

## Church at Home. 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2022. Sixth Sunday of Easter (Rogationtide)

I don't know if many of you have travelled up to Scotland by train. You may have been fortunate enough to travel over the Forth Bridge. A Victorian engineering wonder and an UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Even if you have not had the privilege, you more than likely will have heard of the phrase 'painting the Forth Bridge'. A phrase which has come to mean working on an interminable task. This is because it was believed that as soon as the maintenance crew had finished painting the entire length of the 2.5km bridge, they would need to start again at the other end. If you will it is a task that was thought could never be completed. That was until 2011 when a new type of paint enabled the bridge to only require painting every 25 years.

There are many other tasks that were probably thought of as unachievable at one time or another. Powered flight, climbing Mount Everest, going into space, breaking the sound barrier at ground level, the 4-minute mile and more besides. Yet restless human ingenuity, creativity and in many cases blood, sweat and tears, meant that in time, even those barriers were broken.

Today we are looking at the 4th Mark of Mission: to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation. We might sum this up simple in one word - justice.

We might consider this task impossible – hasn't this challenge been around since the beginnings of time? How can we or I make a difference?

As always, scripture has insights which might help us explore further. Our gospel today is set from early in John's gospel. Jesus is on one of his many trips to Jerusalem prior to his final Passover pilgrimage. In this passage we find him down by a pool by the Sheep Gate. An area associated with healing from even before Jesus's day. We see Jesus have mercy on the ill man, who has been there 38 years, and heals him from his infirmity. A miracle saves the day and brings justice to an unjust situation.

Of course, we know that true justice belongs to God, and he alone has the power to transform the unjust structures of the world, to challenge violence and to bring peace. We know that this is no easy task – in fact it is the opposite of easy. Yet if we focus our attention in scripture God's transforming power saving the day, we often don't see what else is going on as well.

As the church, as the body of Christ in the world – to quote Teresa of Avilla '*Christ has no body now but yours, yours are the feet with which he moves, yours are the eyes with which he sees, yours are the hands with which he blesses the whole world*'. Rightly or wrongly, God has made the decision to work through us to be beacons of justice and even to bring about justice in the world and in our communities. It is the ultimate unending task.

And when we look at this passage from this angle, there is so much we can do, even if it is unending. Look at our gospel again – where were the people to help bring the sick to the water, where were those to notice that at least one person had been there so long, where were the physicians, why was the whole structure design in such a way that made healing ultimately dependent on a miracle.

Elsewhere in the Bible, The Book of Ecclesiasticus tells us that sensible people should pray to God for healing but also consult doctors and take medicines as God created those too. Today we might add that sensible people should also help build the structures to make justice, peace and non-violence easier and look at what God has given us the power to do ourselves.

So, whilst knowing we can't solve all the problems of the world, how might we apply that thinking, for the Lord's sake, here in Southdown?

If we take just one topic of unjust structures, how about that of loneliness. Research suggests that loneliness is endemic in our communities. There are few affordable places to gather and meet and community offered by religion is declining as we know. Those less well-off are affected more – those on benefits, those on a pension, those more on the edge.

We know that, even here at St Johns - where of the 12,500 parishes in the country, we are in the bottom 100 in terms of amount of poverty – there this is still an issue, and that's why we already do something about it, with our wonderful T@3. In years past we had 'soup for the soul' and there were even plans for 'a space to create'. But we all know we are limited in what we can offer and when, there is only so much we can do with our time.

The new Parish Centre offers modern facilities providing space for our community to meet and serve those who need it most – a café, various meeting rooms communal space. It is not the building that is important but what the building enables us to do – to live God's love more effectively and clearly.

Let us pray then, that as we continue to strive to be a church which lives the love of God in world and deed that God might work through us to be his hands in the world, and bless those around us.

Amen