

IN CONVERSATION WITH THE CHAPLAINCY

A special faith festival edition

We are living in challenge and unfamiliar times. All faith worship buildings have been closed and so no public worship can physically take place. This month is particularly an important month for the Abrahamic faiths. Below each chaplain gives a brief reflection about the meaning of these festivals and how we can still keep them even in these days of social distancing.

PASSOVER, Rabbi Dr Moshe Freedman

Like all faith groups, so much of our religious life depends on us being part of a community. The word 'synagogue' comes from the Greek words 'syn-agein' meaning 'to bring together' and the Hebrew form 'beit kneset' means 'the house of meeting'. This is the great strength of all religious communities. We are bound together by our collective history, traditions and laws. We are a family of families. We pray together, eat together, celebrate together and grieve together.

But that strength has now become our weakness.

While we have lost so much of our communal life, religious leaders from across the faiths have used initiative and creativity to recreate our communities online, teleconferencing our services and holding virtual events. This has been a lifeline for those who have been separated from their family, friends and community. I have live-streamed classes, services, funerals and memorials. While it's not ideal, it has certainly given some hope. We have phenomenal volunteers safely delivering food to the doorsteps of those unable to leave home. The lists of those to pray for keep getting longer. Yet however hard things get, we hope and pray for those suffering.

Just to remind you that through this strange and challenging time the chaplains are still available and can be contacted via the contacts page on our website.

EASTER, Revd Dr Fiona Stewart-Darling

Easter is the most important festival in the Christian calendar, and the events in Holy Week including Maundy Thursday and Good Friday leading up to Easter. Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection are at the heart of the Christian faith. Holy week is a time when Christians remember Jesus' sense of being alone, wondering about what was to come, his fear for the future, being betrayed or deserted by his friends. As we continue to face every day the ongoing threat of Covid-19 whether we are a Christian or not Easter is a reminder we are not alone, and God understands our experiences of fear or anxiety.

On Maundy Thursday Christians to re-enact the last meal Jesus had with his disciples and the example he gave us of servanthood through washing one another's feet and then hold a prayer vigil as a reminder of Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane before his betrayal. Then on Good Friday we again gather and remember Jesus' trial and crucifixion, and this is the day to eat Hot Cross buns, with the symbol of the cross of Jesus' crucifixion.

On Easter Sunday comes the celebration as Christians believe that in Jesus' death and resurrection, he overcame fear and death and give hope that there is more than this. And yes, the day for Easter eggs, which symbolize the rolling of the stone away from Jesus tomb.

This year Christians will not gather as a physical community in churches as they are closed. Some Christians may attend virtual churches gathering through Zoom or watch services being live streamed. Christians may not be able to physically meet together but they are no less a community of believers, who are held together by their faith in Jesus, but it will feel very different and may give us much to ponder and reflect on.

RAMADAN, Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra

Ramadan is a month during which the most numerous social encounters between Muslims and their neighbours take place. That will not be the case this year. More importantly, It is also a time when most Muslims spend a lot more time in mosques, with others, to spiritually recharge themselves. The night prayers in particular are enthusiastically attended by many throughout the month. That alas, will not be possible this year. The good news is that, in Islam, although places of worship play a significant role in prayer and worship, Muslims are permitted, even encouraged, to pray wherever they happen to be when it is prayer time. Thankfully, the fasting is not reliant on being in a specific space and so Muslims will fast as normal. We will however, miss the communal breaking of the fast, iftar, at sunset. It has been a most joyful experience for some Muslims to be invited by non-Muslim faith communities for an iftar. Mosques have also enjoyed the honour of inviting non-Muslim friends and neighbours for iftar. This too will not be possible. Street iftars are the new fad and becoming very popular in many cities. Perhaps when we will realise how much we miss all these encounters and activities, and each other's company, we will become more appreciative of all the things we take for granted. It is also an opportunity for Muslim families to observe the month of Ramadan together, close quarters, teaching and learning together. Night prayers with just your own family will be an amazingly different experience. To get the children to lead in some of the prayer activities will bring immense joy to many parents and grandparents. For the younger ones, it will give them a tremendous sense of pride and achievement. So all that remains to be said is, "Keep calm and enjoy Ramadan".