

Epiphany 4
Dear All

Sunday is Candlemas, but I have not done the readings set, for I know Gill has done a reflection on it which you can find on the South Calder Mission Community website <http://southcalder.org> So rather I have turned to the alternative readings of Deuteronomy 18 v 15- 20 and Mark 1 v 21- 28.

In Deuteronomy there is a promise of a prophet who will come from the people and will speak with authority. In Mark we see Jesus at the start of his ministry but even then we see a declaration of his authority by those who have heard him speak. So much so even the evil spirits recognise that he is the Holy One of God. It is through their witness that others acknowledge him. Which leads to a reflective that a people looking for a leader must feel they are leaderless. That the authority they are under is either unjust, unwise, or even ungodly. This is a people who believe they were formed by God Himself and now they urgently desired a clear voice from God.

How many of us feel that we need a clear voice at the moment, not necessarily from God but a clear voice with a clear direction. We have been bombarded with information that results in differing opinions, which then change overnight. We have received promises of hope only for them to be rebuffed in the next breath, which leaves us all bewildered. Understandably we are in a period of lock down, but it seems to grow ever longer with no foreseeable end in sight. I have heard even June is a time that some scientists would like!!

There is a yearning in us to go out and meet people face to face not just on zoom or FaceTime. The highlight of my week is going down to the prison for my COVID test, which is a chance to meet others and there is often a laugh or two. The gossip that seems to be on people's lips here at the moment is who has had their vaccination. And what a wonderful gift that is, all thanks to the hard work of dedicated scientists. I had a real promise of hope this week. Through channels at the prison, I was given an appointment on Wednesday for a vaccination on Thursday (the next day). Then when I was just about to set out for it, I was informed it had been cancelled. Don't ask why because I do not know, but I now have one for two weeks time, hopefully. It seems even the vaccination is a bit of a lottery as to where you live and which health service you come under. It is little wonder that for a good many of us our mental health is a bit fragile and people are suffering from loneliness and lethargy.

Please do not think from this I am pointing any finger at the government, the scientific community or anyone else. They are walking in unknown territory as much as we are. They are only to be prayed for and supported. It is just a very difficult time with so many challenges. My daughter thinks not only must the government constantly urge us to be more aware of what we are doing to prevent the spread of COVID19, but also praise us for what has been achieved. Like a morale boost in the Second World War.

It is very understandable to forget, since the beginning of time, the world has faced terrible crises, pandemics, war, famine, destruction, political unrest, to name just a few. Jesus knew much of this too, as life in Israel was not that simple. It was taken over by an occupying power, their own kings were weak and cruel, and the religious leaders even though they had little direction were working hard to keep the faith of the people. They were turbulent times that came crashing down some time after Jesus's death in AD 70, with the destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersal of its people. Much like the people of Lamentations, the people must have sat and wept and felt abandoned by God.

I have no doubt many of you can recall a time when you may have felt abandoned by God, for few of us have lived a life where it has been all plain sailing. I do not think any of us are like Teflon where nothing sticks. I can remember a time in my life when I felt abandonment by God. It was a time of great hardship and upheaval as my husband was away studying and as a family we were living on a student grant. It was on a day I felt particularly low, that I met a friend who asked how I was, and I told her. Her immediate response was "Praise God in all things". At that moment I could not feel less like praising God. It was the last thing I wanted to do but amazingly I did. As I struggled up the road pushing my small son in the pushchair, I began to praise God. I am not sure what for, or that it was for anything in particular, but by the time I got to my front door I did feel better. That was a lesson learned that I have tried to practice on many occasions since. I have not always been successful, and many times I have failed, but I do believe there is a deep rooted truth in the practice. We only have to read the psalms to see how many times the psalmist's woes turn into a prayer of rejoicing. We can identify this in psalm 13. In the first verse, the psalmist is saying, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" but by the end of the psalm the words are, "But I trust in your steadfast love, my heart shall rejoice in your salvation".

Julian of Norwich in her book "Enfolded in love" says on thankfulness from the heart: "Thankfulness and prayer belong together. Thanksgiving is the deep inward certainty which moves us with reverent and loving fear to turn with all our strength to the work which God stirs in us, giving thanks and praise from the depths of our hearts." The whole piece is too long to write fully here, but over the past year I have read it many times to give me hope and encouragement. The meditation ends with, "The simple enjoyment of our Lord is in itself a most blessed form of thanksgiving. This is so in his sight."

Perhaps in these times of great sadness, uncertainty and loss, thankfulness may not have been central in our prayers. There were so many other things to pray about and pray for. We may have forgotten just to celebrate our Lord. I know I seem to have wandered from the authority of Jesus, and the authority of God, but to remember that God is God is a point of thankfulness. To have the knowing of his love and be thankful. Julian of Norwich believed that all will be well in all things, all will be well. Let us like her trust in our living God in thankfulness.

God bless you all
Angela

