Teaching in the Time of Pandemic: One of my favourite books is Gabriel Márquez’s Love in the Time of Cholera, writes David Jasper. I will not spoil the plot for you, but it is uplifting and hopeful – the kind of book we need right now. As the staff at SEI know, perhaps to their cost, I was dreading teaching ‘on-line’, fearful of the mysteries of Big Blue Button. After forty years of university teaching I am old enough to be suspicious of all this ‘new-fangled’ technology (the old dinosaur alert syndrome is real with me) – but now there is no option!

It would be churlish to say that this is better than nothing. Actually, after two sessions teaching my course “Modern Thought and Theology” I feel much better! The trick is to forget about Big Blue Button altogether. If, as we were, you are struggling with establishing why the philosophy of Immanuel Kant is crucial for the development of modern Christian thought, there is not much space for any intrusion. It is certainly better when you can see people – but I began to recognise that the human spirit is pretty resolute. Reflecting on the nature of synthetic a priori principles is not easy – but I felt a focus and a will in the group that might not be possible in more distraction-prone situations in a classroom. Certainly, I came away after two hours pretty exhausted, but impressed by the concentration of the group and I was pushed into careful reflection on and revisiting of those tough questions about what all this philosophy has to do with our future ministry. Answer – well, a great deal, but we have to unpack all that again.

So here is my chance to thank my class - you know who you are – and say, keep at it!! This class will not all be easy or even what you want to hear sometimes, but (and I never thought I should be saying this) on behalf of Kant, Schleiermacher, Hegel and Heidegger, thank you Big Blue Button for making our conversations possible!

Teaching the art of preaching through a virtual learning environment: ‘It’s all about establishing a connection with your listeners, working not just with the structure and content of your talk, but with good delivery that creates rapport and enables a useful ‘dialogue’ between you the preacher, the congregation and the text. Effective preaching happens within a context and a relationship. The listeners are key players alongside the preacher and the Holy Spirit. The effective preacher is constantly aware of this.’ This is not only what I want to say to the students at the ‘Introduction to Preaching’ course, but I want to model it in the way I teach, writes Jane MacLaren.

Yet here I am on a Wednesday evening alone in my study talking to a computer screen with my own face looking back at me. I can break the monotony with PowerPoint slides, but rapport with my listeners is painfully absent. I know they are all out there. I can see a list of their names down the left-hand side of the screen, but I cannot see or hear them. To avoid sound interference their microphones must be switched off. There are so many of them that their cameras must be switched off too or we would crash the system.

This may be challenging for me, but how much worse for them to have to sit there for 2 hours at the end of a long day! In our class we have teachers who’ve been in virtual learning environments all day already, a medic working long hours at the front line, and others bearing all sorts of stresses and challenges.
Yet between us we are a resilient lot! Thanks to the excellent training for Associate Tutors at the ‘Virtual Staff Residential’ in March, I’ve realised that our virtual learning environment has capacity for all sorts of creative ways of interacting as a group. Linda Harrison has given me her support and expertise as I try new things. The students are full of willingness, encouragement, and tech savvy.

We have used the ‘chat’ function to ask questions and raise issues. We’ve broken off into smaller groups for discussion. In this mode we are able to use cameras and sound and I can glide around the groups, hearing their insightful comments and thoughtful consideration. This week we tried ‘coffee rooms’ during the break. Those of us who didn’t need to lie down in a darkened room could choose between an assignment surgery with me and a student chat room while having their drink of choice. I’ve even had them annotating my PowerPoint – it looked much more colourful once they had all finished, if a little chaotic, but it was great to get their position (literally) on the question under consideration.

In all this the students have engaged sensibly, wholeheartedly and with great good humour. An experience that I was frankly dreading has turned into a joy. As always, I come away from lecturing each week knowing that the future of our church is in safe hands. As we look to an uncertain future, that message of hope was never more needed than now.

Jane MacLaren

**Revd Dr Clare Caley**, Assistant Curate at St Michael and All Angels and St John the Evangelist, Inverness, and a member of the IME 4-6 cohort, reflects upon contributing to worship remotely.

During the current restrictions, like many people I have ended up separated from congregations, church buildings and, for curates, training incumbent. It is a painful separation and, in these new and challenging times, we have to find innovative ways of bridging the gap.

