

Sermon preached by Sister Margaret Anne at 10am Sung Eucharist St Mary's Barnes on Fifth Sunday after Trinity 21 July 2019

It is as we are all too well aware a very uncertain time on both the global and the national scene. In the last few weeks tensions have been rising between Iran and the West, reaching unnerving levels of anxiety over the last few days. In our own nation we have the prospect later this week of our country gaining a new Prime Minister, and of the Queen greeting her 14<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister since Winston Churchill. Nevertheless, there remains a good deal of uncertainty as to how the issues around Brexit may play out in the coming weeks and months. On the one hand there are voices that the years of austerity are coming to an end, and on the other the fear that leaving the European Union with no deal would bring with it, if it happens, grave economic consequences for our nation. In all this turmoil and uncertainty, we can only hope that some sort of stability and order will begin to take hold. But we are not there yet.

As Christians and people of faith we inevitably ask – where is God in all this? And of course, there is no simple answer. Often in times of crisis it can help us to turn to the Scriptures for some measure of consolation and encouragement. Today's readings are helpful I think in the present ongoing climate of both national and international upheaval. Our first reading from Genesis (Genesis 18.1-10a) in the Old Testament serves to remind us that the God we believe in is the God of the impossible – the God who can go way beyond what we might think possible and therefore be our foundation for hope. Abraham is sitting down beside some oak trees in the heat of the day. Suddenly, the text says, that the Lord appears to Abraham in the form of three men standing near him. He offers hospitality and gives them a meal. After the meal one of the men ask where Abraham's wife is. The man then goes on to promise that he will return, and Abraham's wife Sarah will have a son. Immediately following this passage there are a few delightful verses not included in today's reading in which Sarah has overheard the conversation and laughs. Why does she laugh? Because she knows full well that she and her husband are far too old to have children. Nevertheless, despite their old age, the promise is fulfilled, and Isaac is born to Abraham and Sarah as the man had said.

There is a famous Russian icon by Rublev depicting the scene of the three men who visit Abraham, known as "The hospitality of Abraham". In this icon the three men are shown as angels seated round a table. On the table is an object that looks very much like a filled chalice, lending a distinctively Eucharistic tone to the scene. The three angels look at one another, forming a circular movement in terms of artistic lines, united in their bond of love. It is a very beautiful and highly skilled image of the Trinity – the God who is One Substance but Three Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

This story from Genesis indicates that God can do the seemingly impossible for us. It may not always be what we expect, or the way we would expect. Nevertheless, God is love and God is with us and for us, and no matter how tough things get, we still have cause to live in hope. Suffering is interwoven into the very fabric of life and we cannot expect to escape suffering in some measure. It's how we handle it and bear it that matters, trusting in the God who made us and cares for us – the God who is constantly working to bring good out of suffering and evil.

Our gospel reading today from Luke (Luke 10.38-42) perhaps best of all summarises how we can cope when we are really up against it – if all else fails, we can pray. Martha welcomes Jesus into her home for a meal. Like our Old Testament reading, the context of the scene is again that of hospitality, that great biblical theme of God meeting us and communicating something important to us as we share food and drink with others. Above all when we share bread and wine in the eucharist. In this gospel scene Mary, instead of helping her sister Martha get the meal ready, simply sits at Jesus' feet and listens to him. Martha complains to Jesus that Mary is doing nothing to help

her. Jesus however commends Mary for having chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her. Mary has chosen to listen, to pray. This is not a story suggesting that action and service count for nothing and that all we need to do is pray all day long. Far from it. Remember the context in which this passage is set – that of the Good Samaritan, which immediately precedes it, in which Jesus' punch line is

“Go and do likewise”.

Service and loving action towards one's neighbour and social action in general is vital. But from a Christian perspective it must be accompanied and enlivened by prayer. For prayer in essence is the heart of our relationship with God. And if we neglect our relationship with God, then we will be the losers. When we lead busy lives, it is so often tempting and easy to neglect prayer. And I certainly know this from my own experience. But when this happens, I know that I am the one who loses out. Our prayer life can go for a long time when it feels dry and unproductive. Many of the great saints down the ages testify to this in their writings. It doesn't mean that nothing is happening in terms of our spiritual growth. In fact, it can mean quite the opposite. God loves us, and God longs for our response of love. And one of the best ways we can give our loving response to God is simply to be there, still before God, and listen.....and wait. In due time, and with patience, God will speak, as God did to Abraham and Sarah.

Jesus in his teaching is so often radical in ways that we today do not always get. In the story of the Good Samaritan, immediately preceding that of Martha and Mary, he demonstrated that it was the spurned outsider, the Samaritan, who was the one who really showed love towards his needy neighbour. In today's story, it is revealed that true discipleship, that of primarily and first of all being close to Jesus and listening to him and being open to his loving communication, is there for all to receive, women such as Mary as much as men, and even children. Jesus may have chosen twelve male apostles, but it is abundantly clear from the gospel accounts that many women followed him closely and supported him, despite their inferior position in the society of the day. And was not Mary Magdalene, whose feast day we keep tomorrow, the first to witness to the resurrection and consequently honoured with the title: Apostle to the Apostles?

So, let's thank God that God can do the seemingly impossible with our lives and circumstances. And despite the odds let us never lose hope. I'd like to end by quoting a poem by the nun Carol Bieleck, a poem quoted in full in Richard Rohr's book of the same title, *Breathing Under Water*. In it the poet uses the image of the sea for anything in life that might threaten to overwhelm us.

I built my house by the sea.  
Not on the sands, mind you;  
not on the shifting sand.  
And I built it of rock.  
A strong house  
by a strong sea.  
And we got well acquainted, the sea and I.  
Good neighbours.  
Not that we spoke much.  
We met in silences.  
Respectful, keeping our distance,  
but looking our thoughts across the fence of sand.  
Always, the fence of sand our barrier,  
always, the sand between.

And then one day,  
- and I still don't know how it happened –  
the sea came.  
Without warning.

Without welcome, even.  
Not sudden and swift, but a shifting across the sand like wine,  
less like the flow of water than the flow of blood.  
Slow, but coming.  
Slow, but flowing like an open wound.  
And I thought of flight and I thought of drowning  
and I thought of death.  
And while I thought the sea crept higher, till it reached my door.  
And I knew then, there was neither flight, nor death, nor drowning.  
That when the sea comes calling you stop being neighbours  
Well acquainted, friendly-at-a-distance, neighbours  
And you give your house for a coral castle,  
And you learn to breathe underwater.