

1 Corinthians 12 and Luke 4 – Epiphany 4 2016

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Good morning everyone. I pray you have had a lovely week in spite of the changeable weather and the many coughs and colds that have been circulating. I hope that you have all been able to spend a moment or two this week focusing on God. I hope too that you have been blessed with those little glimpses of God's grace as you have been going about God's business in the world.

Our New Testament and Gospel reading today seem to both be tools for building up Christ's Body and offering us encouragement for living our Christian lives. How do we ensure that we remain in touch with God's grace? Where do we look to find strength in our faith? Both readings seem to hold important advice.

St Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 12 are particularly poignant as we think about what it means to be united in the body of Christ. As we read Paul's letter they instantly speak much common sense, and yet in our modern world, they are probably some of the most challenging.

When I was about 20, I found myself amongst a group of about 10 friends who became the core of my life. Every little piece of spare time, I found myself spending with them. We went to parties, up the pub, to football matches, all the stuff that such friends normally do. Tom and Tracy, two people at the centre of the group, began a relationship. For many months their relationship only seemed to gel the wider group together all the more. But then the inevitable happened. One day when we were all having a nice time, another member of our group, Gareth, began being rather unkind to a polish gentleman who had only recently arrived in the country, for no other reason than he was not British, not 'one of us'.

Now we need to be mindful of the backdrop in order to understand a little about what drove Gareth's emotions. We were living on a fenland town. The local economy was driven by agricultural farming and it was in the late 1990s when many Eastern

Europeans had begun moving into the area to work on the land. Gareth's family had been especially affected as his dad was a land worker who had found it difficult to find work as a result of wages being driven down by the influx of migrants.

Nonetheless, Gareth's actions were inappropriate and Tracey and I decided to confront Gareth and stick up for the Polish gentleman. Gareth, to his credit, immediately apologised for his actions and things soon cooled down. We all went home that evening assuming that all was forgotten.

As it turns out, however, that night Tracy and Tom fell out because Tom felt the need to defend Gareth's behaviour. They split up. Over the next few weeks different people began taking different sides and the explanation for the fall out began to be retold in more and more embellished ways. Everyone was damaged by the gossip and the body split. To our shame, however, instead of trying to mend the fall-out, we all decided to go our own separate ways; after all, the advice of most people was that it was better to walk away and start again than to waste precious energy trying to mend something that was already broken.

Society encourages us to dump things when they become a struggle! St Paul strongly challenges that approach.

Paul uses the metaphor of a human body to describe the Christian community. In talking about the Church, he has a concern for how such a diverse group of people can live together in a constructive fashion. In so doing he places the onus on each individual. He associates each member with a particular part of the body, considering each body-part's particular and unique function and how it contributes to the good of the whole body.

Just because we are an ear and not an eye, does not mean that we are any less a part of the body, just because we don't have the particular gift of sight. We simply have different gifts, gifts of hearing. To function to the best of its ability the body needs both hearing and sight and so as an ear, we are just as important to the wider body. Equally, if we are a foot we are just as valuable as a hand, our gifts are just used for a different

purpose. The metaphor can, of course, be followed through for every part of the body, no matter whether large or small, prominent or discreet.

The main point is, that in order for the body to function to its full potential every single part, small or great, needs to work according to its particular and unique function.

Pretty obvious and straightforward stuff. But Paul also tell us what happens when a particular part of the body wishes to deny its place or detach itself from the rest of the body. If an ear goes to such an extent as to physically remove itself from the rest of the body, it not only causes the body damage, it also causes the ear itself to be cut off from the very life source that feeds it, and eventually it withers and dies. A bit like cutting of one's nose to spite one's face, you might say.

Paul's purpose then is to highlight how each of us has an important part to play in the life of the Church community, Christ's Body on earth, and even if from time to time we feel dissatisfied or frustrated with the role that God is currently calling us to, to detach ourselves in response risks damaging both ourselves and the wider body.

Paul's argument seems to rest on two important principles of the Christian life:

- 1) That we need each other and we are better off working together than simply following our own passions.
- 2) That only together are we truly able to experience Christ working within us.

Paul says, "you are the true body of Christ and individually members of it". To be a Christian is to be a part of Christ's body.

As individuals we are called by the Spirit to individual roles in order to help the Christian community remain healthy and grow. This is why Paul goes on to talk a little about our life together. He offers a warning about dissention within the body and encourages each member to have a proper care for one another, stepping up in responsibility to ensure every member is properly cared for. Differences of opinion, he says, must not sever the body.

He outlines the truth we all know too well: "If one of us suffers, we all suffer. If one of us is honoured, we all rejoice!" In good times and bad we are bound together.

We all know how painful it is when we lose a member of our body, either by death, illness or people walking away. Just this week we have lost a special member of one of our congregations, Bill. Bill has become dear to many of us, and sadly died on Friday. Just a few months ago, we lost another life-long member, Burt, who had to be taken into care due to illness. Such things fill us all with sadness. And yet, what a privilege to be a part of a community who holds each other so dear.

The trouble is, sometimes our differences can divide us and it can seem all too difficult to persevere. The most obvious example of this, is of course, our far too many church denominations. Every split in the Church must make Jesus feel as though we are nailing him back to the cross, because it shows our failure to rejoice in what he wishes us to be. And yet the answer to overcoming our division is to be found in that very same Lord.

When we hear Jesus proclaiming in the synagogue that he is the fulfilment of Isaiah's words; the anointed one who sets us free no matter what our impingement, who brings the Good News, releasing the captives as he does so and freeing us from whatever oppression is keeping us down, Christ reveals to us the way life should be lived and affords us the opportunity to live as children of God. In Christ we become the sons and daughters of God.

There is no division in God. If we are to live up to our calling as his sons and daughters, we aspire to live according to the example he sets – and that is an example of unity. Where all parts work together to help goodness thrive.

Christ gives us the life-blood that enables us to be his people, and we have access to this life-giving force through his body on earth, the Church. As Paul says in a different passage: "by the one faith we were all baptised into the one body".

Just know that each of you are dearly loved: by God, by me and by all those sitting around you each Sunday. And we find the root of that love in Christ's life, which indwells us on account of our place within his body, the Church.

Amen.

2nd Sunday Before Lent – Fr Rob's Leaving Service

All week I have been trying to think about what to preach on this morning. So many mixed emotions. It is difficult not to feel a sense of loss amidst all the excitement of what we are being called to next. We have done so much together and we have so many treasured memories. But we must remember that this is not the end. What we have achieved these past four years is not a pinnacle of church life, but only the beginning of what church can be in this place. We have barely even scratched the surface. It will be for you all, and the next priest, to continue building as best you can.

I have many conversations with people who are struggling to believe in the love of God in the face of personal or impersonal suffering or loss. Maybe they have come through the experience of watching someone die horribly or tragically, maybe they witness the suffering of people further removed because of starvation, war or inequality in the world. The question always arises; 'why would God let this happen?' Many people look around the world today and see it primarily in terms of absence and loss instead of presence and blessing. They cannot see evidence of a loving and intelligent purpose, only a set of random and meaningless occurrences.

When we despair, the world all too easily begins to look dark and we cannot help but measure existence according to what we have lost or what we do not have. But there is another way to interpret what we see and experience.

There is and always has been a force at work that has been moving all things towards splendour and beauty. That beauty is not to be measured in terms of material gain, but in terms of ongoing change, change that moves us further and further into a peace and order that was present even

before the world began. Under this understanding, everything we have is a blessing.

I wonder, how often do you notice coincidences happening in your daily life? Things which seem beyond explanation and yet appear to reveal a sort of destiny? How often have you found yourself in a difficult situation only for an angel to appear in the guise of a stranger or friend with just the right tools for the moment? How often have you looked back at an event which happened many years earlier and realised how fortunate you are that it happened in the way it did; how much more negative would life have been had it not unfolded in that way? Coincidences are not just some random turn of fortunate events. Coincidences are God's unsuccessful attempt at remaining anonymous. And I wonder how much brighter the world would seem if we took note of them more often and recognised them as moments of divine grace?

In our reading from the Book of Proverbs today, we heard of the wisdom of knowing that there is a loving presence that operates outside of time. Before even the world began it was there and it operates actively to keep all things on track. When things go out of kilter, it intervenes to bring things back to where they need to be.

Desmond Tutu comments that "despite appearances to the contrary, there is evidence everywhere that we do live in a moral universe – that in the end, justice prevails". That is not to say that suffering is meaningless, but that if we look at the world, suffering only has a set time, and over-time things move back into balance. For our own lives, it is a case of having to find and live in that balance as best we can, even when we find ourselves in the most difficult of circumstances. Expressing a sense of positivity that, no matter how bad things may seem, we always have hope and trust that we are moving towards goodness. And each of us has our part to play.

According to all the Gospel narratives, and the ongoing belief of the Church, Jesus comes from God and returns to God. Indeed, in Jesus we see how that may be true for each of us too. But in Jesus' case, this means that he was a part of God in the very beginning, before the world was even created. The love we see in Jesus is present eternally in God the Father. Jesus mirrors the attributes of God, precisely because he is an eternal part of God. In the first chapter of John's Gospel, known as the prologue, John tells us that: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God...All things came into being through Him and without Him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life'. John then tells us that: 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us'. John is talking about Jesus. Jesus didn't just appear in the 1st century out of nowhere, he is the eternal Word and that becomes flesh in his person.

In his prologue, John is drawing on the first chapter of Genesis from the Old Testament. The Old Testament is of course written in Hebrew. Interestingly, the Hebrew word for 'beginning' can also mean 'sum-total', 'head of', or 'first-fruits'. The Hebrew word for 'in' can also mean 'through' and 'for'. Our Bible translations do little justice to this diversity of meaning in the original text. But if we apply them, as Paul does in his letter to the Colossians, we find out something quite remarkable about the person of Jesus. Christ is the one 'in', 'through' and 'for' whom creation and redemption are accomplished. He is the 'beginning', the 'sum-total', the 'head' of all things.

Jesus, the Word, is the essence of life. But this Word doesn't end when Christ is killed on the cross. Because Jesus is eternally part of God, his life cannot be extinguished nearly so easily and his resurrection is testimony of the strength of his union with the Father. Once Jesus

ascends into heaven, it is him, the Word, that continues to keep all things in balance, as he sends the Holy Spirit which continues to breathe new life into the world; just as it did in the very beginning. In order to live in justice and truth each of us must try and live in tune with the Spirit's promptings. We must stay in touch with Jesus, precisely because in him is life. Jesus is the means by which all things continue to be ordered in the present. In Jesus we find a way to live life in all its fullness.

Our Gospel reading today from John has us ending at verse 14. If we were to skip forward to verse 16 we would find something even more inspiring regarding the person of Christ. In verse 16 John says; 'from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.' Imagine that, grace upon grace. Grace overflowing grace. So much grace that it rolls like the morning mist and runs over itself like a waterfall; so that all who discover it may receive living water. And that water will refresh life in you for eternity.

As we all move forward into a scary new future, there will be endless moments of grace bestowed upon us. It will be for us to recognise them. We must not dismiss them as coincidences, as though there is no order in the world; as though every event is meaningless; as though life is meaningless. Remember that coincidences are just God's unsuccessful attempt at remaining anonymous – they are God's little gifts to us. How we respond is for us to decide.

Sermon for 2nd Sunday of Epiphany 17

May I speak in the name of the living God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last week, we celebrated the feast of the baptism of Christ whilst also having the privilege of being present at the baptism of the newest member of Christ's church in this place, baby Elouise. In one place, we encountered the foundation of Christian baptism and its latest beneficiary.

Today's reading from St John's Gospel begins with the same focus. Last week, we heard how, even before John the Baptist, spiritual cleansing of an individual through bathing took place after some act of uncleanness – such as touching a dead body.

John the Baptist offers an expanded view of what separates individuals from God and with it a broader approach to baptism. John, ever focussed on what God will do in the future, has a deep metaphysical understanding of the sinful capacity of all human beings to distance themselves from the goodness of God. So John calls every person into ritual cleansing, to be washed clean of their sins so that they may begin a new way of life living towards God the Father once again.

But John is clear that he is only paving the way for the future and it is John's revelation about Jesus that really transforms things. In the middle of a characteristic public statement, John makes clear that someone else is being sent by God to save his people; the person on whom the Spirit remains. This, God's messenger, will not only cleanse their bodies with water, he will also purify their souls with the Holy Spirit.

This is significant since it combines both the believer's good intention to turn over a new leaf with God's response to that – the gift of the Holy Spirit. From this point forward, this ritualistic act transforms into a new Christ-styled cleansing that we call baptism. In it the individual recognises their need to be more in tune with God, and as they turn to a new way of life, the Spirit rests upon them and draws them into the life of Christ. This is just as true for us today; It is certainly true of our baptism, but also whenever we take the initiative and begin doing what we can to move closer to God, so he rewards us with his guidance and comforter, the Holy Spirit.

In the second half of today's reading from John's Gospel, we hear of the calling of the first disciples. Foremost, we have two of John the Baptist's disciples, leaving John to follow Jesus. One of them, we are told, is

Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. Andrew then goes to find his brother and tells him 'we have found the Messiah'.

Jesus, upon meeting Simon, acknowledges the whole of Simon's past and exactly where he comes from; everything that he has ever done and been, by identifying him as 'Simon, son of John'. In one short statement and acknowledgement, Christ peers into the depths of Simon's soul and with it deals with his past and all that might hold him back. With it, Jesus' path is clear to draw Simon into a new way of life in the Spirit. And as a mark of that change in direction Jesus renames him Peter. Simon Peter begins a new life as one of Jesus' followers, and with it a new name to boot. This tradition of name change continues today in our Christian tradition. A person may change their name at baptism, when they become a nun or a monk or at their inauguration if they are to become Pope.

