



# Prophet Elias News

News in the time of self-isolation for the Orthodox Church of  
the Holy Prophet Elias in Devon  
31st May 2020



## Faith In A Time Of Pandemic: God's Presence In Our Absence From Church by Meghan Bowen

As politicians begin to lift restrictions around social distancing, I am hearing calls to put pressure on bishops and metropolitans to open church buildings again. When I discussed this with a friend, she pointed out that God does not need us to be in a church in order to come to us. Look at the example of Pentecost, she said. The apostles were in a house, and the Spirit descended with the sound of a great, rushing wind. Or the first time Jesus came to the apostles after the Resurrection, I added. Jesus appeared despite the doors being locked. God will come to us, not because we are in a church building, but because we desire to be in relationship with Him.

To say that the pandemic altered my prayer life is to grossly understate things. As a theology student, I have more opportunities than the average person to attend liturgies of [many] various kinds. All of that came to an abrupt halt, and I miss it. Still, I am nervous about some of the rhetoric around the need to open our churches again. When we hear people arguing that the churches need to be reopened as soon as possible because [closing them] deprived the people of God's grace, we need to recognize that there is a problem in how they are conceiving of God's providence.

Fear is a subtle but powerful enemy. In times of danger, we are encouraged to turn to God as our Protector and Shelter. Throughout history, in times of personal and communal catastrophe, people have found consolation by going to church. The closure of the churches *seems* to have taken away the one refuge we could rely on. As I see it, the problem is not that the churches are closed, but that we have too narrowly associated the church building with God as our Stronghold. Our fear is amplified because we believe we have been stripped of our protection.

At the moment, I find it more helpful to think of the Body of Christ rather than the Church—although, truly, they refer to the same manifestation of Christ. But thinking of the Body of Christ puts the emphasis back on *bodies*: on Christ's Body present in the Eucharist; on the communion of all the faithful in the Body of Christ; on my own responsibility and privilege to embody Christ through my life. We may be separated physically from the Eucharist, but priests around the world continue to [serve the Liturgy]. We may be separated physically from our church communities, but the physical separation does not negate the Spirit which knits us together into the Body of Christ. I may be separated physically from my friends, but I know that through grace I am personally joined to God and to all the faithful. The Church continues to exist and thrive because these bodies are still active in the world.

Underlying each of these incarnations of the Body of Christ is love. The universe exists because of God's love for all Creation; the Church exists because of Christ's love for humanity; and we respond to God with love. The fear that I mentioned is not overcome by going to a church building but by clinging to the God who is Love. No matter where we find ourselves, when we turn to God out of love for Him, we will find Him already present and loving us.

We have to remember that God desires to come to us. In the Garden of Eden, God visited Adam and Eve in the evening and walked with them. The Ark of the Covenant and the Temple were constructed so God could dwell with His People. The Incarnation is nothing less than God living

with us as one of us. The Spirit descended on the apostles, and is present in each of us today. The biblical witness is that God draws near because the faithful are in relationship with Him. The fact that the church buildings have been closed has forced me to take a greater responsibility for my half of that relationship. An abundance of liturgies made it easy for me to think of my mere presence at liturgy as relationship with God. In contrast, the complete absence of “live” liturgies has pushed me into a richer experience with God than I have ever known. Being deprived of church has only highlighted God’s loving presence. In addition, my inability to gather with others in prayer has made me even more aware of the spiritual communion between all believers. We are not united because we are worshipping in the same space, but because we are in loving relationship with God and, through Him, with each other. The pandemic is just the time between two Sundays when we experience God’s presence in ways that are less tangible than the Eucharist. The only difference now is that the Sundays are a bit further apart. Thankfully God’s love is still with us and, I would suggest, maybe even a little bit closer.

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(Abridged and reprinted with permission. Full text posted on [www.orthodoxyindialogue.com](http://www.orthodoxyindialogue.com) 22-5-20)

### **Thoughts on our ‘lockdown’ church**

I see a lot in my inbox and social media about people getting aerated on the subject of churches not opening yet. Yes, it is sad that we can't be bodily together and share in the Eucharist, but to my mind much of the protesting is similar to that of spoilt children not getting what they want, now. Instead, perhaps this time could be seen as an opportunity to create churches of our homes and our hearts, bringing God into the everyday rather than just something ‘special’ for Sundays.

In this day and age we are fortunate to have technology - a gift from God in these strange times. As I watched Fr Peter's live-stream of the Liturgy this morning (Ascension), it came to me how together we are - in an even greater sense than we are when we're in church. People from all over Britain, and from many other places in the world (e.g. Germany, Greece, Russia this morning) watch these live streams in their kitchens, sitting rooms or wherever and exchange greetings. What a wonderful example of the universal church.

I'm looking forward to being with my fellow parishioners again, but I think I will miss the church we've had during lockdown.

