***Welcome!...***

***Each double page as follows – A4 landscape style in two columns – represents a reflection relating to the Sunday church Bible readings (from the Revised Common Lectionary three-year cycle, used as standard in the Church of England and other denominations). I am selective in which of them I focus upon each Sunday. Each thought relates to my online homily uploaded to the You Tube channel ‘Peace to Camera’.***

***You will find the order here runs in reverse chronology. ‘The latest shall be first and the first shall be last.’***

***I take an inspirational approach to each message, rather than a strictly academic one. I am prone to thinking outside the box. I.e., I try to listen to what God might want to say, rather than following orthodox convention for its own sake. We have a living Divine, an active, dynamic Holy Spirit, not a dry, crusty set of dogmas locked in prescribed formulas from religious leaders from a bygone age.***

***‘Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer.’ Psalm 19***

***Revd Robin Stapleford***

***Upper Wensum Benefice Rector***

**Second Sunday in Lent - 28th February 2021**

**Genesis 17:1-7,15-16; Psalm 22:22-30; Mark 8:31-end**

There is a lovely, choice verse from our psalm today that in this moment comes over as prophetic and pertinent and highly poetic:

*My praise is of Him in the great assembly.*

We shall soon be back together in church, the great assembly, to praise and worship in fellowship and solidarity.

*I will perform my vows in the presence of those who worship Him.*

We will share our liturgy together in our act of gathering on a Sunday.

*The poor shall eat and be satisfied.*

We will experience the spiritual nourishment that comes with the symbolism of Communion (the Eucharist), once again partaking of the bread… and in due course the wine.

This is our double-underlined Easter promise this year as lockdowns ease and the era of pandemic begins to fade. Our familiar service schedule and with it, Communion will resume fittingly on Easter day, the day of resurrection, as we go forward once more with gladness, a fresh outlook, and optimism for the future.

However, there are big lessons about life and our shared existence on this planet to learn from this period of hardship and reflection. We must see ourselves more as a global community and work together for the greater good – not only for humanity but the world at large, all living things and natural resources.

The sober fact is that the greatest threat to global health and survival is not a pandemic, but something far more threatening, the human population explosion. The little graph on the right says it all. The X is the cusp of BC(E) to AD, the Y is the turn of the following millennium, the Z is about now, and the 7 is billions and counting - the black shading is human population. Planetary resources cannot sustain this, without it being to the severe detriment of everything else. We have to take seriously this biggest issue of all and respond together accordingly, with a political will, and putting aside the obscene, obsessive cultural, economic, political, institutional mantra of ‘growth’ that infests a-spiritual values.

Spirit says quality, not quantity. And true quality can be found in the small and the modest… and the sustainable.



**First Sunday of Lent**

**21st February 2021**

**Psalm 25:1-10; Mark 1:9-15**

In our gospel reading today Jesus shows us a model for what happens in the spiritual life, be that in small ways or at the level of a lifetime. A threefold dynamic.

1. He is affirmed by his heavenly Father at the waters of baptism. Before anything occurs in his ministry, first he must know how much God loves him and has brought him into being for a reason, a unique purpose. ‘This is my Son the belovèd, with whom I am well pleased’, speaks the voice from heaven, for all to hear. Remarkably the same sentiment exists for each of us. You are God’s own belovèd son or daughter. You have a special reason for being here. You were breathed into life for a purpose and from a being of total, infinite love; love beyond our comprehension – but to get some little glimmer of it would be good for our spirits!
2. Secondly Jesus has to go straight out into the wilderness to ‘wrestle with his demons’ as we say nowadays, or to have a confrontation with Satan as the text puts it. Perhaps Jesus had to work through, prayerfully in his own mind, and work out how he was going to be this prophetic rabbi, this Messiah that he felt called to be. Would it be via celebrity status like a kind of Superman? Not really. The path God had for him was a humbling one that would seem outwardly to end in disaster. Jesus had to be clear on the vision, a vision forged in the rigours of fasting alone under the stars for an extended time. Likewise, we are tested in various ways – both the day-to-day lessons of life and sometimes with a major aspect of life that might last years or decades. It is all designed to help us become what we are meant to be.
3. Finally, Jesus comes back and is able to say, ‘Now the time is fulfilled, it’s time to proclaim the good news’. He was ready. Pre-wilderness, and pre-baptism blessing he wouldn’t have been. For us there is a right time for the right things in life. We might be impatient, but God in his wisdom has to prepare us – in uplifting ways and indeed in the testing of the harsher, usually unwelcome, aspects of life.