These are just a few symbolic examples of what is true for all of us as we take the steps necessary to accept Christ's invite to follow him and find out more about what he reveals. But for most of us, this is a regular experience. Each time we slip away or take a wrong turn, this change in direction becomes necessary. It is why we have holy water at the door to the church – a reminder of our baptismal promises and our need to keep returning to Jesus and keep working at making the relationship strong.

This is also why private confession is important in our tradition, because it gives the individual to properly recognise where they have been going wrong, own it and begin the serious business of making changes for the future.

This is just what the first disciples in today's Gospel reading are doing, changing the direction of their lives and following Jesus. They are clearly searching for something that only a deepened relationship with God can heal. Jesus is the answer to that longing.

For the disciples, however, there is something about these encounters that goes far beyond the physical, and completely re-orientates their being. Jesus reveals something significant about our human nature; we are human beings, not human doings.

If, like me, you are a task junkie; one who generally overloads the diary and jumps from one task to the next, then I think we need to carefully assess our style of discipleship. What we see as being the most important traits of discipleship in the Gospels are not an ability to do lots of stuff in God's name, but attentiveness and awareness of God, and a desire to

listen, to learn and be taught. It is not that disciples don't act or respond to need around them, but action comes out of our attentiveness and stillness; not the other way around. God speaks to us in the silence of our hearts, if we are able to watch and listen. Only then, can we turn that into action.

When the first two disciples meet Jesus notice how they ask him 'where are you staying?'. On the face of it, this is such a straightforward question that it almost goes by unnoticed. They want to be where Jesus is so that they can begin being his students. So they simply ask where he is staying. But there is something deeper in that question too; 'Where are you staying?'. When we stay or settle, we quieten down, we become still, we observe and listen. Jesus' reveals a stillness at the centre of his psyche. The disciples don't just want to be in the same room as Jesus, they want to be in the same place, both physically and spiritually. They want what Jesus has. They want to learn his stillness and attentiveness to the Father. They want to be in complete communion with God.

So their inner being is the key. That is the whole purpose of their journey. They want to change from an existence separated from God to one of attentiveness towards God. Jesus is the only one who can bring such healing. They see in Jesus one whose entire being is transformative. Jesus reveals a new way of being, with an implanted stillness at the core of his soul – an attitude sufficiently free of the preoccupations of personal ego, that it is set free in the Spirit.

Recently we have been running a church study group on Tuesday evenings and we have been focussing on a book by Archbishop Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury until a few years ago. We have had great fun grappling with some very rich discussions. One such has been about the very nature of discipleship. Rowan asserts that 'what makes you a disciple is not turning up from time to time', or doing the odd good deed. 'Discipleship literally means being a student' for life;¹ grabbing every opportunity to grow closer to God and learn more about him.

So being a disciple of Christ, a Christian, is to be attentive to and aware of all that God is doing in Christ; to be a follower, a listener and a life-long learner. But more than that, discipleship brings a yearning for a stillness at the core of our souls; a stillness and healing that only Jesus can provide.

¹ Rowan Williams, *Being Disciples* (London: SPCK, 2016), p.1-3

To conclude, discipleship is not a way of doing, it is a way of being. It is to sit in Jesus' presence, day by day, week, by week, and be attentive to him. It is to want to know more about Jesus, to follow him wherever he may lead and to allow him to find us when we are lost. It is an openness to the future he has for us: the fresh experiences every new day brings, the places he wishes us to go and things he wishes us to know.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

At the last Rugby World Cup, Dan Carter of the New Zealand national team, who incidentally is reported to be a Christian, became one of the most successful rugby players ever as he kicked faultlessly penalty after penalty and conversion after conversion. When interviewed afterwards he was asked if he had any tips for young players. He said; “dedication”. At the age of 6 he had built a rugby goal in the small garden of his house and kicked at goal, shooting small conversion after conversion. I believe that Christianity is no different, a series of small conversions.

Sometimes Christian conversion can sound like a grand affair. For some it excites, for others it daunts. But on a basic level, Conversion is that moment when God moves us to recognise the error of our past and commit to making a better future, starting with our own behaviour. This is the moment when we stop blaming others and start changing ourselves. Conversion is central to the Christian notion because to be a Christian is to be committed to want to change constantly so that the mistakes and misjudgements of yesterday may not determine the world of tomorrow. To be a Christian is to want to change the world for the better. We experience conversion when our eyes are properly opened and, void of the film which distorts, we see the world in a transformed light. This is what it is to live life in the resurrection.

On the face of it, St Paul has a huge conversion experience. On the Damascus road his life is certainly transformed for the better. From this moment on Paul embraces the challenge with open arms.

The story of St Peter, on the other hand, is far less of a grand conversion and more a story of multiple small conversions. At his first meeting with Jesus, as he is called out of his fishing boat, Peter is certainly captivated and all too eager to become a disciple, but as the story unfolds, failure after failure mature and condition Peter's expectations. At first Peter begins with shallow hero worship of a Jesus who is doing wonderful things, and he expects Jesus to do everything for him. Then, following what feels like an endless number of painful learning experiences, he finds himself standing on a seashore with the resurrected Jesus and is almost ready to stride out and take responsibility upon himself for building up the Church. As we hear about Peter's journey throughout the Gospels we can see that each painstaking misjudgement and error is in itself a small conversion experience and slowly they form Peter into the person Christ needs him to be. On the seashore we see this work almost complete. Peter is to feed Jesus' sheep and be the rock on which the church is built. From this moment forward Peter embraces the challenge with open arms.

For many of us, Peter's story may well resonate. The world bats us back and forward. We have moments of spiritual elation but more often struggle. We make mistakes, misjudgements, do wrong by others, just as they do wrong by us. But ours isn't the blame game, it's the growth game. We have had a wonderful example of what it means to overcome the negative things that life can throw in our way this week. The Archbishop, being confronted publically with the realisation that his true

father wasn't who he thought it was and instead was a man his mother had a drunken affair with, Justin Welby did not lash out, he did not denounce, he simply accepted it with the grace he has become so well known for and saw in it an opportunity to reach out to the hundreds of millions who find themselves in the same predicament. If you haven't already, I invite you to seek out the Archbishop's responses to these recent revelations. Ours is not the blame game, it is the growth game. Nonetheless, it can be hard and lessons difficult to learn. It is not always easy to bounce back up.

Following the rugby world cup final, a commentator revealed how Dan Carter came to be so good. He said that every year from the age of 6 Dan would increase the distance of his kicking by 5 meters. When the garden became too small he simply went around the front of the house and kicked from the other side of the road and over the house towards the goal. Occasionally he would go through a patch where he never seemed to be able to get the ball through at all, or, in his teenage years, he would get bored and drift away from it. But he always returned after a short absence. He felt the key was persevering when it felt boring or became a struggle.

Now I am not suggesting that we should all erect the spiritual equivalent of full size rugby goals in our back gardens - I am not even sure what the spiritual equivalent might be. Except to say that life is our practice ground. We will miss the goal. We will get bored or fail to see the point from time to time. But what matters is our perseverance even if it feels

like a struggle. For us as Christians, each life experience is a small conversion moment if we allow it to open our eyes and use it to propel us on to what needs doing next for the good of God's kingdom and his people.

The final and most telling thing Dan Carter had to say, was when asked about the secret to his success and what he would do beyond retirement. He responded "I cannot consider myself successful until I have breathed my last breath and looking back at my life say I gave everything to change the world for the better. Life is more than Rugby. I guess I will just have to grasp the next opportunity with open arms."

The thing that connects the examples of St Paul, St Peter and Dan Carter (I am not advocating Dan Carter for sainthood just yet) is their clear determination to keep moving forward and giving their all to build a better world, in spite of the setbacks along the way. They refuse to rest on the successes of their past and keep working to build a better future, no matter how challenging.

Let us pray that God may inspire each of us with the attitude to recognise each life-challenge as a mini conversion. Let us pray for the same determination to undertake what God has in store for us. Let us pray for the same bravery to respond positively to new opportunities as they arise. All this, for the furtherance of God's kingdom, the future of his Church and the betterment of our world. Amen

17th April 2016 - Fourth Sunday of Easter – Life's in the giving.

A plane gets into trouble flying over a tidal river. It nosedives and crashes into ice cold water. As the wreckage floats downriver, just 10 people are left alive, having crawled out onto a wing. A helicopter hovers overhead lowering a rope on which to winch people up. 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, eventually there are just 2 left, a man and a woman. As the rope is lowered, the man suddenly scampers in front of the woman and grabs the rope with aggression just as the wing begins to become completely submerged. The woman falls.

Then suddenly, then man grabs her and ties the rope around, only then can the helicopter see that she is carrying a baby and could not get the rope without dropping her child. They winch mother and child to safety. As the helicopter prepares to lower the rope one final time, the plane disappears and the man is gone. What is Christian service? What does it mean to give your life to God?

Following a bishop's sermon a young curate decided to congratulate the bishop on the way out. He said, "great sermon Bishop. Just one thing, I found it difficult to tell when you we

were talking about Jesus and when you were talking about yourself”. The bishop lowered his glasses and replied: “My young man, you would do well to blur that distinction”.

Actually, No. There is and always should be a distinction. Jesus is our inspiration and guide, but we should never imagine that we are in some way his equal.

The passage today from St John’s Gospel is a part of the escalating conflict between Jesus and the Jewish establishment. Throughout his Gospel we hear of how there can be no doubt of who Jesus is. John continues to provide evidence for the fact that Jesus is God’s own son – not just in the sense of being his offspring and heir, but at a much deeper metaphysical level. Jesus and the Father are one. In response to their mischievous heckling, at verse 25, Jesus responds that he has already told them who he is. As we witness the story unfolding we know that he has indeed answered their questions in all he has said and done since his arrival. If they cannot see what is in front of their eyes, that is their failing, not his.

In the previous chapters, the Jewish establishment have seen him perform the signs of God. They have seen Jesus’ miracles,

heard his teaching, questioned those whom he has healed, and still they refuse to make up their minds. Through their learning, they know enough of God to make them wary of rejecting Jesus, for his signs speak for themselves. But they have kept God at such a distance for so long that neither can they recognise God when he comes. They keep hoping that he will do or say something that will allow them with a clear conscience not to believe.

But what is it that they hate so much? Is it the inescapable choice that Jesus lays before them? Is it the stark reality of it? Jesus challenges them to accept all that God wishes to do to clean up the world. In their heart of hearts, they really don't want Jesus to be telling the truth. Because believing in Jesus will be costly.

So they pay him lip service and carry on their same old lives regardless. But Jesus won't let people do that. People stand face to face with God's presence and he forces them to decide. The terrible and painful fact that some people would rather do anything other than believe in God runs throughout the Bible as a whole. In fact, it is a truth that resounds through the

centuries. Look around and we see the same examples of people who argue, cast blame, become aggressive, elusive, manipulative anything other than accept God's promptings.

The central lesson seems to be that those who close their hearts to God's new promptings will lose him entirely. Be wary, then, of thinking you already have God in a box of your own making. Be careful of saying to yourself, I am content where I am, I know God already and I need do no more.

But we cannot do this on our own. God uses others to guide, prod and enlighten us. You cannot see God alone in your bedroom – there you will only get an image made from your own reflection. God meets us in the face of others, in the body of the Church, the foreigner, the refugee, the homeless, the sick, the drunk, the drug addict, the widow, the orphan, the criminal. When we open our hearts to the good-life of Christ, service becomes everything and Jesus' face shines from the most unlikely of places.

The final chapters of Matthew's, Mark's, Luke's and John's Gospels and the first chapters from the book of Acts, show us Christ's one plan for the salvation of the world – a united

society of believers, known as 'the Body of Christ', or 'the Church'. This body is to persevere with one-another and put God and neighbour first. There is no notion of a plan 'B' in anything Jesus or the Apostles give us. The New Testament is entirely consistent that, to be saved and numbered among the faithful, one must belong to this special society of believers and commit to service to ensure its flourishing.

The entire book of Acts tells the story of the Early Church growing up. The first eight chapters of Acts outline the Apostles building that Church, according to Christ's earlier instruction. So aware of the great benefits that belief in Christ has given them, they grow in confidence and roam from place to place serving the poor and talking openly about their faith to others. More and more respond and the Apostles bring them to be baptised into the church body. They stop in each town and city and slowly small churches begin to grow everywhere. Each of St Paul's letters is addressed to the entire congregation of one or other of these churches. But Acts and Paul's letters do not unveil a story of teaching faith in a benign and neutral society or worldview. They are not given an even playing field of ideas

in which to implant their philosophy of the good-life.

Everywhere they go, they meet staunch opposition. Many people don't like to be challenged in their thinking. How dare this motley crew of so called Christians suggest that God is challenging them to live a different and better way, a way entirely based on self-giving service and love?

But in spite of the opposition, more and more faithful people are added to the church's numbers and they give everything they have for the glory of God. And so, the church, against all odds and under much persecution, grows up under the banner of the Apostles teaching and service.

The story of Tabitha, which was the passage read from the book of Acts a moment ago, comes right out of the centre of this situation. Tabitha is a faithful follower and believer. She belongs to the church in her village and she gives much in service of others. It is her purity in the faith that leads to the miracle of her rising from the dead.

Most of the church is persecuted at first, lots are martyred, but faith has given them something not worth forfeiting, even under the pain of death. You see once they begin putting God

and others first, living a life of service and giving everything they have for the good of God's work, all the pain and hurt of this world seem as nothing compared to the love they experience in God. It's a love only found and experienced in the giving.

Like the Apostles, we also live in a society where many opposing agendas confront and appose what the Christian faith teaches. When we feel ashamed of our faith or the temptations of the world stop us from taking the next step to serve God and others, let us draw inspiration from these early believers. If they could hold faith in their time, then so can we.