The telephone has become one my most important tools for ministry and, speaking to members of our congregations, I have become aware of how much they appreciate acts of worship on television and radio and the many online offerings by the SEC and others. But it has also become clear, although we know that the church is the people and not the building, how much some people value something from their own church and clergy, something that links them to their own sacred space, something that is special to them and brings them closer to their own worshipping community.

So it was that Holy Week saw me turn a corner of my home into a recording studio (as so many have done) and seizing all too brief spells of fine weather to take my daily walk and gather photographs and video clips. My contributions, be they reflection, reading or intercession, have been combined with those of others for various acts of worship from Palm Sunday to Easter. It has been, and is, an oddly disjointed experience as items that are only part of the whole are recorded in advance on the ‘wrong’ day. It has been a steep learning curve as one records and re-records to get the lighting right, remove strange objects from the field of view and cut out the sound of the phone ringing. The results may not have been technically perfect, but they have been ‘good enough’; they have helped to draw members of our congregations together despite our physical separation.

Intriguingly, the numbers viewing such offerings, in part if not in their entirety, are much higher than the numbers who would come through the church door on a ‘normal’ Sunday morning, even at Easter, so there are probably things we should learn from this experience for the future. However, both now and in the future, we also need to remember that such offerings do not meet the needs of all; there are those without access to the necessary technology but also those for whom this type of online worship doesn’t ‘work’. For them, we need to continue thinking outside the box.

Clare Caley
Throughout the month, the four Mixed Mode students – Rachael Wright, Ross Jesmont, Beki Cansdale and Jaime Wright - have continued to work with the charges in which they are on placement, each helping to prepare and deliver online resources for the congregations they serve. Here each writes about how they helped their placement charges walk the path of Holy Week and Easter.

Initially, the Highland Perthshire Linked Charge planned to mark Holy Week and celebrate Easter together but apart in the sharing of written reflections and liturgy for each day as produced in a lovely little booklet by the Rector, Lay Reader and myself, writes Rachael Wright. However, when we realised that many of our congregants were having a “cocktail hour” via video conference each evening we figured that our concerns about everybody’s technological abilities (our own included) were unfounded. So Liz (the Rector) blessed the palm crosses and sent them out to everyone with the booklets but instead of using them privately we have met each day online to discuss and contemplate Christ’s journey, and our own, to the cross.

I wrote and led the reflections for Palm Sunday and Holy Wednesday. Palm Sunday was an introduction to the journey of Holy Week and a challenge to everyone to find ways of translating the familiar rituals and practices of church life into their homes at this time. For example: stripping the home of religious icons on Maundy Thursday, going into a ‘technology black-out’ from Good Friday to Holy Saturday, making their own paschal candle, creating a resurrection garden, or getting up to watch the sunrise on Easter Morning and giving thanks for Christ’s glorious resurrection. On Holy Wednesday, we contemplated the life and experiences of Judas, and in particular the emotions he would have felt as he betrayed his friend. This was based on a monologue that I delivered as part of worship at the most recent residential, where, in the character of Judas, I reflected on his actions and Christ’s death. That had been a very powerful and moving experience for me because it helped me to appreciate the inner turmoil that Judas may have felt. We concluded our time by reflecting on the fact that in all Judas’s anger, fear, pain, sorrow, regret, shame and self-loathing, Jesus never stopped loving him and that no matter the emotions that we experience, none of them can separate from the love of God.

It’s been a very different Holy Week for us but I’ve found that it has opened the doors for participation and contribution from everyone in the parish in ways that our traditional services would never have allowed for. It has been a true delight to learn more about my friends and share more of our faith together.  

Rachael Wright
The phrase ‘things they didn’t teach me in seminary’ is sometimes used to highlight the disconnect between classroom learning and the realities of ministry, writes Ross Jesmont. For example, I once heard a member of the clergy bemoan the fact that they had been taught various models of the atonement but not how to read a financial report. Following the unprecedented events of the past weeks, how to facilitate Holy Week during a global pandemic is not something for which my training has neglected to prepare me.

