

The Rectory
Rectory Close
Radyr CF15 8EW
vicki.burrows@me.com
Tel 029 20842417 or 07515 965781

Dear Friends,

Vocations Sunday.....The Lord's my shepherd
(Readings Acts 2.42-47, Psalm 23 and John 10.1-10)

Not long before I was ordained Deacon in Guildford Cathedral the Lord Lieutenant of Surrey, a Lay Reader (Licensed Lay Minister) in the church, who had reviewed my sermons during training, gave me two pieces of sound advice. "You may want to believe that the pulpit is six feet above contradiction but it is not" and "don't let people put you on a pedestal for if you do you will fall off". Ken's words still haunt me for I realise the huge responsibility that ordination confers on us not least because you might just believe some of the things I say.



Back in 1993 The Reverend Billy Graham asked, "Is AIDS a judgment of God?" He then answered his own question by saying that whilst he could not be certain he thought so. Graham later apologised to the gay community but the damage was done. Sadly, many came to believe that this was the view held by thinking Christians. During my curacy, I was asked in the local sweet shop to explain why God had sent a tsunami on Boxing Day. Recently, a few people have dared to allege that God's judgment has been unleashed upon the world in the form of Covid-19. Personally I cannot believe in a god who sends disease, moves tectonic plates or creates a virus for our destruction. I do however believe that such situations make us face our mortality and that, through suffering, God may be seen. This morning as I opened a gift, a rainbow gift beautifully crocheted by Paulette (who worships at St John's), I reflected on the flood story. God sets a rainbow in the sky as a reminder that never again will God bring harm to the earth.



When I was 23 and expecting our eldest son I became a Christian through reading the bible as I travelled to work from Norwich to London. In it, I found not histories, but stories of a people trying to explain their sense that God is with them through good times and bad. In their victories and in their losses, in the births of their children and in the depths of their grief, they tell a myriad of stories that say God shares human life in all its highs and lows. By the time I reached the end of the bible I had come to believe that God is the word for all that is good and life giving. Or, put simply and poignantly as we read in scripture, "God is love".

In contrast I came to believe that the devil owes more to Milton's *Paradise Lost* than the bible. I do believe there is sin and evil in the world and, if I must, I occasionally use the words devil or Satan for evil personified. However, sin and evil are not of God - they are the things that sometime happen inexplicably or we choose them - they are soul destroying and suck life from us. Time and again in the Hebrew bible YHWH calls his people to "choose life" - not life lived in the fast lane or a life based on riches or success but a life lived not just for self but for others. As I read the New Testament I discovered love personified in the person of Jesus. So I dare to say that this love is God in the flesh or, if I want to use religious language, I say the incarnate One. As the bible ends, the book of Revelation tells a story that reveals who we are called to be in the light of who the very human Jesus became: the Lamb of God, who sacrifices himself for the sake of the world and calls us to follow in his way.

This Fourth Sunday of Easter is Vocations Sunday when our readings gather up these themes. Peter's sermon on that first Pentecost when God's spirit was felt by thousands speaks about the

life of the early church. They devoted themselves to teaching and fellowship, worship in the temple and the breaking of bread and prayers in their homes. Their faith was expressed not in evangelism or church building but in relationship and generosity for their neighbours with whom they shared their possessions. Perhaps it was because of their generosity that the early church grew so fast.

Psalms 23 and the reading from John's gospel are so well known that sometimes we miss what they have to say to us today. The psalmist speaks of the life of faith being a gift - we are invited to receive, accept, trust and respond to the shepherd who leads his flock to pasture, water and safe paths in a land of untamed beasts and inadequate rain. The sheep are unafraid as they travel through danger and the darkest valleys because the shepherd is with them, feeding them and watching over them. No wonder the early church, fearful and persecuted, found the metaphor of the shepherd such a comfort. The Hebrew bible filled with examples and pictures of a good shepherd laying down his life for the flock now becomes an unforgettable expression of Jesus' love for the church in John's gospel where he describes himself both as the gate to life in all its fullness and the shepherd who leads his sheep.



On Vocations Sunday are we being challenged by these images? IF the church is called to be a sign and sacrament of God's love for the world and IF we are meant to look like the shepherd who leads sheep to fullness of life then what can we do now whilst we are isolated from each other?

During this week I have had conversations with a number of local head teachers. Each of them is involved in providing or facilitating a hub for children of key workers and disadvantaged children. Even in Radyr, Morganstown and Danescourt, there are families who are hungry. Numerous children would normally receive Free School Meals each day - in lockdown they should be receiving vouchers from the government but for those without internet access or the ability to travel, "this has been problematic and therefore difficult to get the food or money they need". Our heads are calling their vulnerable families regularly and dropping round to them with educational resources but if the church could provide food parcels for these families it would make a huge difference. One head has suggested she would like to drop off food with the children's learning each Monday. Please protect lives and our NHS by staying safely at home...**but if you are already shopping and would be willing and able to give some items of food please deliver them to The Rectory - I will leave a red bin for donations outside the door for your gifts of - tinned soup, tinned beans, tinned vegetables, pasta, rice, tinned tomatoes, pasta sauce, lentils/beans/pulses, tinned meat, tea/coffee, UHT milk, tinned fruit, biscuits, fruit juice, toiletries - anything you would feel is essential for a primary school age family.** If we can gather enough donations I will provide weekly food boxes for families as requested.

...and finally, whilst we are thinking about the life and vocation of the church, may I remind you that the church relies on your generosity to sustain its worshipping life and to serve the community. Although our church buildings are closed and our income from plate collections and hirings has dropped significantly, most of our costs remain. So please give generously to sustain our ministry and mission. Many of you will remember that the Sunday before our churches closed I spoke about stewardship and gave you all a letter reminding you of the costs of sustaining our churches (a copy of this is attached to Nick's email again today)..Gift Direct remains the best way to give regularly so, if you would like to amend your giving or donate for the first time please sign up on line - www.churchinwales.org.uk/en/clergy-and-members/gift-direct. For those of you who normally place a cash donation in the plate, please think about changing to the online giving or put aside funds each week to be placed in the collection when we return. As you can imagine we are expecting a short fall of many thousands due to the loss of the summer fete, hall hirings, collections at Easter, baptisms, weddings and funerals along with our regular collections

Perhaps this post communion prayer will help us as we prayerfully think about our vocation individually and as a church

Merciful Father, you gave your Son Jesus Christ to be the good shepherd and his love for us to lay down his life and rise again; keep us always under his protection, and give us grace to follow in his steps through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

With love and prayers

Vicki

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PS next Sunday's YouTube service to mark the beginning of Christian Aid Week will focus on those who have been hit hardest by the Covid-19 in the poorest countries with the least developed health care.

I hope you will join the worship with me and give generously www.christianaid.org.uk and click the red donate tab.

Christian Aid Week 10-16 May

Love never fails.

Coronavirus impacts all of us.

But love unites us all