Amen.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Hello, it is very nice to see you all this morning. Thank you for coming. It seems a long time in the waiting, but we have finally managed to come together. Thank you for your kindness and warm welcome over the past few weeks. You have made us feel very welcome indeed. But why have I come to this church? Apart from the fact that you are all so splendid and bake such fine cakes?

Well, one especially quiet day in heaven, God went to St Peter and told him that he felt in need of a holiday and commissioned Peter to look around for a package deal. A few days later St Peter reported back that he had found a perfect location; "the moon".

God replied "I couldn't possibly go there; there's no atmosphere!"

St Peter, a little perplexed said to God that he had also found a second option, 'Earth'.

God responded, "Well I'm not going there. The last time I went there, I met a nice Jewish girl and they are still talking about it!"

Well, of course we are still talking about it and it is our job to ensure that people continue talking about it in this place for many centuries to come. That, I think, is principally why I am here! Like the many commendable parish priest's before me, I am here to work with each of you in laying foundations and to build upon all that has gone before so that Christ's legacy may continue in this place long into the future.

In our Gospel reading today we hear of St John the Baptist recognising the authenticity of Jesus. And having done so, he is forced to tell others of this revelation. John sees in Jesus not just the one chosen by God, but God Himself. God in human form. This is called the Incarnation, because in the person of Christ we see both humanity and divinity in perfect union. God is Jesus and Jesus is God - God incarnate. Jesus is the Lamb of God; and takes away the sins of the world. The Lamb of God who offers a route back to the Father. All we are required to do is believe in Him, obey Him, follow Him, love Him.

St Andrew in today's Gospel shows us more, because recognising Jesus comes at a price. As Andrew recognised only too well, in our heart of hearts it is our belief in who Jesus really is that compels us to follow Him and tell others about the wonderful thing we have found. So it is that Andrew not only follows Jesus but also tells His brother, Simon Peter, that he has found the 'Messiah'. The term he chooses is extremely important. To say that he has found the 'Messiah' is to say that in Jesus, Andrew not only sees an important moral teacher, but the fount of all goodness. He is not just some first century doctor, but the source of all healing. Jesus is the miracle cure for a terminally ill world.

The unwell only have to touch him to be healed. The poor only have to believe in Him to become rich. The evil only have to see him to be shamed into goodness. There is no doubt that Christ is the divine answer to a very human problem, but how did he intend for things to pan out after His resurrection? Well like all good strategists He provided evidence of a plan A and a plan B.

Plan A was the Church. It is clear from the way Jesus chose his Apostles, sanctioned them and sent them out to make more disciples, that it was absolutely His intention to form a physical church, lead by chosen and ordained

individuals and made up of real people. It is also clear that He expected this Church to spend all its energies growing and increasing in number. The genius of this first plan was that it would not rely on any individual alone, but the power of Christ's Spirit being given to the many. This Church would always be strong so long as it called upon and stayed true to His Spirit – ever present in the Church's words, its actions and the hearts of its people. And if all this failed then He would resort to plan B.

And Plan B was even more ingenious. Plan B was simply to continue with Plan A. In all the scriptural and historical evidence, Christ offers us no alternative than an ordered Church of diverse members spreading the Good News and driven by His Spirit. This is ingenious, simply because it gives us no easy way out. Christ knows our human nature too well and so to save us from our own tendencies, He gives us just one option – membership of the Church.

As the body chosen to live out the legacy of Christ in every age and to reveal His Spirit by His grace, the Church body becomes an extension of our Lord's incarnation. We the church in this age are simply called to continue the work He began, sanctifying the world through our presence. This places a huge burden upon our shoulders because in order to sanctify the world we need to live both individually and corporately as if we believe we can; portraying those same traits that we see in the life of our Lord. If we are to truly sanctify our world then we must be open to the world. In the same way that Andrew could see in Jesus the fount of all goodness, we need to make people see the Church as a place of goodness. Just as people could touch Jesus and be healed, people need to feel that they can touch us to reach Him. Just as the poor only had to believe in Him to become rich, we need to be able to give the poor something to believe in.

In our New Testament reading, St Paul is talking to the Church in Corinth which is being called to a new beginning. Just like them, so are we. The future here is very bright indeed. St Mary Magdalene's has huge potential, but potential needs to be realised. We can only hope to achieve all that God has in store for us if we are united in that same Spirit which abounds in our hearts and drives us on. To do so, each of us must not be shy in giving what we can to increase God's mission to our village. Time, talents, money: each one of us are able to give so much. Don't leave to the few to do all the work of the many; we are all called to live as Christ lives, giving all we are able to. We are all called to live in His Spirit as one body; an extension of His body.

The efforts of people in this parish have been remarkable over the past few years. We really do have some exciting things to build on. And build on them together – we must!

So if you have any gifts you would like to offer or any ideas for moving us forward or for making our church richer, more open, more united, more Christ-like, let us know. Isn't this exciting stuff? Because as St Paul reminds us: "God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord".

Can there be anything more marvellous? Apart from your baking, that is?

Amen

All Saints' 2016

"How blessed are those who know their need of God", these are words from today's reading according to the New English Translation of the Bible. They sum up sainthood perfectly. A saint could have lived hundreds of years ago or they could still be living today. It is not the era they inhabited earth that distinguishes them, but their example of faithful living. And it always starts with a simple recognition - their need for God. This is why Jesus begins his sermon on the mount with this statement:

"How blessed are those who know their need of God"

One of the fine things about being a committed Christian believer is that we have set before us a whole plethora of role models who have been recognised by the Church for their special contribution to the faith's flourishing in past ages. The lives of the saints are a testimony to the endeavours of individuals and whole communities who have put God first. This devotion to God then leads them to put others first and do miraculous things, even at great personal cost. The history books are dominated by such examples of Christian character, whether it be St Paul in the first century or Oscar Romero in twentieth.

There is one era of British history that produced more saints than any other. The list of Anglo-Saxon saints and their endeavours is a most inspiring thing for anyone of even the most tentative curiosity about faith. These stories include people like St Aiden, St Cuthbert, St Wilfred, St Hilda, St Beda, St Etheldreda... This group of Anglo-Saxon saints were largely responsible for the growth of Christianity throughout England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, at a time when there was constant warring between different kingdoms and the invasions of the Danes and Norse made having a faith a very risky business indeed. Nonetheless, it is difficult to imagine how Christianity would have established itself in this country were it not for their deep commitment and resilience in the faith at such a very difficult time in history.

But outside of this period the stories of the lives of the Saints are simply inspirational. People like St Francis of Assisi, who lived in the twelfth century, was of noble

upbringing and whose father was extremely rich. Nonetheless, Francis became so appalled at his father's meanness towards the church and their work with the poor and destitute, that, as a young man, he relinquished everything that his father had given him, even the clothes on his back, and because he wanted no association with it, he began wandering the countryside in a simple cloak praying, preaching the good news of Jesus and helping the poor wherever he could. Soon many others joined him. Today, the monastic order he founded, called the Franciscans, number hundreds of thousands. His father died rich, hoarding his wealth, but is not remembered apart from his greediness and miserliness.

Interestingly, in the Lady Chapel of this church, we have an effigy of our very own anonymous saint. The style of the effigy dates from the late thirteenth century, probably somewhere between 1250 and 1300 AD. He was clearly a priest and there is strong evidence to suggest that people visited this church as a place of pilgrimage and would come to touch the Saint's face and hand; and praying for healing, protection and benediction whilst dipping their figure in the holy water in the stoup at his head and crossing themselves. We have no records of who this saint was, but the effigy, with its tonsured head, elongated neck, holy water stoup and priests' artefacts clearly point to this person being a significant holy person in this village and beyond.

The bravery and fortitude of some saints is quite simply inspiring. One such person is Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was a German priest in the Lutheran Church in Germany during the second world war. He opposed Hitler and was eventually executed for his troubles. But Bonhoeffer is not unique and many faithful Christians were murdered standing up to tyranny of the 1940s. Indeed this legacy continues in some parts of our world today.

Saints from every era provide examples of remarkable self-giving Christian character. How inspiring their remarkable example of fortitude and resilience in faith can be. How easy it would have been for them, when the times got tough, to lay aside their beliefs or let go of their Christian moral integrity. But their faith is what

marks them out. In fact, if it were not for the witness of these remarkable individuals and communities in every era, the church simply would not continue to exist. And the church desperately needs such strong Christian examples today if it is to continue to flourish beyond the present age.

But what of today's 'saints' of Geddington and Weekly? What is to be said of all of you? How are you to be described - indeed, is it even possible to embark on so precarious a venture?

But seriously though, sooner or later, our Christian character will be brought into the spotlight, both for us as individuals and for us as Church communities. The future will no doubt judge us, but more importantly, God will judge us too. So it is worth us taking some time to seriously assess our own Christian character. Using the example of past saints can be an excellent way of doing just that. Looking at the example of the martyrs of the Second World War concentration camps, we may ask; when we see appalling oppression and persecution taking place, do we sit back simply regretting what we can see happening, or do we step forward and put ourselves in a place of danger in the hope that others' suffering might be eased as a result of our actions?

Then looking at the example of the Anglo-Saxon Saints, we can ask; when we are confronted with staunch opposition to our faith do we lay it to one side and allow the secular world view to win the argument or do we resolutely hold firm to our faith during the most difficult and challenging times?

And if we look at the example of St Francis of Assisi; do we feel closer to Francis or his father? Do we resent giving to God what we owe him, or do we give without counting the cost happy in the knowledge that his work is being done?

Whilst it has at its center important truths about the Christian way of life, today's message from St Luke's Gospel can sound hard hitting. The passage we heard is Luke's version of the sermon on the mount and it carries a particular twist with its

warnings against comfort and indulgence in the present life. But they are warnings worth heeding.

Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama have just co-authored a brilliant book called 'The Book of Joy'. Joy, they claim, is the key to life lived in its fullness. But they talk about how we can't have joy without first experiencing struggle or pain. They suggest that all of their combined experiences of life convince them that only through hard work, perseverance and struggle can one experience true, deep, spiritual joy. Such proper joy transforms the heart and builds character. The kind of joy that comes without having to first work for it, isn't joy at all, but some kind of shallow, bitter imposter that does not last. The trouble is, our society today encourages us to crave this short-lived, shallow alternative.

In today's reading from St Luke's Gospel, this is exactly what Jesus is talking about. If we have every comfort in this life and we sit on our treasure chests in our palatial homes affording ourselves every luxury, then we should not be surprised if our Christian character flees from us at the moment we most desperately need it. But if we train ourselves to live in a more restrained way, giving what we have without counting the cost, putting ourselves out for the sake of others, and making an effort to sacrifice a little bit of self-indulgence in order to carve out time for God, then such things will begin building our Christian character and transforming our hearts for the better.

Such Christian character is what saints are made of, and our society desperately needs such role models today. And it all begins with us and a personal recognition: "How blessed are those who know their need of God".

Amen.

All Saints' Day Sermon 2015

Angels, Archangels, Thrones, Dominions, Principalities, Powers, heavenly Virtues, Cherubim and Seraphim; all Saints of God, holy men and women: intercede for us, that we may be worthy to offer (these words in) this Sacrifice to almighty God, to the praise and glory of His name, for our own welfare and also that of all His holy Church. Amen.

A scientist talks to God and says, "God, we can now clone humans, make life, and take care of ourselves. We don't need you anymore." God, believing in free will (after all he created it) says; "ok that's fine. But before I let my beloved children go, I would like to set you one last challenge. If you can complete it, it will prove that you don't need me anymore and that you can look after yourselves no matter what. Each of us has to create our own human using nothing but dirt, and the first one to complete it wins."

The scientist agreed and became very excited at the thought of being able to finally aspire to the heights of God. He sat down and in all haste began making his human. But immediately God stopped him and said, "Whoa there, not so fast. Use your own dirt."

As people of God we claim to believe in a divine being, a God who orders our universe, an all-powerful loving force that keeps us and all things on track. Such an immense being is always going to be beyond our understanding. But our God is not so careless as to reveal to us more than we can bear. For his light would be all too dazzling were we to approach it unprepared. That is of course what life is all about, preparing us to receive the full radiance of God's light and love. In all three of our readings today, we get different insights into what stepping into that glory may feel

like. And it is the strangeness of the situation that will prove our greatest challenge.

In our reading from Revelation this morning, we heard of a new heaven and earth without death or pain or crying or mourning, but where everyone drinks from the water of life.¹ Isaiah 25 uses similar imagery and tells us that this is what awaits us when the veil between us and God is removed.² This is not just heaven, this is M & S Heaven.

Then in our Gospel reading, we get an example of what the result may look like on earth – even the dead are raised.³ This is the power of the glory of God. When we accept God's all-encompassing goodness, even death itself cannot hold us.

As Christians, there are two things that we must always hold on to

- i. First - our God is the ultimate Victor – he brings the victory against evil.
- ii. Second - God, and his Saints, are always active in our world securing that victory.

These, we must never doubt, because to do so is to nail Jesus firmly back to the cross from which he has risen.

No matter how perplexing life may seem at any given moment; no matter how deceptive and enticing the evil around us is, we know that God is enacting his victory against it. God is already bringing all things into the light and justice of his goodness. God has won the victory, through Jesus's cross and resurrection. His cross absorbs all the abuse and violence and

¹ Revelation 21.1-6a

² Isaiah 25.6-9

³ John 11.32-44

hatred and manipulation we can throw at it and his resurrection shows us hope beyond what we deserve.