Jesus did what he was meant to do, he lived the life he was meant to live. Each of us, our life’s journey is to discover our unique path. And the dynamic along the way will often follow this threefold dynamic.

**Ash Wednesday & Lent**

**17th February 2021**

**Psalm 55 & Matthew 11:25-30** (found in the Prayer Book on St Matthias’ Day)

We think of Lent as a time of austerity and self-abnegation – a putting-down of oneself, cutting back, browbeating, a diminishing of the self. But perhaps God sees it as a time when he wishes for us to come and be refreshed. To focus again on the simple essentials of life, to set aside the complexities that can get us down.

‘Come away to a quiet place’ (Mark 6:31), Jesus said to his disciples. He understood the need for soul regeneration, ministering to oneself, perhaps in today’s more own and acceptable terms – good mental health.

After all, the archaic old English word Lent means springtime and is thought to be associated in its origins with *Len-gthening* of the days as the daylight steadily increases. It should be a time of hope and new life.

We have seen that neatly illustrated in the week leading up to Ash Wednesday this year, having had heavy snowfall that lay thick and deep for about a week with everything buried under winter’s blanket: Including the recently emerged lovely snowdrops that adorn various localities. They look so fragile and delicate. You wonder how they survive with kilos of snow encasing them and bearing down on them. And yet somehow, with the snow having very swiftly thawed away by Shrove Tuesday, there they are, pristine and perfect, perky and ready for more life and sunshine. A profound symbol that stands there to encourage us.

The winter might seem long – and that season can be taken as a metaphor for some of the harsher, more difficult and challenging things going on in our individual lives, as they do from time to time, and of course currently in the world at large. But *spring will come*, is the message loud and clear. The snowdrops in their fragile way declare it resolutely.

So, may Lent be a time when we can draw closer to the divine and leave life’s anxieties to one side. Let us hear God’s call to find rest for the mind, renewal, refreshment, and revival… all those good and uplifting R words.

**St Valentine’s Day**

**Last Sunday before Lent, 14th February 2021**

**Psalm 50:1-6; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9 (sel.)**

Valentine was a real person, and his day, Valentine’s Day is the Feast of St Valentine in the Church calendar.

Valentinus was a young bishop, an early church leader, not far from Rome in the A.D. 200s when Christians were still being persecuted and living a semi-underground existence.

The legend goes that Valentinus was arrested and put on trial in Rome, asked to recant his Christian beliefs, which he refused to do even under torture. He was sentenced to execution. The judge asked him to justify his belief in an obscure Jewish rabbi from Galilee cast as the Son of God and having said to have been raised from death. Valentinus prayed in the name of Christ for God’s power to come to the judge’s own daughter who was known to be blind. Her sight was miraculously restored. Nevertheless, the judge’s decision for the execution remained in place.

While awaiting punishment Valentinus sent a letter to the judge’s daughter blessing her and signing off, *Your Valentinus* - *Your Valentine*. In the centuries since his name has become associated with romantic affection. Of course, the story reflects a profound depth and breadth of the meaning of love, not only sentimental feelings. Valentinus displays the type of love Jesus promoted in his messages. In the Greek of the New Testament, it is *agapé*, which in the old traditional King James Bible (e.g., in the famous 1 Corinthians 13) is translated *charity* in the old-fashioned sense. A love that gives for the sake of the recipient, with no thought of recompense. This was Valentinus’ love. Praying for the daughter of the judge who sentenced him to a young death.

If there is a consolation it is that the name Valentine takes an enduring place in popular culture associated with love. How interesting to dig a little deeper, scratch the surface, and find out how Valentine’s Day came to be. Underneath it all is a profound reminder to follow in the Way of Christ in all aspects of life.

