

HOLY TRINITY NICE 2020-2021¹

In the autumn of 2020, I wrote a journal about my personal experience of the first year of the pandemic. I recently added a short summary to cover the end of 2020 and the beginning of 2021.

Looking back, February 2020 belongs to a different era. We were planning a short holiday – a delayed post-Christmas break. We toyed with the idea of taking the train to Sicily (a daily service exists via Genoa) but as news of Covid-19 filled the newspapers and social media, we thought it better to stay in France.

We chose to go to Lyon. We explored and we ate at some wonderful restaurants, but we spent an inordinate time watching the news on French television.

As quarantine seemed inevitable, we resolved to return early. Little did we realise that the lunch we had in a delightful Lyonnais *bouchon* the Saturday before confinement began would be the last meal out until the beginning of June (in April 2021, we barely hope for the re-opening of restaurants, except for takeaway!).

When I booked our return tickets to Nice later that day – direct from Lyon Perrache – there were plenty of free seats to choose from but on the following Monday we found our TGV compartment was packed. Students had been sent home from the university and every available seat had been allocated.

We had sanitiser and Joe (my partner) wiped every surface with antiseptic wipes. We became fixated on a man nearby who coughed incessantly. There was nothing we could do. Masks, mandatory on trains now, were very hard to obtain then. It was a relief to arrive home.



The Promenade empty of traffic and people

Our priority the next morning – St Patrick's Day - was to go shopping before the curfew began at midday. Unlike in the UK, there were few signs of panic buying. Lacking were toilet rolls, pasta and flour (a craze for home bread making became a feature of the first lockdown) but, as it turned out, these shortages were temporary.

Once confinement began, we had to carry a piece of paper (an *attestation*) indicating where and why we were going out. Essential visits to buy food, go to the doctor or pharmacy, or care

for the housebound were permitted, as were hour long periods of exercise, provided you did not stray further than a kilometre from home.

We soon settled into a daily routine except the city was quieter than on a Sunday morning – the streets were empty and air traffic had ceased. Soon a change in the quality of the air

became tangible. Elsewhere, so friends on social media reported, city smog was replaced with pristine skies devoid of contrails - wide, previously un-glimpsed, vistas opened up.

Initially, for some confinement was like New Year and a time for resolutions ('let's turn this into a positive experience ...'). In this spirit, I resolved to read more than usual, which I did, but not the intended serious books I had envisaged but vast amounts of newspapers and magazines online – we were hungry for information about Covid.

There was also, if anything, more work than usual as we sought ways of keeping the community together, particularly wanting to vitiating the loneliness of those who had to weather confinement alone.

Before we left Lyon, we realised we would need to prepare for broadcasting services from Holy Trinity. We thought we could, at least to begin with, use our phones but to do this we needed to buy a tripod, which took most of an afternoon.

On Day Three of lockdown, I started trials of the phone for recording. I did this wandering around the presbytery sitting room, with its beautiful painted ceiling. I was rather startled that a few minutes of tests attracted a following of dozens on Facebook – were people

already that desperate or was it just the ceiling?

We shifted trials to the church and soon discovered that we needed to reduce the distance between the phone and the speaker, which meant using a music stand as a lectern (with seasonal cloth fall of purple) and moving the altar forwards. Again, a substantial audience followed our every move.

By Sunday, March 22, we were ready to broadcast our first Sunday Service. It happened to be Mothering Sunday, which is popular at Holy Trinity and normally includes gifts of bunches of flowers to mothers. On this occasion there were just two of us in church – me, as celebrant, and Joe as *technicien* (the government permitted no more). However, according to the Facebook statistics '762 people were reached', which does not mean that they all watched the



Presbytery sitting room

service in its entirety but from other statistics we realised that hundreds were engaged for most of the service (if you would like to access our services over the past year go to: <https://www.facebook.com/HolyTrinityNice> and scroll down to videos).

We were joined by people from all over France, the UK, the USA, Canada, and India. Part of the reason for our popularity was that our services were live. In the UK, the Church of England told its clergy that they could not broadcast from their churches, which led the Archbishop of Canterbury to broadcast an Easter Day Eucharist from his kitchen at

Lambeth Palace. Considerable controversy ensued as this was not a government requirement.

We fine-tuned our technique, but we have maintained a substantial following through deconfinement until the present. In fact, it seems that broadcasting must remain an essential part of what we offer at Holy Trinity, since it enables those who are members of our community for part of the year to participate every Sunday. It is also a lifeline to those who continue to shelter at home. This mixed style of broadcast and live service has acquired the name *hybrid*, as I'm sure readers of this article will know.

