

5th March 2021

Dear Friends,

Once again I wonder how you are this week whilst reflecting on my conversation with a colleague where we both shared that we ask the same question over and over again! The of course we decided that this is an entirely normal greeting, surely we ask others how they are when we meet them, and so that greeting is not out of place, so I will say again that I hope this letter finds you well and in as good spirits as you can be at this time. I apologise for missing writing a letter last week, I quite simply ran out of time and space for writing, it was a busy week with several meetings and the representative Synod which looked at the God in Love Unites Us paper that will go to Conference this year all things being well. I will say a little more about that further on in this letter.

First I want to reflect on the fact that this is our second Lent in lockdown, and will likely be our second Easter out of our buildings. In my Easter letter last year I reflected on the words of Jesus to Mary on their encounter at the tomb in the garden, he said to her “do not cling to me”. At that time I asked the question:

“In these days what do you want to cling to that seems impossible, lots of us a separated from family and friends, all of us from our usual ways of living. Where do you need to hear Jesus calling your name, and what would you like to say to him, hear his words, do not cling to me, what in these days do you need to let go of so that you can encounter Jesus afresh?”

Of course at that time we thought we need only hold on a few more weeks and things would begin to return to something like normal, although many were expressing the desire to find a new normal, a new way of living and being, of valuing others, of caring for the environment of living less selfishly. The year has ground on and we have been in and out of lockdowns, moved through the dark days of winter, and perhaps begun in a new way to acknowledge how truly challenging and difficult this all is. We have moved from cheering for the NHS every Thursday to a much quieter way of being, and maybe just maybe that is the gift that Lent offers us. This weeks gospel reading challenges all of that though and wakes us up with a start! Here it is:

¹³ The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵ Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ He told those who were selling the doves, ‘Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a market-place!’ ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’ ¹⁸ The Jews then said to him, ‘What sign can you show us for doing this?’ ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ ²⁰ The Jews then said, ‘This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?’ ²¹ But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken. (John 2: 13-22)

So much for any notion of gentle Jesus meek and mild! So what had incensed him so much? It certainly wasn't the worshippers who had made the journey to Jerusalem, making their way to the temple to make the required sacrifices that would make them ready to celebrate the Passover, Jesus himself would observe the festival and to do so carry out the required confessions and cleansing (in that it could be likened to our Lenten fast). No, what incensed him was the injustice of the market place within the temple courts, the money changers and merchants making money from those who wanted to prepare themselves spiritually, he challenges the temple economy, questioning whether it was focused more on wealth than prayer in this he echoes the challenge of the prophets through the ages.

Why is this important to us today? What can this story shine a light on? Where do we find injustice? On Wednesday the Chancellor shared with us the details of the budget, and amongst support packages for businesses and families for furloughed workers and a plan to get the economy moving again one thing was hidden, despite all of our applause, and the constant government affirmations of how wonderful the NHS has been is a 1% pay rise, yes just 1% for people who have given so much! I am not going to comment any further I am going to just leave that there, because it isn't something I have heard raised in the news as we devour information about the Duke and Duchess of Sussex and Prince Philip. I wonder though how you respond?

In challenging the temple traders and the authorities who gave them space to operate, Jesus was also affirming the value of the pilgrims who had come to prepare, to make their sacrifices and to remember the Passover as they celebrated the festival. Jesus so often celebrated those that the religious elite considered unclean or unacceptable, he saw value in each one. He did not despise the leper, he included women in his followers and he told his disciples to love one another as he had loved them. Love is the central message of our Scriptures, proclaiming each one valued and unique.

As I said earlier in my letter last Saturday our Synod met in Sheffield to look at the God in Love Unites Us document and to give an indicative vote on the resolutions within it before it goes to Conference this summer. Love being the central theme of the document as it explored what it is to be made in God's image and what constitutes healthy and life giving forms of human relating. It looks at themes of singleness, marriage, co-habitation, divorce and same sex marriage. It acknowledges that not everyone will draw the same conclusions but invites us to be united in the love of Christ. You can find copies of the document and the resources here: <https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-faith/worship/singing-the-faith-plus/seasons-and-themes/themes/god-in-love-unites-us/>

For the most part the meeting was measured and respectful, the indicative vote was in favour of all of the resolutions, recognising that for some they would agree to disagree in love. There were suggestions from time to time however that not all of us are made in God's image, that not all are to be celebrated and that some are beyond the love of God. This was particularly pertinent to the LGBTQI+ community, and there were a number of us in the meeting. It was hard to hear. The beginning of our Bible states that God has made ALL in the image and likeness of God, it also declares that God is not gendered. Jesus himself when questioned about a widow's place in the resurrection states that there will be no marriage in heaven for we will be transformed (Luke 20: 27-40). Paul states that in Christ there is no male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, for ALL are one in Christ. (Galatians 3: 23-29). As for the texts quoted from Leviticus and the often quoted passages in Romans where Paul apparently speaks about homosexuality it might be shocking to some to know that the word homosexuality did not appear in English versions of the Bible until 1946, and that there are many different words that have been translated that way and all equate with some form of injustice or abuse. +

Now I know this is my view, and that many will not agree with me, and that many will, but the premise of God in Love Unites us is that we center ourselves on the LOVE of God in Christ, and seek the wisdom of the Spirit to guide us to love and serve one another. There has been a positive outpouring of love in the world this year, one of our Pioneer Workers told me yesterday how generous people have been to food banks in the city who have been overwhelmed by the generosity of the community towards those who are struggling. One worker on the checkout at the supermarket told me how people are much more likely to say thank you these days, or to enquire about the welfare of the one serving them. Our church buildings have been used as vaccination centres and people have actively considered how to serve and include one another. God in Love Unites us invites us to stretch our thinking perhaps and to include those who have formerly been excluded, those who wish to be a blessing to their community and to receive the blessing of God.

I will leave you with a hymn:

*Let us build a house
where love can dwell
And all can safely live,
A place where
saints and children tell
How hearts learn to forgive.*

*Let us build a house where prophets speak,
And words are strong and true,
Where all God's children dare to seek
To dream God's reign anew.*

*Here the cross shall stand as witness
And a symbol of God's grace;
Here as one we claim the faith of Jesus:*

*Let us build a house where love is found
In water, wine and wheat:
A banquet hall on holy ground,
Where peace and justice meet.*

*Here the love of God, through Jesus,
Is revealed in time and space;
As we share in Christ the feast that frees us:*

*All are welcome, all are welcome,
All are welcome in this place.*

As we continue to journey through Lent, let us seek to be those who love first, who seek justice and mercy and the freedom for all to approach God in worship with nothing to hinder them.

I pray that your Lenten journey will be life giving, once again I offer a conversation to any who would appreciate it, and I acknowledge that for some what I have written will be challenging this week. You remain as always in my prayers

Peace and blessings



Reverend Sally Coleman 0114 2664637