

**Second Sunday of Lent,
Sunday, 28th February 2021**



Dear Friends,

'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.' (Mark 8: 34)

What a tonic it has been to have these past few days of sunshine and warm, dry weather. It feels as if winter has well and truly been shrugged off. Signs of bright pink blossom are adorning the trees, stunning displays of snowdrops, crocuses and daffodils are bursting forth and the birdsong seems sweeter and more vibrant than ever before. I hope you have been able to get outside to experience the abundant blessings our Creator God pours upon us!



These past two Thursday evenings, our Benefice Lent Course has been taking place online via Zoom. We are working through the #LiveLent material based on the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent Book *'Living His Story'* written by theologian and Director of St Mellitus theological College, Hannah Steele. It isn't too late to join us – just call or email Caroline McAulay in our Benefice Office who will send you the links. Her details are in the 'Schedule of Services' link at the bottom of this letter. If you are

not able to join the group online, why not order a copy the book from Church House Publishing by calling (01603) 785925.
Hannah Steele writes:

We are fascinated by stories. Every culture has them, passed on from generation to generation. Stories tell us who we are, where we belong and how we relate to the world around us. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the story at the heart of the universe, and yet the Church now finds itself in a culture that has largely forgotten this good news. How can we convey the extraordinary love of God to our neighbours in such a strange post-Christian world? First we must recover our confidence. Many people today draw back from even using the word evangelism, assuming it involves imposing a world view on others that they may find quite alien. But in truth, the gospel is all about drawing people in! It's about inviting others to embrace a joyful reality – and we can do this most effectively by being ourselves and using our natural gifts.



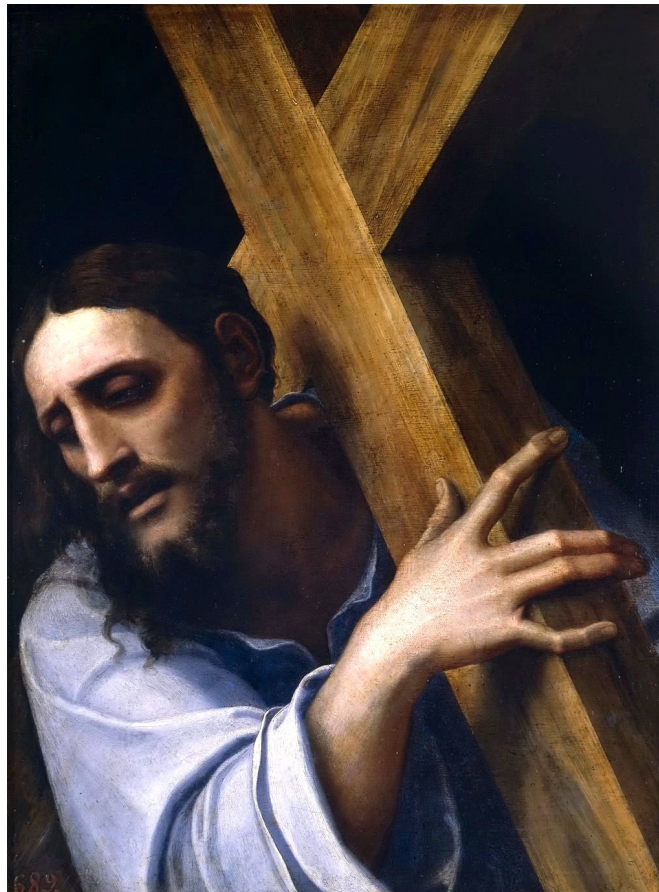
'Divine Love' by Ladislav Záborský

This week we listened to Christian evangelist and priest, Canon John Ioannou John, best known as J. John, talk about how he came to faith in 1975 whilst at university reading Psychology. Evidently he met another student, a Christian called Andy, who introduced him to Christ. J John remembers how Andy *'built a bridge from me to him, and Jesus walked over it.'* So profound was J John's experience of meeting Christ that he went on to become an ordained priest and evangelist.

By 2017, J John says: *'When I was speaking at Winchester Cathedral to a full house, the Lord spoke to me saying, 'Now is the time to step up and use the football stadiums for evangelism again.'*

Later that year, J John did just that! He filled Arsenal Football Club's Emirates stadium in London with 23,733 people and his event was watched by about 250,000 online! Could you imagine that many Christians in one place? Could you imagine them in our parish churches? The point of this course is to encourage each and every one of us to start sowing seeds of faith in what J John calls 'our Jerusalem.' J John quotes Jesus, who sent out His disciples to evangelise the people, telling them to 'start in the place of their greatest failure.' For the disciples, this place was Jerusalem, where no-one had listened to them. What is 'Jerusalem' for most of us? J John suggests it's our neighbours, our family, our friends, our neighbours and our school or work colleagues.

When was the last time you shared your faith with anyone? This Lent, take the plunge to share what being a Christian means to you and see where it leads - *'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'*



'Christ Carrying the Cross' by Sebastiano Del Piombo

Perhaps, in order to have the courage to do this, we need to learn to put our trust in Jesus. This seems to be the battle which is raging in Peter's head as we read today's scripture passage from Mark's gospel, as Jesus tells His disciples He has come to save the world by dying, Peter blows a fuse!

He simply can't understand what the Messiah has come to do. Perhaps Peter doesn't trust Jesus when He says He will save the world by dying for us? From Peter's perspective it seems a perfectly understandable position to take. After all, he doesn't have our gift of the resurrection story at this point in his relational journey with Jesus! The disciples have been expecting a conquering king to topple the Roman regime, creating an order of justice and peace and restoring Israel's rightful place as God's chosen people with the Jews centre stage in positions of privilege. We see this attitude on Palm Sunday. But in this encounter, Jesus confounds the disciples' expectations and challenges them with a new understanding of what He had come to do: To die in order that they, and we, might truly live. All Jesus asked the disciples to do was to trust Him: *'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'* This statement requires of the follower to let go and let God – to entrust their lives into Jesus' care.