‘Will you be my Valentine?’ is a question it might be nice to have the opportunity to ask at some juncture in life! However, there is nothing to stop us at frequent intervals, in many circumstances, without romance being a factor, saying by action or word, in effect, *I will be your Valentine*. Simple, everyday kindness. The core value of love’s meaning.

**7th February 2021 *Second Sunday before Lent***

**Proverbs 8:1 & 22-31; Psalm 104:25-37; John 1:1-14**

Recently I was given my own key to the church tower. Hurray! After 12 plus years in the Benefice it’s like turning 21 and being given ‘the key to the door’. Going up to the top of the tower I realise how breath-taking it is, even a modest sized church tower you feel like you’re in the heavens, touching the sky. It could be a virtual Mount Everest. Everything below looks far away and diddy, whereas from the ground up you don’t think of the tower as being so massive.

It helped me consider how in the spiritual life – and this counts for all faith persuasions and even those who simply see a spiritual aspect to life – we are on a journey to reach towards that Higher Wisdom of God. To gain something His greater, heavenly perspective on life and the world that can calm our fears and lurking anxieties about the trivial and the incidental and helps us to realise there is after all a grand design and plan at play in our own life and in all things.

The Proverbs chapter 8 passage talks about this Wisdom being integral to the Divine nature. ‘I was there in the beginning’ with God, part of the dynamism that breathed all things into being. Rather like the classic John chapter 1 passage that poetically speaks of the Word – God’s expressive force – being there in the beginning. In Christian understanding Jesus is like a human, visible expression, a walking visual aid of what that Divine Wisdom and ‘Word’ (expression) look like and behave like.

There is a normal type of wisdom that perhaps assists us in making correct choices and discerning right from wrong. Then there is a level if you like further up, a Higher Wisdom, related to Godly grace. The kind of Wisdom that understands that life often involves waiting for the right thing to happen at the right time; it understands that retaliation – or as we might like to justify it, ‘standing up for oneself’, ‘giving as good as you get’ – might actually be counter-productive and ultimately unnecessary; it understands that in a time of trial there might be spiritual lessons about life that the ‘Universe’ has lovingly laid in our path to be learned, for the good and benefit and blessing of our timeless soul within.

This Higher Wisdom is there – if we choose to engage – both to be perceived and also expressed. It is not an easy path. It comes with challenges. That is how we learn. And Higher Wisdom’s ‘scripture’ lies not only in the pages of sacred writings, but in the ‘pages’ of nature all around us, and indeed the intricate, infinitely clever interweaving of life’s circumstances.

Higher Wisdom is there, potentially, to be applied to our own individual personal lives, and also in our understanding of what goes on in the world – even with something seemingly quite perplexing and troubling like a rare global pandemic.

As I stood up there ‘closer to God’ suddenly I discovered it was as if a ceiling or barrier between me, my prayers and God and His listening ear and ready answers evaporated. Each prayer I thought of – a plain, simple, reassuring answer seemed to come instantaneously into my intuitive mind. Was it being immersed in God’s sky without human clutter? Maybe. Later I reflected in the words of a poem:

*CLOSER TO GOD*

*Here, O Lord, Holy Father*

*Am I closer to Thy sky*

*Nearer to Thy refreshing light that gives and cultivates*

*And cascades its milky blue pleasure upon us*

*Here my eyes filter Thy Heavenly particles*

*I can touch Thee*

*Here I see as John’s Eagle sees*

*Thou puttest all life in Thy grand perspective*

*I share now, up here, Thy perspective*

*Church life, the interior*

*Gives hints of what is Above*

*But nowhere near this grandeur*

*As if locked in some dank dungeon -*

*We can only guess*

*Here be the revelation*

*Spilling over, cleansing the mind*

*Enabling the yearning pilgrim to breathe at last*

*Within the vortex of the church*

*And then perched high upon its portals*

*Be a fitting symbol of our two aspirations*

*To live now amid this dark underworld*

*With meaning*

*And what is to come -*

*Higher light to which we are beckoned, called, ushered*

*As I have sensed each and every Commendation*

*As the spirit is lifted by angels’ updraft*

*Unto our true belonging*

*Thy place of illimitable forever*

**‘Presentation of Christ in the Temple’ Sunday – 31/1/21**

**(Candlemas / Epiphany 4)**

**Malachi 3:1-4; Psalm 24:1-6; cf. Euripides (‘Hippolytus’)**

In antiquity there is a profound, fascinating, and arresting synchronicity between two classic texts from either side of the Mediterranean, as if in virtual dialogue like a question and answer.

