

Benefice of Ruscombe & Twyford with Hurst

Loved by Christ, Challenged to grow

A reflective worship resource for 22 March 2020 - 4th Sunday of Lent/ Mothering Sunday

Please use this material in whatever way suits you / your family.

I am thinking about the impact of the Coronavirus on our lives and community, but also mothering, the Bible reading about spiritual blindness and our journey as a Benefice seeking a way forward. Revd Helen Charlton

Words of Encouragement from Bishop Steven Croft. "You are not alone." (18.3.20)

"One of the deep foundations of Christian faith is that it is not good for humankind to be alone. We are made for love and community by a God who is love. We place our faith and trust in God as three persons in one fellowship and communion: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We may not be able to meet together in the normal way as congregations for a time, but we are bound together through the ministry of the word and the prayers, by our common baptism and by bonds of Christian love.

Our churches remain open; our faith in God is undiminished; public worship may be suspended, but the life of God's kingdom is inextinguishable. "

Opening Prayer: (From A Song of St Anselm)

Jesus, you gather your people to you;
You are gentle as a mother to her children;
You comfort us in sorrow and bind up our wounds;
In your love and tenderness remake us
and for the beauty of heaven prepare us. Amen

The Readings: the whole of John Chapter 9, and our old friend Ephesians 2: 13-22

My Reflection

Background – this Sunday has focussed traditionally on the Mother Church. In earlier times, staff in hotels and rich families were given time off to visit both their families and the church where they had been brought up and Baptised. The 'normal' Lent habits were relaxed for that day. For us today that might seem rather ironic as we face more restrictions on our life! The theme of Mother Church also involved looking at Mary as the mother of Jesus and therefore mother of the church...and more generally also looking at the church as a whole, a source of nourishment and nurturing for the community.

For many people it is good to celebrate and give thanks for mothers and motherhood, but we need to remember that this day is very difficult and even distressing if someone has lost their mother, or their experiences have been of neglect or abuse. The commercialism adds to the fluff and sentimentality.....

Theme: So let's think about nourishing and nurturing – we all need to work on becoming the body of Christ, we all need to focus on nurturing and nourishing our local community as well as building up the church, both during this difficult time and in our reflections on where we want to go as a Benefice through the dwelling on Eph. 2.

In the words of our Bishop Olivia:

Let's live hopefully, love generously and pray earnestly, blessing each other by the way we behave. Stay calm and let those who are in high-risk groups or self-isolating know that you care for them. Phone calls, messages, letters, cards, food left on the doorstep are all signs of us being community together.

Let's look at what the long story of Jesus healing the blind man, with its twists and turns, has to offer us.....

Similar stories appear in Mark's gospel, and it might be that John is re-working the same stories with a special emphasis on the spiritual healing and light that Jesus is offering. John's gospel is famous for its 'signs and wonders', and here Jesus gives a strong clue about his identity and mission in God - I am the Light of the World.

[A brief aside for those interested in the theology.....the concept of 'original sin' alluded to in the passage is not often thought of these days in its most negative form – of being born somehow 'evil'. This passage actually helps us take a better understanding The Greek word is Hamartia – meaning falling short. We are born into a world that is estranged or alienated from God, where we struggle in the darkness, and it is the work of Christ that restores our spiritual vision and gives us light. In this passage there is also a strong allusion to baptism by the word Siloam meaning 'He who is sent', and word 'anointing' as the mud is smeared. We are baptised into Christ as the means of salvation and the healing of our spiritual blindness.]

In contrast to others in the story, the blind man sees more and more clearly who Jesus really is. The neighbours and his parents are vague or reluctant to get involved. His opponents (here the pharisees) don't accept the healing has taken place, are cross about the violation of sabbath rules, then doubt the man was ever blind.... before abusing him and throwing him out. Jesus saves his main rebuke for the Pharisees because they claimed to 'see' and yet became ever more hardened in their viewpoint.

The gradual dawning of the true light within the blind man comes in stages – emphasised by John in the drawn out story..... as the man is questioned by more people through the whole story, his statements become stronger and stronger. He expresses an ever-deepening understanding of Jesus... from 'A man called Jesus'... to a full declaration of faith. He grows in confidence and vision as he responds to Jesus. He is nurtured and nourished by the light and love of Jesus.

So how do we get closer to Jesus who can bring us light in our darkness and give us a true vision? How do we nurture and nourish each other in these difficult times? How do we nurture and nourish each other as we work together for our group of churches to be a light in these communities?

1st of all we need to be aware of the danger of the church (us as individuals and the church as an institution) being like the pharisees... convinced they see and know everything (and have a monopoly on the 'Truth') – and yet fall further and further away from the light. In the words of Jeffrey John 'Real new vision, God's new vision, always brings challenge and change.'

2. We must keep returning to Jesus, the source of our restoration and spiritual vision. Our enlightenment is always partial and gradual... we may not be aware of what our following of Jesus will demand of us, and we will face challenge and change. By joining together in prayer and humility we can more easily see the light of Christ in the world around us

3. We must take seriously our responsibilities as individuals and as a church body to look after everyone, to nourish and nurture each other and those around us.

4. We continue our focus on Ephesians chapter 2 – we are, "together, citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. In Christ the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom we are also built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God."

May God bless the wonderful efforts that so many of you are making at this time! Amen

I intended the song Amazing Grace to be sung at the 6pm service – you might like to look it up – or even sing it loudly!

A Child's prayer for the world

God of love and hope,
you made the world and care for all creation,
but the world feels strange right now.
The news is full of stories about Coronavirus.
Some people are worried that they might get ill.
Others are anxious for their family and friends.
Be with them and help them to find peace.
We pray for the doctors and nurses and scientists,
and all who are working to discover the right medicines
to help those who are ill.
Thank you that even in these anxious times, you are with us.
Help us to put our trust in you and keep us safe. **Amen.**

Prayers:

Let us pray to the Lord,
who is our refuge and stronghold.

For the health and well-being of our nation,
that all who are fearful and anxious
may be at peace and free from worry:
Lord, hear us, **Lord, graciously hear us.**

For the isolated and housebound,
that we may be alert to their needs,
and care for them in their vulnerability:
Lord, hear us, **Lord, graciously hear us.**

For our homes and families,
For our children and young people,
and all in any kind of need or distress:
Lord, hear us, **Lord, graciously hear us.**

For a blessing on our local community,
that our neighbourhoods may be places of trust and friendship,
where all are known and cared for:
Lord, hear us, **Lord, graciously hear us.**

We commend ourselves, and all for whom we pray,
to the mercy and protection of God.
Merciful Father,
**accept these prayers, for the sake of your Son,
our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.**

*Thinking particularly of those who are self-isolating – let us connect more deeply with God's
light shown to us in nature.... Spend some time today looking intently at something in the
natural world around us, even if it's only from your window.....*

Final Prayer: A Celtic Blessing

**Deep peace of the running wave to you
Deep peace of the flowing air to you
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you
Deep peace of the shining stars to you
Deep peace of the gentle night to you
Sun, moon and stars pour out their healing light on you
Deep peace of the Source of Peace to you, and to each and every one of you. Amen**