

**Sermon, D'Arcy 8am/Tollesbury 9.30, 22.4.18. Reverend Sarah Clare**

**John 10:11-18; Acts 4:5-12**

It's been a challenging week. Not only did we learn at our ministry team meeting on Tuesday, that one of our ministry team priests needs to step back from ministry to concentrate on her health issues, but also in Tollesbury a young girl took her own life...

The impact on her family is naturally huge. She was deeply loved and cherished, and surrounded by kindness and compassion. She had been given good role models all her life, and encouraged in all she had set her heart on. All of which she knew. And said so.

But it wasn't enough to combat her own fragile mental ill-health.

The grieving family is now confronted with the different elements of grief associated particularly (though not exclusively) with suicide – feelings of betrayal, rejection, hurt, anger, disbelief, as well of course as intense sorrow...

*You* may well have had to deal with these elements of grief yourselves.

Certainly, some of those emotions *Jesus* would identify with. Before his own crucifixion he was betrayed and rejected even by his closest disciples; he had to listen to shouts of 'crucify him' from a crowd of people who days before had cried out 'Hosanna' and called him King, Son of David, Saviour.... If he felt anger he hid it. I imagine he felt hurt and sorrowful to the core of his being at what had to happen.

The Christian community in Tollesbury responded by dedicating the church on Thursday to a candle-lit vigil. The invitation was to anyone who wanted to come, sit a while, maybe light a candle and remember the young woman.

Members of the Christian community, which included our brothers and sisters in the Congregational Church, ensured that there was someone on hand throughout the day – to be a comforting, prayerful presence. There was a constant stream of mourners for over 9 hours – around 180 visits - appreciating that there was a place, a *special* place, made available for them to grieve. They seemed to find a measure of something within the church, with the Paschal candle lit, and a simple vase of garden flowers to look at.....

What was it? Love? Peace? Healing? The quiet presence of Jesus? Certainly the building is infused with centuries of prayer...

I wanted to talk about this today for several reasons:

- When a tragedy takes place in small communities like ours, it affects everyone – whether they know the people involved or not – often by reminding them of their own times of grief. It's powerful and it's human
- I'm conscious, too, that while we are all getting better at recognising the reality and the heartache of mental ill-health, which comes in so many forms, it stills carries something of a taboo. Our own vicar is currently battling with depression and its energy-sapping, anxiety-making, life-reducing effects. This, too, is only human.....
- The brain is an organ like any other, only far more complex. We readily recognise the struggles people have with liver, kidney and heart disease. But somehow the brain, the *mind*, the very engine of the body, hasn't been given the same degree of attention and recognition. We need to increase our knowledge and awareness, and our understanding and compassion for those unfortunate enough to suffer....

- And then there's the passage we had today from John. It's rightly called The Good Shepherd passage, because in it Jesus makes one of his famous 'I am' statements. 'I am the good shepherd,' he says. 'The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.' And we are often then reminded that with Good Friday only 3 weeks ago, that's exactly what our Lord Jesus did – he laid down his life for all of us...

But when I was reading this passage earlier in the week, a completely different verse jumped out at me; one I've never really noticed before. [do you sometimes find that happens to you?] It was v16: **'I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.'**

Who are those other sheep? Who are the ones that Jesus is still seeking, through us? We need to think carefully about this, because it's at the heart of who we are as a people.

Are we looking for people *like us* to share the gospel with? People we understand, have natural empathy with...?

Are we brave enough to try and share the gospel with people who seem *different* to us; people we might not normally try to mix with...?

Are we even looking to *share* the gospel at all??

Because *that's what we are called to do* – in Jesus' Great Commission.

Remember? 'Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.' That's what Jesus said.

And it's one of the Five Marks of Mission we're all signed up to as part of the Anglican church.

Perhaps we get hung up on the 'all nations' bit. Of course it still holds true. But closer to home, *much* closer to home - right here – right now – there are a great many people in our own communities who don't know Jesus *at all*.

It's one of the great challenges of our time. If not the greatest challenge. How do we reach them? *How* do we share what is so precious to us – our faith – with them? And *who* are we trying to share it with?

I don't have the answers, but I do need to ask the questions.