The Greek playwright Euripides [pron. yoo-ripper-dees], in response to the narrative of his theatrical tragedy *Hippolytus* dated 428 B.C., expresses a yearning, through his stage ‘Chorus’ commentators on the action, for a truly loving Higher Being who helps us in life. The wish hangs in the air without an answer.

But at the same time, late 400s B.C., the Hebrew prophet Malachi - the last book in the standard Old Testament, before the New Testament breaks through with the advent of the long-awaited Jesus - writes God-inspired words as if in reply to the quest of the heart from Euripides. (See text, right.) ‘Yes, I will come!’ says the Lord. *Hang in there, do not despair. Your yearning will indeed be answered.*

Malachi belongs to the Jews, the so-called people of God. Euripides is a Greek ‘gentile’, a non-Jew, but he expresses a feeling common to all humanity that would like to think there is a benevolence above us that watches over us, has all things in hand – despite the sometimes-tragic circumstances of life – and a design and purpose for the world and our own individual lives. The prophetic text of Malachi in some mysterious way connects with the Euripides question on behalf of ordinary folk. This tells us that Jesus – who reveals himself to be Malachi’s *the one who is coming* – is for everyone, Jew, gentile, Greek… Anglo-Saxons! Etc.

On this Sunday we note the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, which comes 40 days after Christmas – the nearest Sunday to February 2nd. The gospel reading from Luke 2 tells of faithful old Anna who has given her life to prayer in the Jerusalem Temple, and similarly devout Simeon. Upon baby Jesus’ arrival in the Temple with Mary and Joseph for his customary dedication, both Anna and Simeon have a psychic recognition of who he is – the one they have been waiting for. Those sentiments of Euripides and Malachi in effect apply to them. Simeon then utters a poetic response recorded in the gospel text that has come to be known as the traditional short canticle the Nunc Dimittis, ‘Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace’; suggesting he, like Anna, is a ripe age. Effectively he says*, I can die happy now – I’ve laid eyes on the Messiah!*

The *Presentation of Christ* Sunday is also known as Candlemas, dedicating the church candles, and celebrating the oncoming light of pre-Spring. It coincides with the traditional pagan Imbolc festival – also marking anticipation of Spring, falling as it does at the halfway point between the Winter Solstice and the Spring Equinox.

So, Candlemas has wrapped up in it this poetic meeting-point of pagan and Christian perspectives, just like the ‘conversational’ meeting point between gentile Euripides and Jewish Malachi…. Christ is not for any one religious sect. Christ is for all.

Euripides: from *Hippolytus* dated 428 (5th Century) B.C.

The Chorus – commentators on the play:

*So, I have a secret hope of someone, a god, who is wise and plans; but my hopes grow dim when I see the deeds of men and their destinies. For fortune is ever veering, and the currents of life are shifting, shifting, wandering forever. This is the lot in life I seek and pray that God may grant it me, luck and prosperity and a heart untroubled by anguish. And a mind that is neither a false-clipped coin, nor too clear-eyed in sincerity, that I may lightly change my ways, my ways of today when tomorrow comes, and so be happy all my life long.*

Trans. Richmond Lattimore (Univ. of Chicago press)

Malachi 3:1 c. late 5th Century (400s) B.C.

*The Lord Almighty answers, ‘I will send my messenger to prepare the way for me. Then the Lord you are looking for will suddenly come to his Temple. The messenger you long to see will come and proclaim my covenant’.*

Good News Bible / Today’s English Version

RDS

**Epiphany 3**

**24th January 2021**

Genesis 14:17-20 (Revelation 19:6-20)

*Complementary reflection in conjunction with online homily at You Tube ‘Peace to Camera’ channel.*

In our Old Testament reading today one of our most fleeting and enigmatic Bible characters makes a cameo appearance. To meet him, we go way back 4,000 years to the earliest patriarch Abraham the father of the world’s main theistic religions Judaism (the Jews), Christianity, and Islam. He was the founding father. Or was he?