(right: Easter Sunday on Zoom)

At St. Salvador’s Episcopal Church, in Stenhouse, our preparations for Holy Week were well underway when the decision was made to suspend all public worship. The question of how to continue worshipping together led us to ‘Zoom’, an online conference platform which few of us had heard about, let alone used, prior to the government directive to remain indoors. Having figured out how to ‘mute all’, ‘share screen’ and guide congregation members into ‘the strange new world of the internet’, we created new orders of service. While the usual embodied liturgies and processions of Holy Week could not happen, meeting online brought new opportunities: we could easily bring two congregations together: St. Salvador’s and St. David’s, Pilton; as each person was equally audible through their computers we could invite more people to read and lead prayers; and sharing images or videos could be done at the click of a mouse. By adapting our style of worship to that which Zoom could facilitate we were able to make the best of an unexpected situation.

During our course on Mission Entrepreneurship we were introduced to three questions: Who are we? What do we know? Who do we know? These questions are designed as a prompt for churches to take stock of what resources they have and what opportunities are available to them. At St. Salvador’s these questions informed how we cultivated alternative patterns of worship, safely continued our weekly foodbank, and established new forms of community during a time of social distancing. As a mixed-mode student during this period I have again been reminded about the importance of flexibility and creativity. As Robert Burns wrote, “The best laid schemes o’ Mice an’ Men gang aft agley.” The question is what we do after they have. This Easter or Zeaster (Easter on Zoom), I have learnt how to lead worship online; the importance of muting yourself when muting others (apologies to those who had to endure me singing "Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia!") by myself after I forgot to mute myself); I have been reminded about the value of all-member ministry and about the importance of building communities that extend beyond Sundays. I also learnt how to make fire in a frying pan, as we held an Easter vigil on the doorstep of St. John’s rectory (above).

Easter this year was not cancelled but it was unlike any Easter we have celebrated before. The challenges of being separated forced us to discover new ways of worshipping and of ministering to each other. The lessons and skills that I have learnt during this time arose from an unexpected need but now form part of the many things which they did teach me in seminary.

Ross Jesmont
Working Behind the Screens: As someone who uses technology to keep in touch with family on the other side of the Atlantic and who has been involved in online tutoring, the shift to online worship in the midst of societal responses to Covid-19 caused Mordecai’s words to Esther to echo in my head: it seems as if my previous experiences have prepared me ‘for just such a time as this’, writes Jaime Wright.

I began a new placement at St Columba’s by the Castle (Edinburgh) one week prior to the suspension of gathered worship across the SEC, and by the time Holy Week and Easter arrived, I found myself with more opportunities to serve the congregation than had been available at the time I began my placement.

My sermon on Palm Sunday was the first sermon to be delivered on Zoom outside of the church or rectory. An invitation was sent to the congregation to make their own palm crosses with items available in or around their homes, so I prepared a cross out of sticks, complete with red ribbons, a crown of gold-painted twist ties, multi-grain cheerios, and much more. After inviting others within the congregation to show me their home-made crosses, I used mine to talk through the events of Holy Week. One of the most striking benefits of preaching with a prop when using video technology is that people can see the details of the prop in ways that might not be possible in typical preaching situations. However, being aware that some people were calling in, I was sure to carefully describe the look of various elements of the cross.

During Holy Week, I helped to ‘host’ services on Zoom and set up a Facebook page for the church with the goal of livestreaming our Zoom services on it. One of the challenges of using Zoom for online services is the security risks. Although St Columba’s services have not been disrupted by so-called zoom-bombing, we have been aware of the security risks involved in making our services accessible to those beyond our regular congregation. It is hoped that livestreaming through Facebook will offer a more secure medium through which to share our services with others. Accordingly, we have run test livestreams since Easter, working hard to address safeguarding and privacy issues, and had our first public livestream on 26 April.

Finally, I have begun hosting bi-weekly gatherings called Exploring the Psalms. In the wake of the suspension of gathered worship and the closing of church doors, these gatherings are intended to provide space in order to explore our own spirituality and then share our experiences with others in community.

Although it is painful to be separated physically from others, I am thankful that we do not really have to be ‘socially’ distanced at this time of physical distancing. It will be interesting to see how much our use of these technologies for church-related activities will persist beyond our present need of them.

But for now, I am simply content to serve our congregation from behind the screen.

Jaime Wright
Welcome to my new office! (left) writes Beki Cansdale. With all the changes that have happened over the past couple of weeks I’ve moved to working from home, which definitely has its perks! Thankfully I’ve still been able to concentrate and get things done. One of the first things that I did was to spend a day creating a ‘How To Access WhatsApp’ Guide, complete with screenshots with many different arrows and explanations. Given that our congregation are predominantly 60+ there are a number who were not previously connected on social media etc. In the interest of keeping up with people, and making sure that people can keep up with their friends through video chat and group chats, the ministry team made a big effort to help people get onto WhatsApp!