Celia Olsson

### **Prayer in a Time of Pandemic**

O Lord our God, who art rich in mercy, Thou who art the Physician of our souls and bodies, bestow healing upon the sick, raise them up speedily from the bed of suffering, so that they may praise Thee O merciful Saviour; and protect the healthy ones from any disease. Bless, strengthen, and preserve, O Lord, by Thy grace, all those who with love and sacrifice take care of the sick in their homes and hospitals. Remove all sickness and suffering from Thy people and teach us to value life and health as Thy gifts. Grant us, O God, Thy peace, and fill our hearts with unwavering faith in Thy protection, in the hope of Thy help, and in love of Thee and our neighbour: For Thine it is to have mercy and to save us, O our God, and we give glory to Thee, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, now and ever and to the ages of ages. Amen

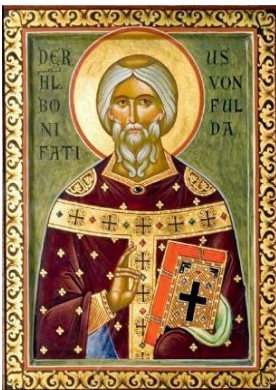
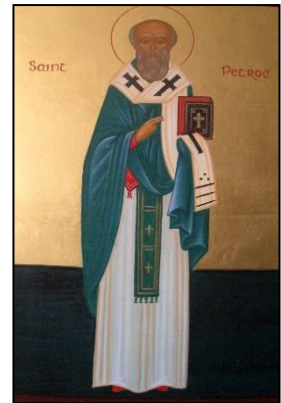
## Three Local Saints

This week we celebrate the feast days of three of our local saints – Saint Wite (or Witta) of Witchurch Canonicorum in West Dorset on June 1<sup>st</sup>, Saint Petroc, ‘Master builder of the faith in the West’ on June 4<sup>th</sup>, and Saint Boniface, ‘Apostle to the Germans’ on June 5<sup>th</sup>.



We know nothing for certain about **Saint Wite**, but the strongest tradition is that she was a Virgin Martyr, killed during a Viking raid sometime in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century. What is remarkable is that her relics are known to lie undisturbed in the original marble sarcophagus to this day – the only saintly relics to have escaped the vandalism of the Reformation activists other than those of Saint Edward the Confessor in Westminster Abbey. Her shrine is still visited by many as a place of healing.

**Saint Petroc** (d 564) was a Welsh prince who established an important monastery in Padstow, from where he made many missionary journeys throughout the south-west of England. There are some thirty churches dedicated to him across Devon, Cornwall and Somerset, and many villages still have traditions associated with his visit. These often recount acts of kindness to animals – in some cases of befriending deer and protecting them from hunting parties of local chieftains. His relics were thrown out at the Reformation but his reliquary can still be seen in Bodmin Parish Church.



**Saint Boniface** (675-754) was a Saxon, born in Crediton. He was an outstanding student and became a leading figure in the Anglo-Saxon mission to the Germanic parts of the Frankish Empire during the 8th century. He organised significant foundations of the church in Germany and became archbishop of Mainz, as well as being an important figure in strengthening ties between the Church and the Carolingian kingdom, the forerunner of the Holy Roman Empire. He was martyred at Dokkum in Frisia in 754. His body was returned to Fulda, Hesse, where his relics remain a site of pilgrimage.

The Orthodox Fellowship of St John the Baptist is compiling a list of on-line services, talks etc: see <https://forerunner.org.uk/resources-in-the-time-of-coronavirus/>

### Waiting

*Jesus said:* “And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but, as for you, wait patiently in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”  
Luke 24: 49

### Good News from Greece

*Konstantina (Dogani) writes with good news from Thessaloniki:*

Last Sunday [May 17<sup>th</sup>] it was the first open Liturgy for us after lockdown. We kept distance from each other, yes, some people were in church, some out even in the street as there were loudspeakers. But in the end we could have Holy Communion as the priests were spread in different parts inside and outside of the church. It was like Easter day!

Let's pray for the end of this phase for the whole world with the least casualties!

## Two quotations from Father Alexander Schmemmann on the Ascension.

“The early Christians realized that in order to become the temple of the Holy Spirit they must ascend to heaven where Christ has ascended. They realized also that this ascension was the very condition of their mission in the world, of their ministry to the world. For there—in heaven—they were immersed in the new life of the Kingdom; and when, after this “liturgy of ascension,” they returned into the world, their faces reflected the light, the “joy and peace” of that Kingdom and they were truly its witnesses. They brought no programs and no theories; but wherever they went, the seeds of the Kingdom sprouted, faith was kindled, life was transfigured, things impossible were made possible.”

“St. Athanasius the Great says that, “God became man so that man could become God.” God came down to earth so that we might ascend to heaven! This is what the Ascension celebrates! This is the source of its brightness and unspeakable joy. If Christ is in heaven, if we believe in him and love him, then we also are there with him, at his banquet, in his Kingdom. If humanity ascends through him, and does not fall, then through him I also have access to ascension and am called to him. And in him, the goal, meaning and ultimate joy of my life is revealed to me. Everything, everything around us pulls us down. But I look at the divine flesh ascending to heaven, at Christ going up, “with the sound of a trumpet,” and I say to myself and to the world: here is the truth about the world and humanity, here is the life to which God calls us from all eternity.”

### *Kontakion for the Feast of the Ascension*

When Thou hadst accomplished Thy dispensation towards us,  
and hadst united things on earth with those in heaven,  
Thou didst ascend in glory, O Christ our God,  
In no way parted, but remaining continually with us,  
Thou didst cry to those who love Thee:  
I am with you, and none shall be against you.

#### **Live streaming of services:**

Saturday 30 May    Vespers at 6.00 pm  
Sunday 31 May    Divine Liturgy at 9.30 am  
Wednesday 3 June    Vespers at 6.30 pm  
Saturday 6 June    Vespers at 6.00 pm  
Sunday 7 June    **Pentecost**  
   Divine Liturgy at 9.30 am  
Sunday 7 June  
   Vespers with kneeling prayers 6.30 pm

If you would like any names to be remembered during the liturgy, please do let Fr Peter know in good time.