In the course of his nomadic travels, when he was still called Abram (‘honoured father’), before God formerly called him as a spiritual patriarch and changed his name to Abraham (‘honoured father of many’) he comes to a place called Salem and meets our mystery character. Salem means ‘peace’ – similar in character to the Hebrew word and Jewish greeting ‘shalom!’ It is thought likely that it was a small settlement on the site of what would become the iconic Jerusalem (Jeru-Salem, meaning ‘*city* of peace’). In this potent location Abram is greeted and blessed by Salem’s resident priestly chieftain… by the name of Melchizedek (pron. mel-kizzerdek). Melchizedek brings Abram bread and wine – sounds familiar?! – and blesses him in the name of *God Most High* – the universal great power.

So, here we have someone who predates Abraham, and predates, in a sense, global institutional religion. Melchizedek doesn’t belong to any formal religious institution that we would recognise. He represents something universal – a belief and trust in the Higher Power, the Creator, Whoever or Whatever it is that enabled us and all things to be. Melchizedek is a ‘priest’ of universal spirituality who is not confined to one religion or another. He represents something for everyone, the instinctive yearning we all have for that something spiritual in life; for the many who might say they don’t sign up to any one religion, but in their heart they feel that there is probably ‘Something’ – holding us and all things together, something benevolent.

Psalm 110:4 has a prophetic line that reads, ‘You are a priest in the order of Melchizedek’. In the New Testament the letter of Hebrews 5:10 picks up on that line and applies it to the burgeoning understanding of the significance of Jesus. In other words, Jesus did not come to create a new religion. Instead, he comes in the spirit of Melchizedek’s universal spirituality. A ‘Way’ (cf. John 14:6) – a way of life and outlook – that is for everyone, wherever they might sit of the spectrum of faith and philosophy.

Melchizedek was pan–institutional religion, and Jesus in his true essence is pan-religious. The gospel reading for today is John chapter 2, Jesus turning the water into wine. One way of understanding the symbolism of this, his first reported miracle, is that he is heralding a time of renewed understanding when people will no longer be fixated on the delineations between one religion and another, or between religious outlook and non-religious. Instead, all will come to appreciate that we are all spiritual beings – in a physical envelope - with a spiritual dimension and spiritual needs and aspirations. Something universal that joins us all together as human brothers and sisters. This transformed understanding and appreciation will be like water becoming wine.

*RDS*

**Epiphany 2 Sunday**

**17th January 2021**

**1 Samuel 3:1-10; Psalm 139 (selected); John 1:43-51**

We have some wonderfully intimate scriptures set for today. They show us that we are not called to be robotically religious, we are called to enter a phenomenal reality – that other R word, relationship with the Divine.

Psalm 139 is one that speaks of God knowing us better than we know ourselves, even from before birth. He knew us, he assigned for us a special bespoke journey in life. It is a reading I have become fond of using at christening services. We look at the little baby that can’t yet talk and won’t even remember things properly for a few years. But God already knows everything about him or her. We pray that the child will become what it is meant to be in life, and if possible, enjoy a sense that a loving Creator has brought it into being and is with it through everything that will occur.

The book of Samuel presents a touching story of the eponymous boy prophet – who will one day have an important role in selecting David for kingship - the ancestor of Jesus. Samuel is being schooled in spiritual ways by wise old Eli. As they lie asleep one night Samuel is woken by someone calling him. He runs to Eli saying, ‘Yes, master, you called me.’ Three times this happens. Eli denies all knowledge but then realises it is the voice of God. Finally, when Samuel hears the voice he replies, ‘Yes Lord, your servant is listening.’ And that is how a prophet is made – one who hears the voice of God.

In the passage God is referred to as LORD. The word in capitals indicates that the original Hebrew scribes the word YHWH (no syllable letters in Hebrew!) or Yahweh (also mispronounced as Jehovah), which is God’s name. The rabbis who read the texts considered it too holy to utter, so would say *Adonai* meaning Lord instead. Somehow that’s crept into almost all English Bibles. But there is something profound about the name of God, Yahweh. Its meaning is enigmatic, but might be something like, ‘I Am’ or ‘I Am Who I Am’ (cf. Exodus 3:14). If you like - *when you are God, you don’t need a name – you just ARE.*

God is saying, I can be as familiar to you as this: Your own I am. Your heartbeat, your breath, right inside your head, heart, spirit, soul, and mind. Not far away up on the altar or up in the sky on top of a cloud. Right here.

