Roughly twelve weeks ago it was Christmas day. There were high spirits which may have had a little to do with the bottled sort and we ate too much and I hope laughed loudly. There was probably the odd barney or two but being thrust together in the same space for a couple of days can definitely raise a few tensions.

Now many of us will be spending probably more consistent time with our families than we have spent for years. And of course there are those of us who live alone and will be more isolated than we previously were. One thing is for sure, this is going to be a long haul, a marathon, not a sprint…... Or perhaps this is an initiation.

The entry point for many tribal initiations is fear. Fear of losing control, fear of dying, the deep fear of the unknown. This fear becomes apparent during the purging stage. The purging stage is the first stage of many rites of passage. This is the stage we are now in. I do not wish in any way to make light of both the bravery of all those dealing with Covid 19 on the front line as well as those who have contracted the virus, those who are seriously ill and the suffering of those families who have lost and will lose loved ones. But in the queues for the supermarkets, at petrol stations and on the news the fear is palpable. Most of all we feel it, this fear, as a form of anxiety. This either comes in waves or it is there as an underlying hum, a shadow in the background. This fear, this anxiety changes our behaviour, we become less tolerant, much more self protective, more impatient, our fuses shorten, our bodies respond as they would just before an attack.

This is the state the disciples were in during the storm on the sea of Galilee, you can almost hear the panic in their words, see the fear in their eyes as they woke him ‘ Teacher do you not care that we are perishing.’ he simply stood up and said to the storm ‘ Peace. Be still’

In every human life there will be initiation. In tribal societies and conservative religious communities this process, this reality is structured. In the Jewish tradition the bahmitzvar, in the aborigional tradition, the walkabout. In the Christian tradition Lent was intended to be the rite of passage leading to baptism. But embedded within human existence are the initiations of love, of tragedy, of heartbreak, of loss, of hunger. These rites of passage both allow us to move from one perspective to another but also mark time within the context of a life. They also ferment times of deep reflection and they are times of deep learning.

Within the Christian tradition there is meant to be space every year for ‘ Retreat’ a time when we take ourselves out of the swim of our lives, the busyness and we spend some in silence, without screens, mobile phones. These are times to untie the knots, to find forgiveness, to come to terms with, to recognise error, to face selfishness and even harder, beauty. It would seem now that half the human population is on retreat. The constant hamster wheel we were all on, the way we are living meant most of us never had the time to reflect, to truly heal. To move forward not carrying the wounds of the past with us. This way of living, our way of living, our unhealing has infected everything from the deepest oceans to the air, from the leopard to the lama, the birds, the flowers, the butterflies, every hill, every ice cap, every stream. All of life enduring the tragedy of human arrogance, of human separation, of a dominion almost empty of love. And now we are woken from our forgetting by the tiniest of beings, shaken, we are being shaken.

As was mentioned earlier. The entry point for many initiations is fear. When we have no choice but to venture out beyond the routines, the patterns and all the apparent certainties that we have all put in place and believed in. What is waiting for us are the reasons for the choices we have made and in many cases the fear that generated those decisions. And right now we are all confronted with fear. Listen to it. Listen to what it is trying to say. Yes we can go round it, open a bottle, change the subject, watch a film, eat some ice cream, make ourselves busy. But these are very short term temporary fixes and the point of being on retreat is to look them in the eye. To take the purge, to hear and to see.

In the old testament. In the first book of Kings. Elijah is on the run, he is fearing for his life and hiding out in the depths of a cave. ‘ Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake but the lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of sheer silence. ‘

This is the time, now is the time to know ‘ Sanctuary’ to know it in yourself as the place that is free from anxiety, free from worry. It is there, it is here waiting for us, waiting for us always. It is at the end of the path taken through the fear, through the anxiety, through the storm, through the fire, through the earthquake and into the silence. Know it as your safe place. Imagine a room, a grove somewhere that you are completely safe within. This is the great gift of Sanctuary. Take yourself to this place of peace before you sleep. Give thanks for your life, for another day, how extraordinarily precious they have become.