

Sermon by the Revd Sister Margaret Anne for the pre-recorded 10am Parish Eucharist for 1st Sunday after Trinity 14 June at St Mary's Barnes

First reading: Genesis 18.1-15

Gospel reading: Matthew 9.35-10.8

One of the recurring thoughts I have had through lockdown is that the nation, indeed the world, is going through a significant grief cycle on a massive scale. In these recent weeks and months we have all lost so much. Many families have lost loved ones due to their death from the Corona virus Covid 19, whether their loved ones died at home, in hospital, hospices or care homes. More than 40,000 such deaths have now been recorded in the UK. The global pandemic has brought with it countless stories of tragic loss. Any significant loss involves us in a grief journey. The death of a loved one plunges us into grief. But so can the loss of a job, moving house, retirement, a break up of an important relationship, and so on. And lockdown is yet another means of setting off the grief cycle in people's lives. So many simple pleasures of life are denied to us at this time, such as seeing family and friends and marking special occasions, such as a wedding. Eating out together, playing sport at the local club: whatever it is we are denied in these unprecedented times (and there will be many such things) these extraordinary and challenging circumstances have a profound impact on us, physically, emotionally, socially, economically, spiritually.

Back in the 1960's the American doctor Elizabeth Kubler-Ross wrote a seminal book on the subject of grief entitled "On Death and Dying". As she treated her patients who were suffering from terminal cancer, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross noticed in her conversations with them what she came to term as a grief cycle, as her dying patients grieved as they anticipated their own death. She observed this grief cycle consisted of five stages:

- 1) Shock, denial and isolation
- 2) Anger
- 3) Bargaining
- 4) Depression
- 5) Acceptance

Kubler-Ross also observed that these five stages of grief formed a spiral or cycle. Patients might move backwards and forwards through the varying stages.

In the midst of lockdown, on our not so good days, we might well wonder when, if at all, this is all going to end. Will our lives, our world, be changed forever? There are so many unanswered questions, and the uncertainty is difficult to live with: it is easier to have reassuring answers. In all of this the Christian virtue of hope is essential. We need reminding that our God is the God of the impossible, that it is in the nature of God always to bring good from evil, and that in God our lives still have promise. Our first reading today from the book of Genesis is a lovely story of such godly truths. Abraham and his wife Sarah are growing old together. One day, unexpectedly, as Abraham sits outside his tent by some oak trees on a hot day, God appears to him. The story tells us that he sees God in the form of three men, three strangers. The three strangers are provided with the best hospitality in the form of a lavish meal. One of the men promises that they will return, and that Sarah will bear a son. Sarah is clearly well beyond the age of child-bearing, and she laughs at the prospect of becoming pregnant in her old age. Yet the promise comes true.

Last Sunday was Trinity Sunday, and there is a beautiful and famous icon of this biblical scene which depicts the Trinity in the form of three angels seated round a table. It is entitled the Hospitality of Abraham, with reference to the story today in our first reading. The mysterious angelic trio who

bear a message of good news are depicted in the Russian icon by Rublev with exquisite beauty. On the table at which they are seated is an object that looks very much like a filled chalice, lending a distinctly 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 mutual love. It is a very lovely and highly skilled depiction of the Trinity.

We may find it hard to hang on to hope during lockdown, even when there are signs of its restrictions being eased. The experience has changed all of us, and those changes might well be a mixture of both the positive and the negative for each one of us. We might well ask ourselves, what is our Christian calling now, in these particular times of restricted movements and activities, and increased isolation for so many? The death of George Floyd in America has had a global impact, and many have come out of isolation and restrictions in a shared protest of outrage and anger that institutional racism is still an ugly reality in society, and still needs to be challenged. Social justice is at the heart of the gospel. Our gospel reading today from Matthew reveals Jesus calling his twelve disciples around him and giving them authority for a mission. Jesus has compassion for the crowds, because he sees them as “harassed and helpless”. So he sends his closest followers out to preach, to teach and to heal. They are to proclaim the good news that “The kingdom of heaven has come near”.

Whenever someone is healed, whenever justice and truth and reconciliation prevail over bitterness and injustice, whenever a wrong is put right, then the kingdom of heaven has come near. It is our calling as Christians to engage in such ways, however small-scale those ways open to us might seem. It is our calling to continue to live in hope, despite the odds. Today, 14 June, is the feast day of Richard Baxter, a seventeenth century Puritan Divine. He opposed the Civil War during the reign of Charles I, and played a prominent part in the recall of Charles II. I close with one of his prayers:

Keep me, O Lord,
while I tarry on this earth,
in a daily serious seeking after thee
and in a believing and affectionate walking with thee;
that when thou comest,

I may be found not hiding my talent,
nor yet asleep with my lamp unfurnished;
but waiting and longing for my Lord,
my glorious God,
for ever and ever. Amen.