Through his goodness, God raises up faithful and saintly individuals. Individuals who have lived lives devoted to him, in the service of his church and in the goodness he brings. God's saints are people who have made his goodness manifest in the world. At their deaths God brings all such individuals into his eternal goodness by raising them into what we call heaven. It is this heavenly host, God's warriors in his fight against evil, who we celebrate today.

For today is All Saints' Day, otherwise called All Hallows' Day. The day when all those hallowed under God are especially close to earth to draw us closer to heaven in the process. Indeed, God's eternal Saints are ever active worshipping God in heaven, whilst frustrating the devil's devious demons on earth. Desmond Tutu reminds us that 'if we had the right kind of eyes, we would see the Saints of heaven all around us'.

'If we had the right kind of eyes, we would see the Saints of heaven all around us'

There is something about our life's' journey that includes developing that right kind of spiritual sight. That is why our regular worship is so important, it helps to focus our vision. As we persevere in faith and help to build up God's church on earth, our spiritual sight awakens and the eternal church of heaven begins to move closer with every prayer and action.

God, with all his Saints, is ever active in our world securing his victory. Despite the frustrations that the world puts in his way, God is bringing all things to completion in his goodness. This is the glory of God. If we can accept that God is in control, then all we can do is follow his lead.

So why do we despair? Why do we doubt? Why do we give up the race? For if God is for us, who may be against us?⁴

God sends people to us for a time to hasten our progress on the journey of faith; sometimes individuals and sometimes groups. Sometimes he sends them for a moment, sometimes a season and sometimes even for a lifetime. Sometimes they are folk just like you and me, but sometimes they are spiritual beings mysteriously making our paths clearer or even carrying us along the way when we are too tired to go on. Whoever he sends, he sends them as his messengers. Is our spiritual sight strong enough to recognise them as such? Do we respond with gratitude or complaint?

God brings us to situations and encounters that offer us an opportunity to deepen our faith in him and build up our Christian character along the way. This stands us in better stead to be numbered among his saints in glory; it gives us a better chance of adapting to the new heaven that he is calling us to, where we will meet him unveiled, face to face - It focuses our spiritual lens.

Are we willing to persevere on the journey even when God's plans for us do not fit with our own designs? Do we see every event as an opportunity to deepen our faith and grow our Christian character?

In all of this, what we do in our worship and in the service of our church, and the way we engage with it, is vitally important if we are to deepen our spiritual sight. This is why the Church is the gateway to the glory of God. Through our actions, prayers and joint focus, we glimpse God's eternal glory. And we view God's glory through the widest lens when we are all united in prayer and endeavour.

⁴ Romans 8:31

Help this Church to be a gateway to the glory of God. There are numerous opportunities for you to grow your Christian character by serving this church, in a whole host of ways, large and small. And you get the satisfaction of knowing that you are also helping others develop their spiritual focus at the same time. Why not let us know what roles you might be interested in? What better way to serve God, his people and begin to develop your spiritual focus for the good of God's church now and into eternity?

May the protection and guidance of the saints be with you and may you be given the spiritual sight to recognise it.

Amen

**All Saints Sunday 2017 - Blessed are those who simply love
spending time with other people**

“Blessed are the peacemakers”

“Blessed are those who mourn”

“Blessed are the merciful”

These are all quotes of Jesus taken from today’s Gospel reading – But we are meant to be celebrating All Saints’ Day, so why hasn’t the Church given us readings that speak more directly about them?

Well, perhaps these statements have more to tell us about sainthood than we realise. These statements all have relationship with others at their centre. One could translate them this way: “Blessed are those whose pleasure is in serving and trusting in others”... “Blessed are those who simply love spending time with other people”.

Such people will never be lonely, they will always find somebody to be with, after all there are plenty to go around.

As humans, we need each other to survive, and we need other people if we are to find true fulfilment. We cannot be fully rounded human beings on our own, we are designed to live together.

That may, in fact, give us a real insight into what heaven may well be. To enter heaven will certainly involve being able to enjoy the company of everyone else there. No place for envy or hatred or prejudice. There certainly won’t be much privacy.

To be able to live for an eternity like that takes time and practice, it doesn’t just happen on its own. As a child of the enlightenment born into

a western culture, the principles of personal privacy and autonomy have been bred into me from a very young age – indoctrinated into me, if you will. But if we take a step back a little and step outside of our culture, we can see just how challenging principles of privacy and autonomy can be to the building of community. That is why nations that do not hold these principles so highly seem to find it easier to build stronger communities at a local level, even if they are often poorer.

In the West, we have learned to allow a greater degree of privacy and autonomy in an attempt to simply allow each individual to co-exist, but often it means that if we can talk of living in community at all, it is often fractured and only on our own terms. Community is not simply co-existing; it can only be built upon deep ties of relationship. Therefore, to live in a real community, our needs and desires need to be balanced with the needs and desires of everyone else in that community. When communities go wrong, it is nearly always because one or more members have forgotten the need for compromise and have pursued their own will at the expense of other people. So to build a truly rich and diverse community means letting go of our wilfulness. We simply can't have it all our own way.

Heaven is no different. Heaven gives us the ultimate model of community and it is one that has to balance my will against everyone else's. I can't be selfish about my desires or else heaven simply cannot work. Heaven is a community where everyone is equal without privilege. So to enter it means me having to share everything I am and give up a little of my wilfulness and autonomy for the good of everyone else. Of course, I can do this because I am in the full knowledge that I am safe in heaven to do so.

In other words, Heaven will be the the place where I am finally able to hand everything over into God's care, just as everyone else has handed everything over into God's care. Then, what I am left with, is to just sit back and enjoy everyone else's company.

Blessed are those who simply love spending time with other people.

And that is how today's readings become so poignant to today's feast of All the Saints.

The saints, all those currently living in heaven, are those people who, irrelevant of their good or bad points on earth, now live in perfect harmony with one another and God. This is far beyond any human authority to judge. They number far more than just those who have already been recognised formally as a saint by the Church on earth. They include are all those who have managed to let go of the things which get in the way. They have let go of all the pride and anger, all the longing for power and control. They have handed everything over to God to take care of. And now they bask together in God's radiating presence.

Blessed are those who simply love spending time with other people! In this way, we are all called to be with All the Saints too.

At Christmas 1914 soldiers took the risk, crossed a battle-line and kindled an evening of friendship and football. It is the moment all have picked on this year, whether in adverts or sermons. The truce illustrates something of the heart of Christmas, whereby God sends his Son, that vulnerable sign of peace, to a weary war-torn world. The problem is that the way it is told now it seems to end with a 'happy ever after'.

Of course we like Christmas stories with happy endings: singing carols, swapping photos, shaking hands, sharing chocolate, but the following day the war continued with the same severity. Nothing had changed; it was a one-day wonder. That is not the world in which we live - truces are rare.

Disease does not have any truce. Last week I was in Sierra Leone to meet faith leaders struggling with a plague that has spread across three countries. But Ebola will be as virulent today as it was yesterday, crossing boundaries defiantly. It will be beaten by those courageous people treating and working, both locals and many from this country, but the struggle is hard.

Today there is no Christmas truce in the Middle East, or in north-east Nigeria where Christians are persecuted, with other minorities. The tension in the ancient lands of Jesus' birth rises by the day. Fear does not have a truce, nor the animosity and hatred whose tangible outcome is increasing separation between Israeli and Palestinian.

The Christmas story could be told simply with a happy ending where the gospel reading ended. 'Shepherds are cold, shepherds see angels, shepherds head into town and see baby, and shepherds disappear into sunrise, happy'. If we end there, Christmas removes us from reality. Christmas becomes something utterly remote, about lives entirely different, fictional, naïve, tidy. That's not Christmas. Jesus came to the reality of this world to transform that reality - not to take us into some fantasy kind of 'happy ever after' but to 'Good News of great joy for all people.'

It is Good News precisely because God addresses the world as it is. Isaiah speaks of warriors and garments rolled in blood, of yokes on people's shoulders, of oppression. We know that story; it is the lived reality of so many suffering today. Yet Isaiah announces the news of God bringing light, joy, and exultation, through a child!

It is 'good news of great joy' because a helpless baby (who is God) becomes the one who changes this world decisively. Differently to any other figure in human history Jesus breaks in, not to help us escape, but to transform and take hold of our past, our present and our future. This baby brings the promise of forgiveness, the certainty of love and the hope of peace.

This means that whilst we must truly face the state of the world to which Jesus came, we can - we must - be equally realistic about the difference he makes.

Jesus did not come for one day. Jesus changed things for ever.

He comes to the person who turns and calls to him, bringing forgiveness and new life. That is an offer to all of us today, whether full of the joy of Christmas or in the midst of a personal darkness of despair and hopelessness. If Jesus can be laid in a manger there is nowhere that is not fitting for him to come, no person who is unfit to receive him.

He comes to the person nearing death, whether that death is premature or after a long life, and he brings the assurance of his presence, and the hope of eternity. Jesus is the promise that 'God is with us', no matter what.

To the region caught up in war or to the family caught up in fights, he offers a transformation of hearts so there might be reconciliation. He offers a stepping out of the trenches, away from positions taken against enemies – and into new paths of relating.

He comes to lives that can too easily get caught up in acquiring, amassing, consuming and self-obsessing, bringing a shift in our horizon – beyond ourselves, to those who don't have what we have. If we hear this story properly we look away from ourselves, from our life with its care and burdens. This is freedom: as our perspective widens, so we are healed. This is good news of great joy for all people. The epistle to Titus describes his impact, the creation of people and communities that live out the reality of the love of God in Christ.

Yet because Jesus comes as child, as baby, we are not manipulated or forced, we have freedom to choose whether to hear his story properly or not. This baby is love so fierce it changes universes, love so gentle that the weakest is free to choose.

Rowan Williams puts it beautifully in his poem 'Advent Calendar',

*'He will come, will come,
will come like crying in the night,
like blood, like breaking,
as the earth writhes to toss him free.
He will come like child.'*

Jesus does not remove us from reality, he indwells it; and he indwells us if we invite him. To be indwelt by Christ changes our understanding of reality, so that with his eyes we may see the world and love it, overflowing with the love that he gives to us.

Last week I saw a young woman named Monica near Freetown [in Sierra Leone], teaching a group of Ebola orphans to sing about Jesus building community. Her face, her manner, her pragmatic Christ-likeness is before me in my mind as I remember. That is the impact of the baby in the manger, the impact of the one who reaches out to us and brings not a day-long truce but permanent peace with God, not escapism but to a call to be a Church community of those who change the world in which we live.

What an extraordinary God this is who makes all the difference in the world. Don't we all long for his reality rather than our make believe? The question is whether we will have open hands and ears, hearts and lives to receive him, not just on Christmas, but each day of our lives.

More than that, having received him, whether we will make it our life's aim - like the shepherds - for the sake of his world to be the difference Jesus came to bring.

Jesus is no mere 24-hour truce: he is joy forever.

Archbishop of Canterbury, J Welby 2014

Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Little Johnny and his family were having Sunday dinner at his Grandmother's house... Everyone was seated around the table as the food was being served. When Little Johnny received his plate, he started eating right away. 'Johnny! Please wait until we say our prayer,' said his mother. 'I don't need to,' the boy replied... 'Of course, you do,' his mother insisted. 'We always say a prayer before eating at our house.' 'That's at our house,' Johnny explained. 'But this is Grandma's house and she knows how to cook!'

In all the excitement of our lives, all the fun things in store, all the wonderful ideas we have for moving things forward, it is all too easy for us to get carried away just like little Johnny, and want to receive the rewards without laying the necessary foundations. As Christians, it is important that before we eat, we pray, because saying thank you to God for His gift of food makes it all the more delicious as we receive it in gratitude and not expectation. There is no physical reason why we should do this, but spiritually it transforms our outlook and our world.

Today we celebrate the Festival of the Assumption of Mary. In other words, we rejoice that the Mother of our Lord assumes her rightful place at her son's side in Heaven. Now, the precise nature of Mary's raising to glory has been the subject of much theological debate down the ages. But this morning, you will be glad to hear that I will not attempt to answer questions about how exactly her bodily form may have been raised to the side of her beloved Son. Such things are for God alone to know. To your relief and mine, I shan't attempt to teach you a physics or chemistry lesson. No. To do so would be to miss the point entirely.

It would lead us down the road of obsessing about process, rather than admiring the person by lifting our eyes to heaven. In our materially obsessed world, there are strong forces which encourage us to focus on the empirical and worldly at the expense of the spiritual. But to do so hinders our ability to see the wider truth. As Christians, we must always resist the temptation to hold material truth in higher regard than spiritual truth.

So today is about the person of the Blessed Virgin Mary and how her moral and philosophical integrity leads us into greater spiritual depth. That's where our focus will be.

From this day all generations will call me blessed.

This is a very familiar line from the Magnificat, the Song of Mary found in Luke's Gospel. Earlier in Luke's Gospel, when the Angel Gabriel visits Mary, she is terrified, but obedient and faithful none-the-less. I don't know about you, but I often pray that I may be a tiny bit as faithful as Mary during difficult times – especially times when God is trying to lead me in a direction I am not sure I want to go. Sometimes, I find myself wanting to run away instead of going where he leads, how about you?

Mary shows a remarkable amount of trust and maturity in her response to being told she is going to become the mother of the Messiah, God's own Son, daunting to say the least.

You'll recall how Mary's song of praise begins with her cousin, Elizabeth, calling her "the mother of my Lord". At that moment the earlier message of the angel takes on a meaningful living shape. Suddenly Mary sees a vision of what she must become and her future begins to take a more identifiable form. So Mary, obedient, prayerful, faithful, can't help but glorify her Lord! She sings of the all-excelling perfections of God; his power, his holiness, his mercy and his faithfulness.

The Magnificat, or the Song of Mary as it is often known, is almost wholly comprised of Old Testament quotations, but the whole hymn is inspired by Mary's promised Son, who is to be the Messiah, to whom all those scriptures proclaim and point.