There's something about 'coming alongside' people ***where they are*** that's really important. Without judgement. Without condemnation. With compassion. It's something Jesus was really good at.

It's something I think we all tend to struggle with. It's in our nature to want people to join us where ***we*** are. But it doesn't work. It just doesn't. People resent others trying to make them in their own image. I am, as always, talking as much to myself here as anyone else....

Sharing the gospel involves, amongst other things, 'acts of random kindness'. Because those acts of random kindness come from a place of selflessness, rather than a place of self. Not 'what can I get out of this', but rather 'how can I offer you something you need?'

And we have so many people in need within our communities. People who are lonely, who feel excluded from life. There are people who are frightened; people struggling with addictions; with mental health issues; with domestic violence and abuse. The need is all around us.

How do we address it? We need to do *something* otherwise we risk becoming irrelevant to others – and to Jesus.

One of the answers is to **PRAY**.

I say *one* of the answers, but really it's the **key** answer. Because I'm talking about intentional prayer, prayer *with real intent, real focus*; prayer that's approached with the same energy you'd use in doing something physical. Rolling-your-sleeves up kind of praying. I'm talking about a call to pray not just for those who are struggling, but pray too for the wisdom and discernment to know *how* to help people, and *who* to help...

Our vicar has *prophetic prayer* as one of his 3 strands of mission for our benefice. [The other 2 are prophetic proclamation and prophetic pastoral care.]

The thing is, we can't do this in our own strength. That's been shown time and time again.

And we're not meant to.

Prayer is about involving ourselves with God and God's plans for this world. It's about committing ourselves to be active participants in building the kingdom, by deliberately setting aside time to talk *and to listen* to God.

In the next few weeks there's going to be a huge international Christian initiative. It's called ***Thy Kingdom Come***. Some of you may already be familiar with it. And there'll be more about it in next week's pew sheet. It started out as an invitation from our two Archbishops in 2016, who saw the desperate need for us all to join together, ecumenically, to pray.

It's ecumenical and runs for 10 days between Ascension Day (10 May), when we remember Jesus being lifted up to heaven and disappearing from the sight of his disciples; and Pentecost (20 May), when we celebrate the outpouring of

the Holy Spirit on Jews gathered in Jerusalem. If you put Thy Kingdom Come into your internet search engine you can read all about it.

Basically the idea is that you *commit to pray* with God's world-wide family for these 10 days. That's just 10 days of your life...

If you remember, that's how it all kicked off for the disciples, because 'they were constantly devoting themselves to prayer'. How many of us do that? How many of us pray every day? For more than a few minutes? *Really* pray?!

We're asked to pray for 5 people we know personally who don't yet know Jesus. How about that? Does that seem manageable? Can you think of 5 people you know, who don't share your faith? You commit to pray for them every day of those 10 days....

You could also commit to pray for those in our communities here who are vulnerable, suffering, isolated, lost.... You could write a list of people you know in one of those categories (here in our benefice, or elsewhere if they're known to you as maybe a friend or a member of the family), and just pray down your list every day of those 10 days.

The hope is that in joining in everyone will

- deepen their friendship with Jesus
- bring others to him or to know him better
- and come to know that every bit of their life is the stuff of prayer ☺

The ministry team is committed to this. We're going to sign ourselves up as individuals.

And actually I'm asking **You** to do the same thing too. This is not a theoretical sermon, this is *a call to action*. Because this is something we *can* do. It's a great place to start. Read about it online (it's very easy to access), and then sign yourselves up. Make your light shine along with others around the world. And be expectant.

Who knows where it might lead? Who knows what we might be encouraged to do, or to be?.... what we might hear?

And the other thing is, whose name are we doing all of this in?

The name that is above all names. The name that Peter and the disciples spoke about in our reading from Acts. 'By what power or by what name did you do this?' (heal someone, that's what they'd done) he's asked by the church authority of the day.

'This man is standing before you in good health **by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth,**' replies Peter.

*That's* whose name we invoke. *Jesus* is our authority. And that is how we pray all our prayers – **through Jesus Christ our Lord.**

I invite you to become part of this. To play your part, however small that might be.

In the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