Perhaps the strangest part of confinement was Holy Week. On Easter Day, we would normally welcome well over two hundred to Holy Trinity. There were just the two of us for each of the major services. I am afraid that the Vigil on Holy Saturday – with the lighting of the fire on the parvis and the blessing of the Paschal Candle – seemed a stretch too far.

However, although we were just two in the church, we were accompanied online by over 700 on Easter Day itself. We had an Easter celebration, but it was entirely different from anything we had experienced before. To mark the fact of our separation physically and community spiritually, I made a point of including a reference to the experience of lockdown in this and subsequent sermons – a series we referred to as the 'Covid sermons'. Also, an interesting feature of broadcasting via Facebook is that those watching can comment and greet each other, which creates a greater sense of community.

Broadcasting the Sunday service was the principal way in which we preserved a sense of community, but we also had a 'phone tree' linking parishioners together for a daily phone call and I maintained my Friday Lent study group.

There were unexpected benefits from both. Through the phone tree people who had barely met before developed friendships and discovered shared interests. The study group, which would normally finish in Holy Week, has continued to the present day. In advance of our discussion, I send out a commentary about the gospel text for the following Sunday. We then share of our insights and experiences on the Friday itself – this resembles the Episcopal Church *Way of Love* course that we followed last year.

Of course, I can bring some technical knowledge to the meeting, but the interesting aspect is that everyone has some experience or specialist knowledge to contribute. For example, when we discussed the story of Jesus walking on the water, two members of the group had knowledge of navigation on lakes – apparently, they are unpredictable and dangerous.

The study group, like the broadcast services, has also had the remarkable effect of bringing people separated by differences of distance and time zone together. Regularly, participants include those in Canada, the UK, the USA and other parts of the world. Particularly during confinement, this was an invaluable way of helping us to surmount isolation and to share anxieties, not just for ourselves but also for our families.

There was a point during confinement when one hoped for a different life once it was over, that deconfinement would not simply be a return to 'normal'. Now, it is hard to tell whether this hope has been fulfilled. We live with a fear of a return of the virus, vindicated by the large spike in cases in August (which was fulfilled after this was written – France at



Ticks and crosses mark out social distancing

Eastertide began her third *confinement*). We are told to wear masks and yet many will not wear them. Some are complacent but many remain vigilant and wary.

However, we have returned to church and a good number attend and feel safe to do so. This has been achieved by taking the steps of deconfinement gradually, a process which has been helped by the wardens doing so many things, including marking the church to enable distancing.

In spite of the isolation and sometimes boredom of confinement, I believe that there is a lasting benefit for Holy Trinity. We are an international community and paradoxically the use of the internet – for broadcast services and meetings via Zoom – has brought us together in a way we could never have anticipated. Whatever happens in wider society, this greater sense of community has been a wonderful experience and something for which we should be truly thankful.



My 40th anniversary of ordination party after the Eucharist – indoors, socially distanced because of rain!

2021

I re-read this Covid journal at the beginning of 2021. So much had happened since I wrote it in the autumn.

At a personal level, I remember early October as the time when we celebrated the 40th anniversary of my ordination as a priest. We were fortunate to be able to celebrate this together just before the second *confinement*.

Tragically, just before the less strict second *confinement* began there was another terrorist incident when early morning worshippers were knifed to death at the Basilica. The memory of the July 14 attack in 2016, when so many died, is still raw,

so this caused great distress in the city. As the only English-speaking priest here I had to field many international press enquiries, mostly via Zoom.

Former parishioners in London were startled to see me on BBC morning TV, as were others in Australia (I initially gave an interview to the BBC World Service).

We also twice experienced a curfew. The second returned at the end of the second confinement before Christmas. On January 3, in Alpes-Maritimes and many other départements where the virus still has a strong hold, this was extended to run from 6 in the evening to 6 in the morning (revised with summer time to 7 pm to 7 am).

Mask wearing is obligatory outside the house. Most people you encounter on the street are compliant and everyone wears one entering shops, but there is some 'slippage', not least those who don't cover their noses (presumably they sneeze through their mouths!).

Still, the cases surge and there are new strains of the virus which are more infectious. There is much punditry but it is difficult to know what will count as normal later this year. Much depends on the rate of vaccination. A complicating factor is that a large minority of the population in France say that they will not be vaccinated.

However, after a very slow start, vaccination in Nice proceeds at a good rate – 5000 were vaccinated in a day recently and all of our older parishioners have been vaccinated, most of them twice. Even people of my generation have received their first vaccination (done with astonishing efficiency and – no other term - very courteously).

For Nice a third confinement began some weeks ago, but it began for the whole of France at Easter. Perhaps, we will be free of it by May. We have learnt to be cautious about planning much. Will there be the long-anticipated weddings, socialising, or vide greniers? But the priority is to remain safe and support each other and reach out to the homeless and needy in our neighbourhood.