'Take Up Your Cross' by Day Williams

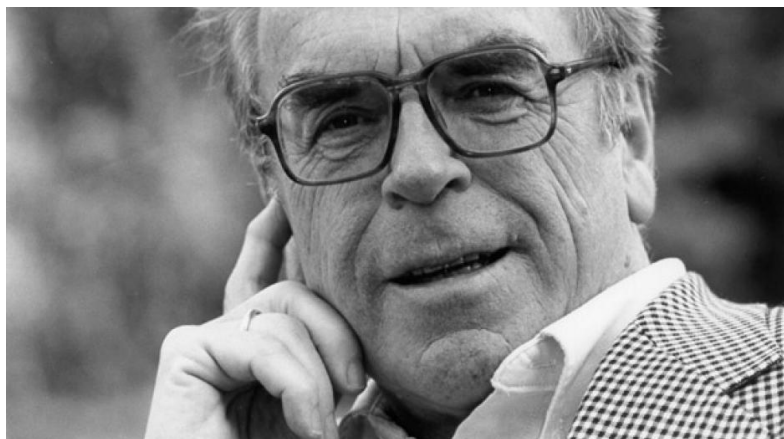
Lent is a good time for our own taking of small steps in trusting God as we rejoice in His love for us – abundantly clear on these beautiful first days of spring! These steps are not about making ourselves feel better or holier, but about allowing ourselves to do what the disciples learned to do - let go and let God. In Mark's Gospel, we catch a glimpse of God's costly and transforming love as we see Jesus modelling for us what it is to choose faithfulness to God even though it will lead to His death.

Earlier we heard how trusting God transformed J John's life. Remember how our Lent course is all about helping us to reconnect with Jesus Christ, who is the story at the heart of the universe. Here is another remarkable story of how following Jesus transformed another soul's life against all odds.

The great German Protestant theologian, Jurgen Moltmann, was a prisoner of war in Scotland in 1945. He and his fellow prisoners had just been shown photographs of the horrors of Belsen and other Nazi concentration camps. Moltmann came to the realisation that he had been fighting for a Nazi regime responsible for unimagined atrocities. At that time, Moltmann had no theological education or spiritual awareness, but when an Army Chaplain gave him a copy of the Bible, he wrote:

I read Mark's Gospel as a whole, and came to the story of the Passion, when I heard Jesus' cry '*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*' I felt growing within me the conviction that this Jesus was someone who understood me completely; who was with me in my own cry to God; who had felt my same sense of forsakenness as me. In that moment, I summoned up the courage to live again.

Jesus asks us, just as He asked Jurgen Moltmann, not just to give up a bit of ourselves, (like giving up chocolate or booze for Lent) but to trust our lives into His hands completely; giving everything to the work of God's Kingdom. Moltmann committed himself there and then to trust Jesus and live out his life in a variety of costly ways, bringing many other people to find the same presence of God in Christ he himself had encountered. Now aged 94, Moltmann continues to work as an eminent international theologian. I had the privilege of listening to him talk with Miroslav Volf (one of my favourite theologians) at a conference on the Holy Spirit at Holy Trinity Church, Brompton. It was an energising and uplifting experience I shall never forget and helped to deepen my personal trust in God at a time when I was testing my vocation to priesthood. Whilst we will not all (mercifully, I suspect) become theologians in trusting ourselves to the Lord, we might just fill the hearts of others' souls with His love!



Jurgen Moltmann – Courtesy of [bing.com](https://www.bing.com)

We too are being asked to trust our lives into God's hands; being blessed with the fulfilment of the promise He makes us - the gift of eternal life. By listening to and following Jesus, God's faithfulness becomes our own.

Yours, trusting in Christ,

Jax
Rector, The Downs Benefice

Schedule of Services

After much prayer, and in response to the ongoing threat to public health of the new and virulent strain of COVID-19, our Benefice of five parishes has decided to suspend in-Church services until further notice in an attempt to model the Government's request of us all to stay at home and beat the spread of Coronavirus. Instead, our Benefice website has many links to a wide range of digital resources from across the Church of England and within our Diocese, including our own recorded services. You will find all these resources at: <http://downsbenefice.org/> Please also contact Benefice Administrator, Caroline McAulay on (01962) 880845 or at office@downsbenefice.org.uk

We are producing a recorded service for **Mothering Sunday** and each parish church is planning to produce posies which will be available for people to give to their mothers or place on family graves. More news on other March services next week!

As our nation passes the tragic milestone of 100,000 Coronavirus deaths, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York are inviting our country to **join together in private prayer at 6pm each evening**, in response to the suffering and sadness the pandemic has brought our world. You will find their letter on our website. Do join in this profound action of love for all affected by this disease.

In a week when our Queen has had her first Coronavirus vaccination and Prince Philip continues to recover from in hospital, our continuing prayers are with all the Royal family:



Be a bright flame before Your servant, Philip, O God;
a guiding star above him.
Be a smooth path below him,
a kindly shepherd behind him
today, tonight, and for ever.
Alone with none but you, our God
we journey on our way;
what need we fear when you are near,
O Lord of night and day?
More secure are we within your hand
than if a multitude did round us stand.
Amen.

Collect Prayer for the Second Sunday of Lent

Almighty God, you show to those who are in error the light of your truth,
that they may return to the way of righteousness:
grant to all those who are admitted into the fellowship of Christ's religion,
that they may reject those things that are contrary to their profession,
and follow all such things as are agreeable to the same;
through our Lord Jesus Christ,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.
Amen.



Mark 8: 31-38 - Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'