And in the gospel reading with the calling of disciple Nathaniel there is a lovely intimacy portrayed. ‘I choose you because you are you’. This is what God says to all of us. He enjoys our own particular, idiosyncratic skillset.

There seems to be an implication that Nathaniel has been reading the story of Jacob’s ladder from Genesis (chapter 28), or perhaps discussing it with his friend Philip. Jacob’s dream of a ladder going to heaven with angels going up and down on it. Jesus says in a mystical way, ‘You will see angels go up and down on the Son of Man’, by which he means he is an emblematic way to God, a way that gives all believers access. Several times in John’s gospel Jesus makes ‘I Am’ remarks. I am the resurrection, I am the way, I am the bread of life, I am the gate for the sheep, etc. Here he comes close to saying, in effect, I am the ladder, the means to become fully intimate with God, the God who knows you and loves you better than you know or love yourself.

**BAPTSIM OF CHRIST Sunday**

Jan. 10th 2021

Genesis 1:1-5; Mark 1:9-11

The Genesis passage from the beginning of the Bible speaks of a time before… the Bible. All there was, were the elemental forces of universe and cosmos and nature: *Let there be Light*, the power of the Creator. And when human beings began and started on their quest for the spiritual dimension of life, to affirm it and celebrate it, they had no scriptures. For them scripture, holy and sacred text was nature itself. The sun a symbol of God (or vice versa?!) The cycle of seasons speaking of the cycle of life. Goodness and providence can be seen in nature, guidance in the cosmos and the stars. Religious text, tradition, and formulas came later… and with it the downside of political exclusivism (!).

Then at the baptism of Christ there is again a refreshing dispensing with the need for prescribed liturgies. The liturgy is nature, God speaking through light, maybe thunder or earthquake, Jesus washed in the natural baptising invigoration of a flowing, healthy, life-giving river that feeds planet earth. There’s a wonderful, elemental naturalness to it all.

Maybe after two thousand years of tightly controlled religion in which so much emphasis is placed on reciting the correct creeds and belonging to the correct latest tribal delineation of theological thinking… at last we are just beginning to come to a new age of free spirituality in which religious modes which have helped many for so long have now helped launch us forward to embrace the Divine common to us all. This ‘religion’ has no walls, no exclusivism, no *us and them*. It is only *us*: Members of planet earth. Nature and Cosmos is our religion. The Creator’s hand and fingerprints and guidance can be seen everywhere if we have eyes to see and ears to hear. For His scripture is out there, in every language and beyond the language of mere literary form. A language of leaves, sunlight, birdsong, times and seasons, and the magical interweaving of life’s infinitely clever and intricate interconnectedness.

Jesus was baptised not in a mass of liturgical words and scriptural prescriptions, but the forces of our Creator’s universe, cosmos, and nature. This is spirituality at its most thrilling and fundamental. A spiritual life to which we are all called, and humanity at large is welcomed… and perhaps will become more and more manifest.

Reflective poem:

***These are My Scriptures***

The birds sing higher than any psalms

The Light breathes greater than any god

Unfolding its mysterious magic

moment by moment, colour by colour

The air that cleanses, heals, and enlightens, is my Spirit

The trees with their fingers pointing to heaven are my prophets

Four Seasons be my quadrant of the Gospels

 corner-points of this Holy Temple

 so supremely manifest yet invisible to the cultured intellect

The flow of energy through each day’s circus story –

ready, unfolding epistles

delivered for the moment as bespoke guidance from our teachers

The night and her depths of insight, eternal lights twinkling

*Lun* reflecting *Sol*, balancing Mother earth –

The deepest mysteries of Revelation, enigmatic, arresting, alluring

And they all do speak –

` eloquent, poetic, penetrating as Paul’s ‘sharp sword’

They wash me, they surround me

love, cradle, nurture, guide, enter my veins, sinews, brainwaves

all

*RDS*