplains. Is all this a shocking absence? With the greatest respect to those who are saying otherwise, I wonder whether they are making that most basic of all mistakes in the Easter season. They are looking for Jesus in the wrong place.

Of course, we long for our church buildings to reopen. But when they do, it won't be business as usual – partly because we are discovering new ways of serving our communities. Even when we do return to the sacred, beautiful space of our church buildings, with all their vital and much-missed resonances of continuity, I believe the Church of England will emerge from this stronger than it has been for a long while.

It is not one thing or the other. It is not in a building or online. We want to do both. When it is safe, we will. From this week, clergy will again be streaming services from their churches. But we learned ages ago that the best way to proclaim the gospel is to live it out. Those who see it are those who have eyes to see it.

As usual, this is most likely to be the poor, the sick, the isolated and the vulnerable. They are well aware of the church's presence with them at the moment. Ask the woman whose only contact with the outside world is a telephone call from the Vicar. Or the family who are kept afloat by YouTube posts. Or those whose only food this week comes from the foodbank run by the local church. Or the bereaved whose loved ones' funeral is being taken this week. Or the two million listeners to Radio 4, or the 600,000 people online who listened to the Archbishop of Canterbury on Easter morning.

All these people recognise Jesus in what they receive. What they are hearing and receiving is a prophetic message about how we can become a better, fairer nation, and the practical expression of that vision through the care of God's Church. Of course we could do more. Of course we've probably made some mistakes. But to sneer that we are doing nothing, or have vacated the territory is just wrong.

Finally, might it be better if, as well as being a little kinder to each other, we also looked a little harder to see where God is actually at work through his Church. Then we might see a stronger and more servant-hearted church emerging from this global crisis. Fortunately, the very first message of Easter is as relevant as ever: He is not here. He is risen.

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