I’ve also spent quite a bit of time on the phone with people, talking them through setting up WhatsApp, making group chats, helping to fix webcam issues where I can and generally being at the end of the phone for all things tech-related.

Alongside being tech support I’ve been putting together a resource for Holy Week at Home. This includes a wee thought about the passage and up to 3-5 ideas for different family activities for each day. Some are more suited to younger kids; for example, one of the ideas for Palm Sunday was to spend some time drawing a donkey (right and below) and talking as a family about what it must have been like to ride one, and what it might mean that Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey too. Then there are other activities which are more suited to older children and teens, like the suggestion to make a stop-motion animation about the story of Easter and what it means for you.

I had a lot of fun putting it together, dreaming up fun activities, finding youtube videos, instructions for various crafts and pondering on what it all means for us now. Holy Week at Home may certainly be different this year, and we may need to engage in totally new ways but there is still so much to engage with and so much to be thankful for at this time of year. Beki Cansdale

Extract from Beki’s Holy Week at Home resources for Palm Sunday.

Create your own palm leaves: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h3aJ7J8bV0A
http://www.dltk-bible.com/crafts/mpalm.htm

Go on a procession: Some churches celebrate Palm Sunday by processing around the church, or around the streets near their church. Why do you think they do that? Have a chat and a think together as a family about it. Perhaps consider how you might do a procession around your own home or garden. You could make some palm leaves and pick a favourite song or hymn which you can sing. You could also read the bible passage at one point in your procession.
When, as a result of discussion between Fr Simon Mackenzie from Mid-Argyll and staff of SEI, we became involved in piloting an introductory module on Doctrine delivered by Skype, I think we were excited and nervous in equal measure. Would rural broadband hold up? Would we all be able to be comfortable with the technology? Would it be at the right level?

It turned out we needed to have no fears about the technology. The majority of the students were in or around Lochgilphead, the local tutors in Tighnabruaich or Glasgow - and communications were good. But a couple of island-dwellers also had no problem. One participant managed to Skype from Campbeltown, from Islay, and once - a little less successfully - on her phone from the ferry in between! In fact the only place we seemed to have trouble, once when three of us were there for another meeting, was Oban...

One student said: ‘The model and presentation is admirably suited to the geographically disparate congregations of the west coast, and I would strongly recommend it’; and another ‘I strongly believe that on-line distance learning is a viable and good way to undertake any academic subject - and that it may be the only way that some people are able to study because of other personal responsibilities and commitments.’ But we had to learn as we went along. Discussion is difficult on an on-line platform and, although we got better at it as time went on, some face-to-face time would have helped. The wife of one of the students teaches for the Open University and encouraged us to set up an email discussion forum, which enabled us to share thoughts and helpful material. Skype is free and people are familiar with it, but now that Zoom has made itself ever-present in these strange times, that platform, or something like it, would be a much more suitable and flexible way to present, some of us felt.

But what of studying theology online? Again, we learnt as we went along. It turned out the chosen textbook needed quite a bit of supplementing. Different students had come with different backgrounds and expectations. In hindsight we, the local tutors, should have engaged with the students more in advance and conveyed this to Mike Hull, who was the lecturer, before we started. One student felt it could be pitched at a higher level. Another said she moved from ‘disorientation’ to being inspired to ‘continue to study the subject and keep an eye on what our contemporary theologians are up to.’ All were hugely positive about the module. Fr Simon said to us he wanted the people taking the module to be able to say ‘I am a theologian because I am discussing theology’. One of the students said: ‘I do think that we, as a dispersed congregation, have a huge amount of untapped talent among our ranks, and that this short course has enabled folk to feel much more confident about articulating their beliefs and faith.’ As Mission Enablers, we must see that as a great outcome!
So, we thank SEI for the opportunity to study this module and see what learning can be done even by the remote people of Argyll and The Isles. And...we (Chris and I) have been inspired by this experience, and our experience of Zoom services and meetings, both formal and informal, to plan to move our cancelled regular training day for the lay leaders of Argyll onto Zoom. It is scheduled for just after this newsletter goes out, so we can’t tell you about the results yet!