The Jews understood that the Messiah would bring in a new realm as foretold in Isaiah chapter 61. Mary repeats this prophecy in her song of praise: Her son would bring a time of massive political reordering and social reversal. The hungry would be filled with good things, and the rich would be sent away empty. The proud would receive their comeuppance and the humble would have their day in the sun! This affords us a glimpse of what heavenly values look like and they are spoken by Mary before her son is even born.

Elizabeth refers to Mary as 'blessed' three times in just four verses. St Luke uses two Greek words here¹ — but their meaning is essentially the same. The latter word, makarios, is the same one which Mary uses in the Magnificat - From now on all generations will call me blessed (makarios).

Makarios means happy. But not a superficial, fluffy, short-lived pleasure, as we use the English word 'happy' today. Makarios is the deep religious joy of a person who has a share in divinely-given salvation; a peace, blessedness, that transforms their very being into a peacemaker – one whose whole being is now in tune with God and will not do anything that hinders his love transforming our world.

This is the key to understanding Mary's blessedness. She has a vital and indispensable role to play in God's plan for the history of the world.

In our first reading from Revelation chapter 12, we heard about the image of the pregnant woman. 'She is clothed with the sun. The moon is under her feet, and she is crowned with twelve stars. She gives birth to a male child whose destiny is to rule the nations'. Now the imagery of the Book of Revelation, the Apocalypse, is notoriously challenging to interpret, but the Saviour, as we see him in the person of Christ, is clearly the Redeemer of the whole world, the ruler of the nations. His mother, Mary, the Queen of Heaven.

As with all the saints, we must remember, however, that every feast of Mary is also a feast of Jesus. The Saints point to Jesus, just like scripture and worship always point to Jesus. Mary is blessed because she is the mother of Jesus, and the saints in heaven are blessed, precisely because of their devotion and relationship to Him. They point us towards our Blessed Saviour.

Now you will remember at the beginning that we reflected on the need to be open to spiritual as much as material truths. What we have just discussed certainly registers on the spiritual end of the spectrum

¹ eulogemene and makarios

as well as the material, and such spiritual truths are important to our Christian journey. Here is an example as to why:

Maximilian Kolbe, was a Polish Franciscan friar of the early twentieth century. Kolbe was active in promoting the veneration of the Immaculate Virgin Mary, and founding and supervising a monastery near Warsaw. Kolbe saw in Mary, as with Jesus, an example of obedience, bravery, self-sacrifice and loyalty that stood as an example for all Christians to follow.

Early on in the Second World War, Nazi occupiers closed his monastery and placed Kolbe and some of his brothers into a concentration camp, as a result of Kolbe's refusal to recognise Nazi Authority. Soon they were transferred to Auschwitz.

Continuing to act as a priest, Kolbe was subjected to violent harassment, including beating and lashings, and once had to be smuggled to a prison hospital by friendly inmates. At the end of July 1941, three prisoners disappeared from the camp, prompting the deputy camp commander to pick 10 men to be starved to death in an underground bunker to deter further escape attempts. When one of the selected men cried out, "My wife! My children!", Kolbe stepped forward and volunteered to take his place.

According to the eye witness testimony of an assistant janitor at that time, Kolbe regularly led all 10 prisoners in prayer to Jesus and salutation to Our Lady, Mary. Each time the guards checked on him, he was standing or kneeling in the middle of the bunker and looking calmly at those who entered. After two weeks of dehydration and complete starvation, only Kolbe remained alive. The guards wanted the bunker emptied, so they gave Kolbe a lethal injection of carbolic acid. Kolbe is said to have raised his left arm and calmly waited for the deadly injection. Rather fittingly, his remains were cremated on 15 August, the feast day of the Assumption of Mary.

It is undeniable, that for Kolbe, it was his devotion to Christ and his intimacy to Mary that gave him his courage and composure when it really mattered. Mary stands as an example and aid to each of us too. For she who is mother of our Saviour is matriarch of the body of all who are saved in her son, Our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Amen

R.T. Parker-McGee 2015

Sermon for the Feats of St Barnabas 2015

“Behold what we are: May we become what we receive”

Last week, we explored a little more meaningfully what we are as people of God, and in so doing we began to understand more fully what it meant to be called blessed.

Today, we are celebrating the Feast of St Barnabas. Barnabas was certainly able to radiate blessedness. For Barnabas, as with all the early church apostles, their walk in faith was a long journey. Sometimes this journey was tough. They nearly all started from a different place, with different beliefs and often finding Christ, meant giving up significant areas of their lives.

Much of the evidence we have for the apostles of the early church is found in the New Testament; the Acts of the Apostles and the letters that follow. What we see there is a continual struggle to stand up against a prevailing culture that would ridicule or dismiss the spiritual benefits that Christ brings. But the apostles stand strong in the face of such opposition, because they recognise the bigger picture that, charity alone cannot save the world, only relationship with God can do that.

This I guess is the point Jesus is making when he points out to Judas that: “You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me”.¹ It is not that we should ignore those who are less fortunate, but that the only way to truly alleviate an individual’s suffering is to help them find spiritual treasure and trust in God, whilst alleviating their practical needs – to help them recognise their blessedness. For the early church apostles, this was their central aim and they could not afford to hide their “light under a bushel”² or else the Church simply wouldn’t grow.

The other thing we notice as we look through the recordings of their endeavours, is that they didn’t always agree on how to go about this. In fact, often those who held greatest authority among them had to make decisions that some of the others did not like. Arguing and bickering featured, sometimes this fighting completely overshadowed their work and occasionally one or other would throw a tantrum and leave... Often they would return a short time later once they had recognised their rashness and the damage they had caused to the wider body and the Mission of God. This then is the story of normal humans walking a bumpy ride together towards recognising more fully their own blessedness. The reason they nearly always return to be in fellowship within the wider flock, is because they realise that this blessedness cannot be lived out in exclusion, no matter how much they disagree or become annoyed at each other.

Barnabas’ story, like so many of the early apostles, includes all these elements. Barnabas travelled, with his colleague St Paul, all over the known world to preach the good news and to grow God’s church. Alongside Paul, he was a workaholic in the business of God. St Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians, “are Barnabas and I the only two who are never allowed to stop working?”³ –no doubt by way of complaint at the lack-lustre nature of the Corinthian Christians.

It would appear that Barnabas grew in grace as he increasingly began recognising his blessed core more and more through the breaking of bread, healing the sick and preaching the Gospel of Christ. For

¹ Mt. 26:11; Mk.14:7; Jn. 12:8

² Mt. 5:15; Lk. 11:33

³ I Cor.9:5-6

Barnabas, the more he realised his blessedness, the more fruit he produced as a result. But, like us all, Barnabas too had his moments and at some point he and Paul split – only to be reunited some time later. It is thought that Barnabas was stoned to death in Salamis on a missionary trip to Cyprus and returned to the Lord in all rejoicing, having fulfilled his calling to proclaim the Good News to non-Christians... and doing so rather well.

I guess, for Barnabas, today's Gospel reading from St John is especially relevant. Having trusted in Christ all his life, never faltering in his balance of offering Charity alongside overt Christian witness and in the end he came to epitomise one significant verse of our reading; 'Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends'.⁴

Last week, we discussed how when you and I were baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, we discovered the deepest truth about ourselves: that no matter what else, we are the Beloved of God.

We should radiate God's love, not in a naïve or sheepish way, but prominently and enthusiastically. With no personal agendas, no arrogance, no manipulation, but patient, kind, loving, accepting and above all else obedient to the people we truly are – a holy people, whose only agenda is the Lord Jesus Christ. But we are only human, and sometimes our humanity can get in the way...

As we explored last week, thankfully in the Eucharist we **behold what we are** and we ask that we **may become what we receive**.

In broken bread and wine outpoured we glimpse Christ's broken body on the cross and see the lengths to which God is willing to go for each and every one of us – an intimate love beyond measure. Every time we receive the Eucharist, we are transformed -- or should be transformed -- a little more fully into the Body of Christ. "**Behold what we are: May we become what we receive.**"

As we explored this further last week, we drew on the work of the formidable spiritual teacher Henri Nouwen as he began to explore what the life of a Christian entailed. For him, the words "taken," "blessed," "broken," and "given" summarize the life of every Christian, in fact, he considered that they summarize our lives as compete human beings.⁵ But especially as Christians, we are called to become bread for the world: bread that is taken, blessed, broken, and given.

We discovered how to be "taken" meant to be chosen, to be precious to God who implanted his image in each and every one of us at our creation. If we explore what that image might look like through the example of Christ, we see an image of love. Not just superficial love, but love that is willing to make the tough choices for the wider good, even if that leads to immense struggle.

Then we explored what it was to be called blessed; Nouwen's second characterization. First, we must recognise the fact that we are "blessed," and to remember that "blessing" literally means to speak well of someone. We are blessed, for God is always speaking a word of blessing in our hearts. When we train ourselves to hear God's blessing better, we can't help but speak good things to other people and call forth

⁴ Jn. 15:13

⁵ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*, New York, NY: Crossroad, 1992

their beauty and truth. As Henri says, “No one is brought to life through curses, gossip, accusations, or blaming.”

We are chosen and blessed. And we are broken, too. Everyone in this room is broken. We all have places of loneliness or fear, places of disappointment, shame, hurt or grief. We all have feelings of betrayal and we have all been the betrayer – both leave their scars. Sometimes we sadly project that brokenness onto others and onto God or his representatives; especially sometimes onto God and his representatives. We all know the pain of broken relationships, and we all face fear of death, often producing the most destructive display of brokenness. We need to learn to accept and befriend our brokenness, before it destroys us. We only do this by entrusting our whole selves to the care of God, so that, as St. Paul puts it, we know that “whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's”.⁶ This is true self-knowledge and only comes from confronting the parts of our lives that are broken, especially the most painful stuff. Doing so takes real honesty and real bravery.

It is important to place our brokenness in the light of God's blessing, to experience it within the context of God's love. This can be especially difficult if our brokenness includes an element of unbelief or anger towards God. But it is essential that we overcome such destructive notions in order to help it to heal in the only true healing presence open to us – God's love as received through Jesus. When we know ourselves as God's Beloved, we experience our suffering differently -- maybe as a kind of purification, or as a way to enter a deeper communion with a loving God who, in Jesus Christ, allowed himself to be broken.

And finally, we are chosen, blessed, and broken -- to be given. Henri writes “Our greatest fulfilment lies in giving ourselves to others.” Our humanity comes to its fullest bloom in giving, not because of individual fulfilment, but because of the power it has to unite and grow communion with one another. We become beautiful people when we give whatever we can give and share whatever we can share: a smile, a handshake, a kiss, an embrace, an apology, a word of love, a donation, a present, a prayer, the Eucharist, a part of our life... When Jesus says, ‘those who save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will save it’,⁷ this is what he means. How different our lives become when we believe that every little act of faithfulness, every gesture of love, every word of forgiveness, every prayer for peace or healing or reconciliation, every gift for the good of someone else, every little bit of joy and peace will multiply and multiply as long as there are people to receive it, until heaven breaks through and the earth is completely healed from the sins that separate us.

The witness of Barnabas shows us that this is never an easy road, it has its ups and downs. Sometimes, just like Barnabas, we might even lose a friend or a colleague along the way. But the building of God's kingdom requires us to not only believe we are blessed, but to confidently live so that others can see it and see where it comes from - to help the rest of the world recognise that at the core of our blessedness sits our loving God.

Once again, we behold what we are. May we become what we receive.⁸

R.T. Parker-McGee 2015

⁶ Romans 14:8

⁷ The Gospels of: Matthew 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24

⁸ This sermon is based largely on text written by Society of St. John the Evangelist & *Margaret Bullitt-Jonas*

Sermon for Corpus Christi 2015

“Behold what we are: May we become what we receive”

Today is an extremely special day in the life of the Church, for two reasons. First, we have these splendid little chappies being baptised, becoming the latest members of God’s Church, and with God’s guidance and their parent’s perseverance, they will become dedicated members of Christ’s body. Secondly, it is also a special day, because it is the day the world-wide Church requires us to remember the most precious gift Christ gave us, the Eucharist – a never ending remembrance of his body and blood. Over the generations we have chosen to call the Eucharist different things Mass, Holy Communion, the Lord’s Supper... But the Eucharist it began and the Eucharist it shall remain. An eternal banquet that draws us into Christ’s example of service and sacrifice.

This morning's Gospel, from St John, gives us a chance to reflect on how we are formed and shaped by the Eucharist.

When you and I were baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, as these little ones will be in a moment, we discovered the deepest truth about ourselves: that no matter what else, we are the Beloved of God.

That is our deepest identity: we are God's Beloved.

Yet it takes a lifetime of practice and prayer, of devotion and commitment to live into the truth of our Belovedness, to make it embodied in everything we say and do, so that in the very nitty-gritty details of our lives, from the moment we get up in the morning until the moment we fall asleep at night, we not only remember in some remote way, “God loves me,” but overtime more and more fully we become the Beloved, we become who we really are. We radiate God’s love. With no personal agendas, no arrogance, no manipulation, but patient, kind, loving accepting and above all else obedient to the people we truly are – a holy people. We can only pray that we may have the resilience and the good fortune.

