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Dear Friends,

At the name of Jesus every knee should bend (Philippians 2.10)

Cat lives in Leeds, she has just completed her A levels, achieved three A grades and one A* grade. I'm incredibly proud of her and whilst I have never met her in person I pray for her often. Four years ago Cat called me when she was just 15 to tell me that her mother was dying, that her father didn't live with them, that she had no siblings and that she was scared. Cat attended an independent girls day school, worshipped with her mum at an Anglo Catholic Church in the city, was a committed Christian and simply found my number by googling "a priest called Vicki" when she decided she needed a female priest to talk to. Over many months she poured out her heart to me whilst I at the end of the phone felt helpless to save this articulate young lady from her emotional pain and the impending death of her mother.

As the months went by she shared with me the pact that she had made with her mother - she would juggle her education and nursing her at home, her school would provide her with home education and the district nurses would support her. As her mother declined she shared with me her fears about the future; Cat would go to live with her godbrothers and godparents. In the last weeks of her mother's life she would call me late into the night whispering down the phone as her mother faded. And then it happened. At 2am one morning she called to say she was lying in bed beside her beloved mother's body. I asked her to call her godparents who only lived across the road to come and support her and to phone the doctor to come and certify her mother's death. She couldn't and she wouldn't and I felt helpless for I had never managed to obtain her address - she was a child in need who I was called to care for as best I could at a distance. And so for hours through the night as she lay with her departed mother she oscillated between weeping inconsolably, trying to be brave and expressing her trust in the God whom she believed would enfold her and her mother in love.

Cat expressed her deep faith by singing quietly to me as she lay there. Her words were haunting. This was a child doing theology through hymnody as she tried to come to terms with death and explore the meaning of resurrection by singing to her priest, confessor and comforter. "In Christ alone...." she sang over and over again. "The Lord's my shepherd...." she sang with her voice breaking, And slowly between sobs she sang "I danced in the morning....they cut me down and I leapt up high, I am the life that will never, never die" I wept silently as I listened to her. And I wept again after we spoke today for the first time in ages as she told me she had been forced to defer her university place not due to Covid but because having been given lower grades by the original English A level algorithm system her revised grades came too late and her course was full to capacity. I shall think of Cat when we sing Claire's choice of "I danced in the morning" for St Mary's Zoom worship this Sunday.

I suspect like Cat I'm not alone in finding comfort in hymn singing. At times of joy and times of sadness particular hymns go round and round in my head. Long ago St Augustine said, "to sing is to pray twice". Singing for many of us is the way we work out our feelings, express our longings and disappointments, cry for help and shout for joy. People of faith sing as they try to reach out to God in their loneliness as well as in humble adoration and heartfelt thanks. We have all done theology through hymnody and whilst some of the hymns and songs we sing in our churches owe more to poetic license than good theology we remember them in a way we cannot call to mind verses from the bible. Hymns get inside us and shape us and sometimes even confront us with our brokenness and our need of reform. It was ever thus.

When Paul writes to the early church in Philippi, as he tries to inspire them to live Christ like lives by putting aside selfish ambitions, he quotes from what could be the earliest Christian hymn

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form, he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death -
even death on a cross.*

*Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

Paul believes his imprisonment will lead to a greater proclamation and sharing in the gospel but uses the hymn to remind the believers, who are trying to work out how they should follow their Lord, not to be conformed to the context and culture in which they live but to have their lives shaped by God's Christ who came not to be served but to serve and be a servant of all.

In the final week of his life Jesus confronts those people who hide their hunger for power over others by cloaking their behaviours not just in seeming respectability but in religion. He overturns their tables in the temple and when the chief priests and elders ask; "by what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority" he tells a tale at their expense. A man has two sons. One when asked to go and work in the vineyard refuses but later rolls up his sleeves and gets on with the job. Another when asked to work agrees to go but does nothing. "So which one" asks Jesus "did the will of his father?" Jesus reminds the holier than thous that it was the hated tax collectors and prostitutes who understood their need for God when John came preaching repentance unlike the religious ones who foolishly thought they could dress the part and pay lip service to God whilst marginalising and oppressing others.

In the coming years the parishes within the Diocese of Llandaff will be trying to work out how we can better serve the needs of our communities and draw others to worship "at the name of Jesus". At our PCCs and within our churches you will begin to hear more about Ministry Areas; we are being asked to work closely at every level with those in our North West Ministry Area of Pentyrch and Capel Llaniltern, Radyr, St Fagans & Michaelston-super-Ely, Taffs Well and Tongwynlais. I am sharing with you The Diocesan "Handbook for Ministry Areas" published this week ahead of our Diocesan Conference today. I know some of you will be interested to read it. Every parish is being called to work closely within our area sharing and pooling resources to grow the Kingdom of God. It might take an adjustment to imagine that the sharing of clergy and lay expertise, the sharing of time and talents, and the sharing of our riches with others is what we are called to do - but isn't this the Jesus story? We do not exist for ourselves but for others. We are not called to grow our own empires but to call people to live lives of holiness and faithfulness in serving others. We are not meant to be a group of religious people but ones who will empty themselves so others might live.

Covid has taught us that we are totally dependent on each other. Where would we be without our wonderful NHS? Where would we be without those key workers who've risked themselves for you and me? Where would we be without digital communications, generous givers and Food Banks? None of us is an island. I have relied on many others to help me exercise my priestly ministry in new ways in these past few months - and like our Bishop I believe we need to work closely with others if we are to proclaim the gospel effectively in the years to come. I know the Ministry Areas handbook will challenge you but if we want to see churches flourishing in the valleys as well as in the suburbs and if we want to see both clergy and people managing a healthy work-life balance then we need to welcome a new way of being church that will value and share the gifts we each bring so that in the end we will have "the same mind that was in Christ Jesus"

Yours in Christ

Vicki

**Vicar of Radyr,
St Fagans & Michaelston-super-Ely**



Remember to wear your face covering over your nose and mouth in shops and church.

Or Zoom Worship at 10.30am for all who cannot attend church.