Ros and Chris Brett

Two of the wider SEI Community - in IME 4-6 - reflect upon the experience of participating in Compline with other IME 1-3 students and staff during Lent via Zoom. The Revd Ellie Charman is Assistant Curate at St Peter’s Thurso and St John the Evangelist Wick. Her piece is followed by another from the Revd Dr Clare Caley, Assistant Curate at St Michael and All Angels and St John the Evangelist, Inverness.

It was so lovely to join the SEI community for Compline, writes Ellie Charman. Staying at home or ‘self-isolation’ has in some way brought the community closer. This is reflected in our geographic communities where practical aid is coming from small groups of people working with the Councils and the Red Cross. The Zoom meeting for Compline met a much deeper need, spiritually and emotionally.

Where I am based, in Caithness, there is a certain amount of geographic isolation that I had to adjust to when I began my curacy. There was a very real need for community and I had to actively find that community. In self-isolation, the similarities are there, but we need to actively find that community online. So when I was invited to join not just the students in saying Compline, but the whole of the SEI community, there was no hesitation on my part.

This is something I reflected on recently with a friend. Those whose placements or curacies are amongst communities that already have a rhythm, whether that’s in a Cathedral or a regular weekly attendance in schools or community centres, have had that taken away instantaneously. This may have left an uncertainty in what one’s role is under these new circumstances.

Therefore, any chance to come together and worship is an opportunity not to be sniffed at. Yes, it’s different meeting by Zoom, but the way that the atmosphere was prayerfully curated, with an image to focus on, rather than the leader, helped me to engage and worship God.

Ellie Charman

The opportunity to join others for the daily office is one I have always valued, and it was a joy to join the SEI community for Compline via Zoom recently, writes Clare Caley. Having always been a ‘remote’ student, linked into seminars by technology, I have never been able to join with other students in person for Evening Prayer prior to seminars.

The Zoom meeting took me back to my earliest days with SEI, when seminar groups were in various locations across the country and I belonged to a group with the tutor in Aberdeenshire and students scattered across the Highlands and Islands. We met each week by Skype and always started with Evening Prayer together. As a very scattered community, the opportunity to worship together as well as study together was important to us and drew us closer together.

Times have moved on and arrangements are different now. However, when this current emergency is over, perhaps we can use this experience to find opportunities to include those in remoter locations, or otherwise unable to join us in person, in our worship as the SEI community and also in our congregations.

Clare Caley
Keeping SEI calm and carrying on during lockdown: It feels like a tremendous privilege to be so busy from home, and to be putting Moodle through its paces to continue all that happens at SEI at this key point in the year, as each student attends his or her Appraisal Conference and we bring the residential weekends to a close for the academic year. 2019-20 has been the strangest of academic years, with an early focus on the Periodic External Review (PER) and, unfortunately, launching all too quickly into change to all known ‘norms’.

However, SEI has been so fortunate to have our electronic platform, Moodle, already up and running to support our students at a distance, then used by all for submission and marking of assessments online and for weekly seminars, with some students in the building in Edinburgh and some joining via BigBlueButton (BBB). Now all has moved online.

BBB may be more familiar in type to many of you now; it has many similarities to Zoom, but is orientated towards education. As we look back over the year, we were fortunate to have been moved to a new version of BBB over the summer, offering us some new features that certain Tutors trialled for us, and then to have Dr Ken Farrimond of the Church of England’s Ministry Team as one of the Speakers at the SEI Staff Training in mid-March, which moved at very short notice to be held within Moodle and BBB. Dr Farrimond offered a wonderful model for online events that we have been able to translate to create our May Residential Weekend (see image). More straightforwardly, we have also been able to make use of BBB as the platform to ensure the Appraisal Conferences can go ahead within our usual annual pattern.

The SEI Library is the main casualty of the current situation. However, Moodle helps us out there too. Along with registration for Ordinands and Curates-in-training to the Clergy Support Trust Library, Moodle also links to The Hub, maintained for all 19 TEIs (Theological Education Institutions) by Ministry Team. The wealth of resources, online books and journals within The Hub is available at all times, but has come into its own for all TEIs at this time.

SEI is being responsive to the current situation as far as it can be and as swiftly as possible. Through our firm foundation of faith and hope, supported by our excellent Tutors and Students, ensuring as far as we can that all remain safe, we are learning and growing in all we do.

Linda Harrison