In some churches, after the Lord's Prayer, the celebrant breaks the bread and says: “Behold what you are.” And people reply, “May we become what we receive.” These words can be traced all the way back to St. Augustine, who, sometime in the 4th and 5th centuries, preached a sermon on the Eucharist [Sermon 57, which surprisingly enough is called “On the Holy Eucharist”]. In this sermon St Augustine says: “one of the deep truths of Christian faith: through our participation in the sacraments (particularly in baptism and Eucharist), we are transformed into the Body of Christ, given for the world.” In broken bread and wine outpoured we glimpse Christ’s broken body on the cross and see the lengths to which God is willing to go for each and everyone of us – an intimate love beyond measure. **“Behold what we are: May we become what we receive.”**

The point is that every time we receive the Eucharist, we are transformed -- or should be transformed -- a little more fully into the Body of Christ, so that the divine love that made us and that flows through us can become more fully expressed in the world.

So, how are we formed by the Eucharist? Henri Nouwen says, the words “taken,” “blessed,” “broken,” and “given” summarize the life of a priest, because whenever a priest comes together with members of this community and celebrates the Eucharist, he or she takes bread, blesses it, breaks it,

and gives it. But he goes on to say that These words also summarize our lives as Christians because, as Christians, we are called to become bread for the world: bread that is taken, blessed, broken, and given. Most importantly...they summarize our lives as compete human beings because in every moment of our lives somewhere, somehow the taking, the blessing, the breaking, and the giving should be happening.¹

So what does it mean to say that we are “taken”? To be “taken” by God is to be chosen, to be precious to God. As Nouwen puts it, “Long before any human being saw us, we are seen by God’s loving eyes. Long before anyone heard us cry or laugh, we are heard by our God who is all ears for us. Long before any person spoke to us in this world, we are spoken to by the voice of eternal love.” Claiming and reclaiming our chosenness is the great spiritual battle of our lives, for in a competitive, power-hungry, manipulative world, it is all too easy to forget that God has taken us, God has chosen us – its all too easy to slide into self-doubt and self-rejection. Knowing that we have been taken by God, that we have been chosen, is the first thing we need to understand as we **behold what we are and become what we receive**.

The second is to recognize that we are “blessed.” The Latin word for “blessing” literally means to speak well of someone or to say good things about someone. We all have a deep need for affirmation, to know that we are valued not just because of something we did or because we have a particular talent, but simply because we are.

Henri Nouwen tells a wonderful story about the power of blessing in his community. For the last ten years of his life, this renowned spiritual teacher and best-selling author who had taught at world-class universities lived as a chaplain at a daybreak community in Toronto, a community for people who are mentally and physically disabled. One day a handicapped member of the community, Janet, asked him for a blessing. Henri was busy and distracted, and quickly and automatically traced the sign of the cross on her forehead. Janet protested, “No, I want a real blessing!” Henri realized how unthinkingly he had responded to her request and he promised that at the next prayer service, he would give her a real blessing. After the service was over, when about thirty people were sitting in a circle on the floor, Henri announced, “Janet has asked me for a special blessing.” He didn’t know what she wanted, but she made it crystal clear: she stood up and walked over to him. He was wearing a long white robe with large sleeves that covered his hands as well and his arms, and when Janet came forward and put her arms around him and put her head against his chest, Henri covered her with his sleeves so that she almost vanished in the folds of his robe.

As they held each other, Henri said “Janet, I want you to know that you are God’s Beloved Daughter. You are precious in God’s eyes. Your beautiful smile, your kindness to the people in your house, and all the good things you do show what a beautiful human being you are. I know you feel a little low these days and that there is some sadness in your heart, but I want you to remember who you are: a very special person, deeply loved by God and all the people who are here with you.” As he said these words, Janet raised her head and looked at him, and from her broad smile, Henri knew that she had really heard and received the blessing.

¹ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*, New York, NY: Crossroad, 1992

After Janet returned to her place, another handicapped woman raised her hand -- she, too, wanted a blessing. She stood up and put her face against his chest, and before long many more of the handicapped people took a turn, expressing the same desire to be blessed.

How hungry we are for blessing! And we are blessed, for God is always speaking a word of blessing in our hearts. When we know ourselves as blessed, we can't help but speak good things to other people, and about other people, and call forth their beauty and truth. As Henri says, "No one is brought to life through curses, gossip, accusations, or blaming... As the 'blessed ones,' we can walk through this world and offer blessings. It doesn't require much effort. It flows naturally from our hearts."

We are chosen and blessed. And we are broken, too. Everyone in this room is broken. We all have places of loneliness or fear, places of disappointment, shame, hurt or grief. We all know the pain of broken relationships, and we all face death, the destructive manifestation of brokenness. Accepting and befriending our brokenness is part of the long journey of entrusting our whole selves to the care of God, so that, as St. Paul puts it, we know that "whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's".² And it is important to place our brokenness in the light of God's blessing, to experience it within the context of God's love. When something 'bad' happens to us, it can be tempting to let that event fuel the fire of our self-rejection, to say to ourselves, "You see? Of course that happened to me. I always thought I was no good. Now I know for sure -- the facts of my life prove it." But when we know ourselves as God's Beloved, we experience our suffering differently -- maybe as a kind of purification, or as a way to enter a deeper communion with a loving God who, in Jesus Christ, allowed himself to be broken.

We are chosen, blessed, and broken -- to be given. "Our greatest fulfillment lies in giving ourselves to others," writes Henri. "...Our humanity comes to its fullest bloom in giving. We become beautiful people when we give whatever we can give: a smile, a handshake, a kiss, an embrace, a word of love, a donation, a present, a part of our life... When Jesus says that, 'those who save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will save it',³ this is what he means. How different our lives become when we believe that every little act of faithfulness, every gesture of love, every word of forgiveness, every gift for the good of someone else, every little bit of joy and peace will multiply and multiply as long as there are people to receive it.

That is the promise of the Eucharist: that as we know ourselves to be taken, blessed, broken, and given, we will become bread for the world. Our lives will feed and bless those around us in more ways than we can ask or imagine. In our Eucharist this morning, we see a sign of God's desire and intent to feed not only us but this whole hungry world, and in these baptisms, we see the next chapter of God's plan for sharing it.

Once again, we behold what we are. May we become what we receive.⁴

R.T. Parker-McGee 2015

² Romans 14:8

³ The Gospels of: Matthew 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24

⁴ This sermon is based largely on text written by Society of St. John the Evangelist & *Margaret Bullitt-Jonas*

Today's sermon for Candlemas 2015

In the 4th Chapter of Genesis we are told the story of Cain and Abel. Most famously Cain turns on his brother in the end, but the event which begins building the tension between the two brothers is God's rejection of Cain's offering. Have you ever wondered why God would reject Cain's offering? Well, it is rejected because they are not his first fruits. Abel is a shepherd and gladly gives God his first born lamb, as a thank you for his many blessings and his promise of prosperity. But Cain takes what he wants first and then only offers God a portion of what he has left over. He is reluctant and resentful that he should have to give back some of what God has given to him. So because his heart is disturbed with ill motives and misaligned intentions, God cannot accept what Cain offers. He thus becomes separated from God and there is a severing of the sacred bond. This of course leads to his murderous actions and his banishment.

It is so easy to become more like Cain than Abel? Does God comes first? Do we always offer him the first of what we have, or is it a reluctant and resentful second?

This message continues throughout the Bible.

At the fall of Jericho, which we find in the book of Joshua chapter 13, God gives strict instructions that no-one is to take from the spoils of Jericho. Jericho is the first city of the new kingdom and so everything should go towards God's work in building the new kingdom – the Community of the People of God. When they steal the offering, it is no longer any good to God, because their hearts and their faith are impure and disturbed by wicked and selfish intentions.

There was, however, far more than money at stake when Abraham offered his first-born son Isaac in Genesis chapter 22. When God asked for his Son, Abraham was distraught at the thought of the huge cost, but he did not wait to have 12 more sons first before offering one to God. Abraham offered his first son despite his anguish at doing so. Of course, we never thought that God would allow Abraham to go through with it, and he doesn't - he provides a ram to take Isaac's place. It was Abraham's unshakable selflessness, faithfulness and trust in God that not only saw God intervening to save Isaac, but also resulted in God blessing Abraham and all his descendants. It was Abraham's faith that God respected and blessed.

Then, in the first book of Samuel chapters 1 and 2, we are told how Hannah cannot have children, but God hears her prayers and blesses her with a son nonetheless. In in gratitude for being blessed with a child, Hannah offers her first-born son, Samuel, to God's service, and Samuel begins a life learning to be a priest of the Temple. God is so pleased with Hannah's faith and wholeheartedness that she is blessed with three further sons and two daughters.

Today, is of course Candlemas, or the Presentation of Christ at the Temple. Just like Hannah, who offers Samuel to God's service, Luke's Gospel tells us of how Mary brings Jesus to the Temple to be placed in God's service as her first-born son. It is a place where Jesus will dutifully return for worship and teaching throughout his life. But this is a first-born with a very different fate. Jesus' fate is not beyond Mary's insight, certainly not after Simeon tells her that as a result of this young boy's destiny a sword will pierce her soul too. But Mary is nothing if not wholehearted in her devotion to God and her faith remains steadfast.

Mary allows her son to fulfil his divine destiny, and God gives his Son in faith. God gave us Jesus. He gave his first in the form of his Son. His first and only begotten Son who was given to us while we were still sinners. God gave Jesus in faith so that one day we would return the favour by giving our lives completely to him. The gift of his Son came first, but the blessings he brings are still left incomplete in us until we respond. Not reluctantly or resentfully like Cain, but wholeheartedly and gladly, full of faithfulness and trust, just like Abel, Abraham, Hannah, Mary,.. God.

Before we see the blessings of God, we give in faith. Giving the first fruits of what we have, be them time, money, resources; giving our whole lives, says to God, "I recognise you first. I realise that without you I would not be alive at all. I am awestruck that you would be willing to give so much on the cross for me. And so I am putting you first in my life and I trust you to take care of the rest, in ways that you know best. Just as you have always done."

Amen.

May I speak in the name of the Living God, Father, Son, and Holy spirit.

Today during this service, we are focusing on Christian Service, and what it means to us. I must admit when I was asked to take this morning prayer service, I spent ages scratching my head, thinking what I could base the theme on.

I read the two readings for inspiration, but nothing happened, I prayed for guidance, but still there was no answer, and with little over a week away I had spent hours staring at a blank computer screen hoping that something would come to me.

In desperation I re-read the readings for the forty fifth time, and suddenly Isaiah 1 17 leaped off the page: *“learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”*

And just I was about to dismiss the idea making an excuse that it probably wasn't such a good idea, Isaiah 18 gave me clear instructions:

“Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool”

That absolutely struck me at the core of my being, the the Lord pre-empts my doubt and excuses and says directly to me *“Come now, let us argue it out”*.

I have to admit that this is something I wasn't that keen on, sure I've screamed at the Lord when I didn't understand,

I've argued that this was not meant for me to do, but ultimately I have come to understand that when the Lord prompts me to do something, it's probably best to get on with it, after all part of our Christian duty is service.

The next verse of Isaiah, 19 reads *“if you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land”*, so I accepted the Lords instructions and set about the task in hand.

Why is it that we often find excuses when it comes to serving the Lord, or doing things for the Church? Matthew 26 – 27 reminds us

“whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave”

Wouldn't it be marvellous if we put so much commitment and intensity into the Church and service as we do with sports and all our other pastime,

how many of us have become so wrapped up in our life's routine that we have no time for God at all, let alone service?

How many of us set aside Sunday morning for Church, believing that that is enough time for the Lord instead of involving him in all our life?

We can all be guilty of putting God into a box, and only opening it when it suits our needs. In times of sorrow, need, and want,

how many of us fail to thank God for the times which are mundane, or good in our lives? How many of us actually ask God how we can help to further his kingdom?

Instead we look to the world that defines greatness in terms of power, possessions, prestige, and position, the media feeds us daily with the idea that we must put ourselves first, and if there's nothing in it for us, what's the point? Acting as a servant is not a popular concept for us.

Jesus, however, measured greatness in terms of service, not status. God determines our goodness by how many people we serve, not how many people serve us.

This is so contrary to the world's idea of greatness that we have a hard time understanding it, much less practicing it.

The disciples argued about who deserved the most prominent position, and 2,000 years later, people still jockey for position and prominence.

In fact if we are asked to do just about anything for the Lord the excuses start. "I'm too busy, I'm already doing this, you probably need to get someone else because I can't commit to that"

I read a humorous story about some soldiers on furlough that I think illustrates this.

"The commanding officer was furious when nine soldiers who had been out on passes failed to show up for morning roll call.

Not until 7 p.m. did the first man straggle in. "I'm sorry, sir," the soldier explained, "but I had a date and lost track of time, and I missed the bus back.

Being determined to get in on time, I hired a cab. Halfway here, the cab broke down. I went to a farmhouse and persuaded the farmer to sell me a horse.

I was riding to camp when the animal fell over dead. I walked the last ten miles, and just got here."

Though sceptical, the Colonel let the young man off with a reprimand. However, after him, seven other stragglers in a row came in with the same story

-had a date, missed the bus, hired a cab, bought a horse, etc.

By the time the ninth man reported in, the colonel had grown weary of it. "Okay," he growled, "now what happened to you?"

"Sir, I had this date and missed the bus back, so I hired a cab." "Wait!" the colonel screeched at him. "don't tell me the cab broke down."

"No, sir," replied the soldier. "The cab didn't break down. It was just that there were so many dead horses in the road, we had trouble getting through." Excuses!

Sometimes our excuses hold us back from accomplishing anything for God.

How often do we use excuses in order to avoid serving others? How can we further Gods kingdom

God often tests our hearts by asking us to serve in ways we're not comfortable with, for my part I found it particularly difficult to be around children.

My wife and I had been trying to have children for over 10 years, we had been down every route to conceive, but sadly it didn't happen for us,

accepting the reality of the situation was one of the hardest things we have had to do, my hopes of being a father and Karen a wonderful mother were dashed.

In my previous job as a Police officer I had only experienced the worse of humanity when it came to dealing with children, so to say that I was uncomfortable when I was around them was an understatement.

But God spoke to my inner soul, he recognised the hurt that I had been carrying, and he prompted me to volunteer to take our Noah's Ark, parents and toddlers group leaders role,

you can imagine the inner turmoil I went through, I didn't want to accept this call, it brought all the hurtful memories back to the fore, but eventually, begrudgingly, I accepted the role which I have now been doing for over a year.

And its been inspirational for me, I have let go of the angst, my heart has started to heal, and I love being around the wonderful parents, volunteers, and toddlers now.

God truly does heal all wounds, and challenge us in our daily Christian life.

So I ask you all now, how can you help grow Gods kingdom?

Can you talk to your neighbour and offer to help in some way, can you set a good Christian example by the way you live your life for others,

can you pray for someone or the world, can you use your gift that God has given you for the good of others?

It doesn't have to be a big act, but perhaps in some cases it does?

Perhaps you could volunteer to help keep the Church café open, perhaps you could add your name to the cleaning roster,

the lay rota for readings, serving, or teas & coffees, perhaps God calls you for some other purpose, but unless we take the time to pray and listen, how are we ever going to know.

So today I have set up some prayer stations, and during the intercessions we are going to have some time to move around the church and pray for some guidance on how we are called to grow Gods kingdom.

Christ calls us to have the hearts of a servant, to listen to God and to obey, just as Abraham in our second reading obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance,

he set out ' Let us set out on our journey today, without excuses.

Amen

'Be Still and Know that I am God'.¹ Christ the King 2016

May I speak in the name of the living God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Sometimes our paths cross individuals of great power. Power generated through the position they have acquired in life. A power that comes as the result of their own forcefulness and aggression. It might be a king, a queen or a powerful politician. A military commander or a very successful businessman. Such individuals can make us feel intimidated or weak in their presence. Sometimes their projection of power can make us feel powerless. This can promote strange reactions in us, we may cower or we may put up strong resistance in their presence. We may follow such individuals, but we do so out of fear or greed: fear that they may use their power against us if we do not follow them, or in greedy hope that they may pass a little of their power onto us if we do.

Very occasionally, however, we can come across an individual whose power is of a very different type. An individual whose moral exactness carries profound weight. Power that comes from their own concern for others and willingness to serve. Such individuals speak with a force that seems to shake the very foundations of our world. Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela, Mother Theresa of Calcutta all spring to mind. There is an attractiveness to their approach that compels us to follow them. We do not follow such people out of any hope of self-gain, except that we may also develop the same kind of concern and moral grounding.

¹ Psalm 46

Today is the feast of Christ the King, but Jesus is a king quite unlike any other. He does not come with the power of the sword. His power does not rest in nuclear warheads or an over inflated bank balance. Jesus is quite unlike any earthly king. Jesus is the fulfilment of Jeremiah's prophecy, Jesus is 'the Lord Our Righteous Saviour',² and he saves us by the nature of his power. Jesus' power is something far less tangible and yet stronger than any other force on earth. Jesus' power is limitless love. And Jesus reveals the profound depth of that love through service of others. That service leads him to be flogged almost to the point of death and hung like a criminal to die on a cross; hung in the baking heat of the desert outside the city walls. But Jesus' love is so profound that even at the point of death he is able to resist the temptation to self-pity. Instead he becomes completely consumed with concern for another person's plight. First he prays for those who have done this to him to be forgiven by the Father. And then, with an effort that must have consumed him with pain, he lifts his head and says to the criminal beside him on the cross, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise'.³

In Luke's version of the crucifixion, this is Jesus' last act before he dies.

Why does Jesus say this? There must have been so many other concerns on his mind. What had the criminal done to justify Jesus literally using his last breath to reassure him?

Well, by defending Jesus from the insults being thrown at him, the criminal reveals a heart that is capable of receiving the true love Jesus brings. This so called criminal is willing to open himself up to the abuse

² Jeremiah 23:6

³ Luke 23:34,43

and ridicule of others in order to protect Jesus from the same. And let us not forget that these would be the criminal's final hours too. By his actions, the criminal reveals his belief that Jesus, this lonely carpenter hung naked and in agony on the cross, is worth protecting. At this moment he believes that Jesus is indeed God's son and declares with one of his final acts on this earth that he is willing to follow Jesus' example.

I wonder if it was his proximity to Jesus that influenced his actions? Like any king, the closer we get to Jesus the more we are influenced by his power. This is why we meet him in the Eucharist every week. By listening to God's holy word and receiving Jesus' precious body and blood in the bread and wine, we move closer to him and if we are open to it, his power transforms us into a community of love.

But unlike all other kings, his gift is free. We don't have to do anything to receive it. It is not reserved for the good and withheld from the bad – otherwise, as the writer of the Psalms notes in Psalm 130: 'if you, Lord, kept a record of our sins who could stand'? That is the marvellous thing, Christ our King recognises that we are all sinful and fall short, but he does not hold that against us. He knows of what we are made; he knows we are but dust. He bestows on us his love, no matter what. Can you believe that?

This knowledge transforms us, but for most of us there is something that stops us short. We desperately want to believe that Jesus loves us and offers that love freely, but something in our past or our present situation stops us and makes us doubt whether this can really be true. "How can Jesus love someone like me? Everyone else here seems so much closer to him than I am. They look more prayerful. They read their bibles

more often. They talk so much more confidently about Jesus than I could ever do.”

Bunkum! What a load of nonsense. Can you see into your neighbour’s heart? Can you see into mine? I am thankful not. Can you know how well I pray? When I kneel in prayer, I try to focus on the right things, but all too often my mind wanders. I did not follow my calling to be a priest because I can pray well, but because I have so much more I need to do.

We all have those dark places that we don’t want anyone to see. If we feel that we are unworthy of God’s love, that is not Him doing that, it is us.

“I know he sees every part of me, even the bits that I refuse to see myself, and I can feel ashamed. I can struggle to believe that he can truly love someone like me.”

But that is the King that Jesus is!!! He will not punish us unfairly. He will not hold a grudge against us. He is not an earthly king! His forgiveness is limitless so long as our heart is ready to hear it and receive it. ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise’.⁴

So what stops our hearts from receiving it?

Do we really believe we can be forgiven? Do we really believe that love can be that profound and limitless? Are we willing to forgive ourselves? Are we willing to let others leave the past behind too? ***Jesus is.***

⁴ Luke 23:43

Are you not swept away with the power of God's love? You should be!
'The Lord Almighty is with us, the God of Jacob is our fortress', so 'Be
still and know that' he is 'God'. Be still and know. Be still. **Just Be.**⁵

Be who God made you to be, people formed by his love, in his love, for
his love. A love found in service of each other. Is this not a king you wish
to be close to? Is this not a king you wish to follow? Is this not a king you
wish to serve?

So come close to him. Follow him. Serve him.

Amen.

⁵ Psalm 46

I would like to talk a little about chickens. My family have just acquired seven new chickens to add to the one we had left after the winter had done its worst to our previous small flock of three rather old ladies. The interesting thing about introducing new birds into a chicken run, is how they have to re-establish a pecking order. It matters not whether you add one or seven, each time a whole new pecking order needs to be established and sometimes the process can be disturbing and messy. Often, if one bird is being picked on, others join in. So sometimes new birds need separating from the old ones and very occasionally a new bird will end up being rejected entirely. But eventually, one way or another, things settle down. The old chickens begin being a little more generous to the newcomers and the newcomers begin to feel less self-conscious and defensive. Eventually, they all accept each other and begin laying eggs – a symbol of new life. Having observed all this over the past few weeks, it struck me how alike chicken communities are to human communities. Nations, towns, villages, community groups or clubs can all respond negatively to newcomers and view them with suspicion. But life lived in the full knowledge and hope of resurrection overcomes this.

Creation and resurrection are mirror images of each other, they are held together by the nature and purpose of God. At its simplest, God is life-giver. That has endless implications, all of them glorious. In God there is endless inventiveness that can bring newness out of what

appeared to be finished. In God, there are no dead ends, new doors can open in what seemed to be brick walls.

God works in us most profoundly at moments of crisis – and one way or another, God brings new life out of what appears to be dead. Whether that new life touches us personally, all depends on our response. If we are open to God's prompting, it can transform our lives. If we approach it with a closed heart, then God is simply left transforming the world in spite of us.

Holy Week treated us to a unique insight into the events which show this most deeply: the good news of Jesus' life and death.

Christ does not allow evil to win the day - He does not betray those around him, even when they are denying him, fleeing from him, providing false witness against him or even selling him to his murderers for 30 pieces of silver.

In the end, all alone, Jesus simply has to find a way to strengthen his resolve and move deeper into God. At the moment of crisis Jesus moves further into the Father's goodness, not away from it. So Jesus reaffirms his commitment to his loving Father and even at the point of death he services the mission for which he has been called. To build a people, a society, a Church built on faith and trust.

The story of Christ's death and eventual resurrection shows us that in God there is endless patience and resourcefulness that cannot be

defeated. In fact, that is the central message of Easter. You remember those brick walls - well even the most uncompromising brick wall of all, death, God transforms into a doorway to something miraculous – eternal life. It is Jesus' commitment to his Father, despite the worst the world can throw at him, that secures his eternal life, and opens the door for his followers to do the same.

What is more, Jesus' resurrection brings new hope even for those who have fallen away. We experienced on Good Friday the disciples fleeing. They leave the scene of crucifixion filled with doubt and despair. They are perplexed by a mix of complex emotions – their failure, the death of their leader for which, some of them at least, are partly to blame, but above all they are overtaken by immense fear for their own lives. They lock themselves in an upper room in the hope that a tap will not come at the door from a Roman soldier, or even worse a temple guard. Then the truth of it all is revealed to them and it is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, risen from the dead.

In our Gospel reading today we see how the resurrection was just as unbelievable to the disciples as it is to some of us today. They are so caught up in their own self-obsession, fuelled by fear, despair and cynicism, that they cannot see or believe what is in front of their eyes. So much so, that they do not believe the testimony of the women

returning from the empty tomb. Only Peter is curious enough to run to the tomb to investigate further.

If we hold Luke's narrative alongside all the other accounts of Jesus' resurrection we get a more rounded picture of the events as they unfold. Later in Luke's Gospel, we are told of Jesus appearing to some of the disciples on the Damascus road, then he appears to all the disciples in the upper room. Mark's Gospel, retells the same events, but in more brevity. Mark also includes Jesus giving the disciples a commission to build up his church. In John's Gospel, we hear again of him appearing in the upper room to all the eleven and then later by the seashore. Here he gives Peter his commission to 'feed his sheep'. Like the others, Matthew tells of Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene and then to the other disciples in the upper room, and, like Mark, Matthew reveals Jesus telling his disciples that they are to build his church so that more may come to believe and inherit eternal life. Here he gives his famous commission to all followers present and future. He says: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations baptising them... and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you'.

A few things are notable about these accounts. Notice how Jesus does not accuse them or condemn them because of their denial or betrayal. He simply offers all of them forgiveness and through it renewed hope – he opens a doorway in the brick wall of their despair and guilt. All they

have to do is respond. Even Peter, who denied him three times, is offered the renewed hand of friendship. This is not what Peter expected nor deserved, but instead of punishment, this is the moment Peter begins his new life lived in resurrected hope.

In the disciple's repentance and sorrow, Jesus absolves them from their sin and gives them a new life removed of the shackles of negativity and sin. From this moment forward, eternal life belongs not only to Jesus, but to all those who come to him in repentance and faith and are committed to his charge.

What is that charge? Well as the Gospels outline it, Jesus charges all his followers to build his Church and draw new believers into the resurrected life. This all gives us an insight into faith today. Just like the first disciples we can begin living eternal life now. Eternal life is not some far off event. It happens now. If we can live as though we continue to believe that, then our community will see new life, the eggs of Easter, being revealed throughout the year. We are a community living in resurrection hope, all we have to do is believe that we are!

Amen

Resurrection Dance – Easter Vigil Sermons 2015

Alleluia, Christ is Risen. Surrexit Alleluia.

Picture the scene: a middle-aged lady has spent years following faithfully in her master's footsteps. She has travelled all over the globe spreading the Gospel of Christ to different people and nations. She has faced tyrants and chieftains, lords and kings in her bid to reveal the love of Christ to all she meets. After her exile from Jerusalem, where the Christian Church was being persecuted, she finally ends up in modern day France and her journey continues. She becomes an active missionary and preacher, before retiring to a cave and living as a hermit in old age.

It was less than a century after this that Donatello carved a statue of Mary Magdalene in polychrome wood – he casts her as an ascetic hermit, gaunt and old but still on her front foot and full of energy.

The story of Mary Magdalene's missionary endeavours cannot be proven, but there is evidence to suggest that Mary did die in France. The only other evidence we seem to have of her life after Jesus' resurrection is the statue that Donatello carved of her. Her relics are now placed in various chapels dedicated to her name – many in France itself. But, the details are not important, because the overarching rhythm of this story fits perfectly with what we know of her from the Gospel accounts.

We know that Mary was often one of the first people to recognise Christ – she was the first person through her actions to show how Christ's teaching had positively affected her. We know that she was attentive to His teaching and dedicated to His cause. We know that she followed Him to the cross and then was the first person to see Him rise. We know that Mary left the tomb and the place where she encountered her risen Lord in confusion and joy and went off to tell the other disciples. And the way this story is told, we get the impression that she danced all the way.

If Donatello's depiction of Mary is to be believed, and there is no reason why it shouldn't be, Mary, very advanced in years, could not stop spreading the word of Christ. She could not stop striding, best foot forward, to do the work of her Lord and continue that 'dance' that her Lord called her to. All who recognise the resurrection of Christ end up partaking in this same dance, it would seem.

John, describes the resurrection of Jesus and his appearance to Mary Magdalene so well. But Luke's Gospel tells of another resurrection story detailing the walk to Emmaus. In it we are told of two very solemn fellows making their way to meet their friends. They have dropped their heads in despair and they are dragging their feet, which now feel heavier than ever. It feels to them as if this journey may never end. They had placed such great expectation upon Jesus, he had given such purpose to their lives - and now he was dead and all hope seemed to be lost.

Then they are joined by a person they do not recognise, but they value the opportunity to retell all that they had seen and that Jesus had done. They do not know they are talking to Christ and He does not tell them, because he recognises that they need to be brought slowly towards the truth.

Through the scriptures, He begins to reveal to them the true interpretation of recent events. We now begin to get a sense that the two followers are becoming less morose and despairing. By the time they reach their destination, the two disciples are positively dancing, and yet they still do not recognise that it is the risen Christ who has done this for them. Only when Christ shares the Eucharist with them do they recognise Christ for who he truly is. And with that Christ departs from them, leaving them to perform the dance He has given them to do - job done!

But, of course, the dance does not stop there. This dance continues with us today. Every Sunday morning in our Eucharistic celebration, the risen Christ continues to make himself known to us, just as he did to his disciples at the end of the Emmaus road. And having shared His divine offering with Him, we then depart to continue His dance in the here and now. Everyone is invited to this dance and, long before we recognise the full truth of the resurrection for ourselves, we begin slowly tapping our feet. Then we find ourselves working for the good of others, radiating a joy and a loving kindness that is difficult to characterise. We get involved in all kinds of activities on behalf of Christ's Church and we feel a deeper desire to attend divine worship more regularly as the resurrected Christ slowly reveals himself to us, just as he did to those disciples on the road to Emmaus. Our feet stop tapping, just as our bodies begin to groove and bop, sway and rock.

Eventually the truth of the resurrection is revealed to us in all its radiating magnificence. A truth that cannot be explained by human faculties, but which will be revealed at the time of Christ's choosing. It cannot be proven or uncovered by scientific endeavour or empirical evidence, but only through faith, goodwill and the grace of God.

Rather interestingly, recently in Egypt, a group of archaeologists uncovered some of the earliest forms of chocolate in a tomb of one of the great Egyptian Pharaohs. Until this find, it was considered that chocolate, in the form that we have it today, was a relatively recent invention.

An example of this chocolate find can now be seen in the British Museum. They have called it Pharaoh Rocher.

Ecclesiastes tells us that 'there is nothing new under the sun'. And every time we forget this pearl of wisdom we are brought back down to earth with a bump. Christ's resurrection is as real today as it was 2000 years ago and it will continue to be true 2000 years from now. Doubt and scepticism cannot change that. Christ is the Lord of the dance and He calls the tune. All we can do is allow ourselves to feel the rhythm.

I will leave you with the words of one of the 20th century's greatest swinging gurus; so in the words of Baloo the bear from Disney's Jungle Book. 'Come on Baggy, get with the beat!'

Amen

R.T. Parker-McGee 2015

Epiphany 2: 18 January 2015

It is good to be with you here at Geddington & Weekley once more, and now to share in ministry with Rob as he begins his second year with you.

In our opening collect this morning Rob prayed:

In Christ you make all things new: transform the poverty of our nature by the riches of your grace, and in the renewal of our lives make known your heavenly glory.

And again, after communion he will pray:

Fill us with your Holy Spirit that through us the light of your glory may shine in all the world.

We are very bold in our praying – asking that we might be so transformed by God as to manifest his glory to the whole world.

This is, of course, the Epiphany Season, the weeks following the arrival of the Wise Men on the 12th Day of Christmas. In these weeks of the Epiphany Season, we recall Jesus being recognised, and making himself known, for who he was, by his very being as well as by the things he did – and today we reflect upon that self-revelation being evident in his calling of some of his disciples, of which we just heard in our gospel reading.

Before reflecting on that gospel reading itself, we might notice that the calling of the first disciples is pre-figured in a number of instances in the OT, where God calls individuals to specific tasks. We were reminded of one of them in our first reading this morning – the calling of Samuel.

Samuel's mother, Hannah, had been greatly distressed because she had no children. She had come to the temple and prayed fervently that she might be able to have a son, promising God that, if she did have a son, she would dedicate him to God's service.

Hannah did then give birth to her son, Samuel, and true to her word, when he was old enough, she fulfilled her promise and brought him to the elderly priest, Eli, to serve with him in the temple. The story ended even more happily for Hannah, for having kept her promise to God with regard to giving Samuel to God's service, she then went on to have three more sons and two daughters, who remained at home with her.

So young Samuel came to live and to serve in the temple and, as we were reminded in our reading, as he lay down one night, he thought he heard old Eli calling him. Samuel went straight to Eli, but Eli said: *I did not call you; lie down again.* Three times this happened, until Eli realised that it must be God himself calling the boy, for there was no one else there. So Eli told Samuel, if he calls you again, say:

Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.

So Samuel went and lay down again, and when God called out again, Samuel did indeed say:

Speak, for your servant is listening.

The Lord spoke to Samuel that night, giving him bad news for Eli. Eli's sons had been stealing for themselves the gifts that people had been bringing to God, and so they were unworthy to follow in their father's footsteps as priests in God's temple.

Old Eli was wise and holy. He realised that Samuel wouldn't want to tell him this bad news, but he insisted on hearing it, and it rang true for him. He knew that it was indeed God who had spoken to Samuel.

So we, we who are so bold in our public praying – *that we might be so transformed by God as to manifest his glory to the whole world* – are we equally bold in our private prayers? Do we, like Samuel and Eli, do we listen for the voice of God? Indeed, as a Christian community, as we come together in worship and at other times to meet and reflect and plan: do we listen for the voice of God – do we genuinely expect to hear from him and to be transformed by our encounter with him? Does our encounter with the living God shape our life and service together?

In our gospel reading: Jesus calls Phillip, who immediately goes off in search of Nathaniel, telling *him*:

We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote.

As sceptical Nathaniel approaches Jesus, Jesus recognises him for who he is – *an Israelite in whom there is no deceit* – and also knows where he was when Philip called him – *I saw you under the fig tree*, Jesus says.

Nathaniel's spontaneous response to Jesus' insight is:

Rabbi, you are the son of God, you are the King of Israel.

In Jesus' calling of his disciples, *they* immediately seem to perceive something of who he is: the lamb of God, the Messiah, the one written about in the law and the prophets, the son of God, the king of Israel.

They immediately seem to perceive something of who he is, and of the significance of his call upon their lives. Their response is immediate and it is total, and their lives are changed forever.

Are we equally perceptive and responsive, as we wait upon God? - for just as Jesus called *them*, so he calls *us* – just as Samuel and Nathaniel were called, so we are called. We, as individual Christian disciples, and we, as Christian communities, are called repeatedly to make a *renewed commitment to the purposes of God*.

As we follow Jesus, individually and together, we expect it to change us.

As Cardinal Henry Newman in the C19th said:

To live is to change, and to become perfect is to have changed often.

Later in John's gospel, we hear Jesus say:

Abide in me as I abide in you

Abide in my love.

You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.

May we abide, may we make our home in, our relationship with God and be attentive to his call – the call of God on our individual lives, and his call on the lives of each of our churches, to make a fresh commitment to his purposes, and to bear *fruit* that will last.

In the church in this land, at this stage in its history, many of us perceive Jesus to be calling us, in particular, to be his more effective witnesses. He is calling us to do as Philip did with Nathaniel. He is calling us to invite others to *come and see* what we have seen, to share with us in recognising Jesus for who he is.

May we be ready and willing, then, to be changed by Jesus. Through the action of his Holy Spirit upon us, may we be ready and willing to be changed into that which he calls us to be – a community, a body, united in his love and active in witness and service.

May God bless you and make you ever more fruitful in these parishes as, individually and together, you seek, we seek, to respond *more fully* to his call.

G Steele 2015

Ever since I refound my faith in my twenties, I have found great enrichment in going on pilgrimages, retreats and quiet days. There is something very rich in joining a prayerful community and sharing in their prayer life and hospitality. But pilgrimages and retreats are not holidays, they can be really hard work, because they are all about increasing our awareness and attentiveness – two aspects of our discipleship that we spoke a little about last week.

But we're not often very skilled at looking for the divine. Take this other short story from the Benedictine tradition:

A monk comes to his abbot, seeking enlightenment. He questions the abbot eagerly and impatiently, firing questions at him. But the abbot says, "Just look." The monk is very disappointed. "I'm always looking," he says sulkily. "No, you're not," says the abbot. "In order to look at what is here, you have to be here, and you are mostly somewhere else."

I guess, life is so busy that we are often somewhere else and fail to be properly attentive.

I remember once, going on retreat to a monastery in Worcestershire. We all gathered in the dining hall for lunch. Served before us, sizzling on a platter with its rich aromas wafting in the air was a roast chicken. Before we began our meal, the Abbot stood up and began to pray. 'Thank you Jesus for joining us at this table and for providing this meal so that we may be nourished by it. And thank you sister Chicken. You have given all that you have so that we might receive the strength we need for another day. As such you have walked the same path as our Lord Jesus, in giving your very life, that we might live. Amen'.

This was all about attentiveness – recognising where God was and the blessings he brings. In this one short prayer, the Abbot had recognised three important truths. First; the blessing we had in being around the common table together in Jesus' presence. Second; that the life of God runs through every living thing. Third; the great sacrifice that the chicken had made in order that our physical bodies might be fed.

One of the central themes that often comes through attempts at monastic living is the ability to recognise God's hand in all things. Often, monks and nuns are encouraged to live in a perpetual sense of prayerfulness, where they recognise God in every aspect of their work, recreation and prayer lives. So if they are gardening, they recognise God's hand in the soil, the water, the plants and even the utensils they are using to do their work. If they receive a new guest, then they are encouraged to recognise the face of Christ shining through the newcomer. If they are driving a car, then God's hand is to be seen in the production of the machine, the resources that have been used to make it work, and in the journey it is taken them on. In such ways, they are encouraged to feel a closeness to God in everything they do, because God is indeed present in it all.

Last week, as we reflected on St John's version of how the first disciples came to follow Jesus, we reflected on how discipleship was less about what we did and more about what we were to be. Or to put it a different way, discipleship was about our sense of being – resting in the spiritual stillness of Christ. This, we suggested, required awareness and attentiveness to our surroundings and God's hand in it. This week, we have a slightly different telling of those same disciples coming to follow Jesus, this time from the account of St Matthew.

It begins with Jesus retreating into the wilderness following John the Baptist's arrest. The arrest of John must have troubled Jesus very deeply, so where better for Jesus to go in order to refocus and still his soul, but the countryside. As he observes nature in all of its wonderful variety we get a sense of him feeling reaffirmed in his calling through the words of Isaiah; 'the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.'

Jesus, we are told, then goes out and proclaims 'repent, for the kingdom of God has come near'.

The greatest testimony that our God reigns is seen in and through nature. There is something very Godlike to be one who appreciates, cares for, preserves and rejoices in living things. When we become obsessed with material possessions and economic gain, something dark happens to our souls. Life no longer becomes our main focus, and it is instead replaced by an obsession for wealth and comfort. As we hoard inanimate objects and work at increasing our numbers on a balance sheet, we are in real danger of ceasing to recognise the depth of our blessings. In the words of Jesus; 'A man or woman cannot serve two masters, God and wealth', 'for where your money is, that's where your heart will be also.'

It is no surprise then, that the first disciples' hearts are not hardened or corrupted, by wealth and personal gain. They are but simple fishermen. These men already have a deep appreciation for nature. They respect the power of the weather, they rely heavily on their equipment and have a passionate care for the health of the aquatic environment and all its wonderful biodiversity. When Christ enters their midst they seem to recognise something familiar in him – almost like something they have

been involved with for a very long time. The first disciples appear to have no trouble in simply stopping what they are doing and following Jesus – almost as though this were a natural progression on from their lives as fishermen on the lake.

After the section we heard today, the next few verses of Matthew's Gospel tell us about Jesus healing the sick and teaching in the synagogues. The healings are, of course, further testimony of his intimate relationship with nature and all living things. But so too is his teaching about the kingdom of God. The two are inseparable. These are examples of how Jesus corrects and cures wherever the divine design for creation has been damaged and distorted.

This week, there has been wide publicity of a recent paper released by Professor Jack Schultz, Professor of Plant Sciences at the University of Missouri in Columbia. He claims that plants can see, hear and smell. Whilst they might not have organs that we recognise as eyes, ears and brains, he observes that plants do in fact exhibit all the same behavioural traits as animals. They fight for territory, seek out food and water, evade predators and trap prey. If true, and it sounds logical enough, what this suggests is that far from being only good for our furniture, plants are as alive and as responsive to their environment as any other living thing. There is a life force in them that is not only passive, but responsive.

Jesus carries within him the life of God. He heals the world through teaching and restoration. He reconciles all things back to the Father. In and through Christ, the whole universe is infused with the life of God. As disciples of Jesus, we are called to recognise God's hand in all things. The very life of God pulsing through the veins of every human, as well

as every tree. If we love God, then we must love each other and every living thing he has made. Not just a passing acknowledgement, but a deep and attentive engagement with everything around us.

In giving thanks for that Chicken, the abbot in that Worcestershire monastery showed a deep and holy awareness that God is in all things. That no animal, plant or object is simply ours to do with as we choose without care or appreciation. We can gaze at the face of a friend, the orange in the fruit bowl, the car on the drive and observe the wonderful hand of God within. In Christ everything is gathered up, healed and renewed, and we see his mark in every part of nature, as well as the stranger who next walks through that door.

Amen.