

**Third Sunday of Lent,
Sunday, 7th March 2021**



Dear Friends,

‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ (John 2: 19)

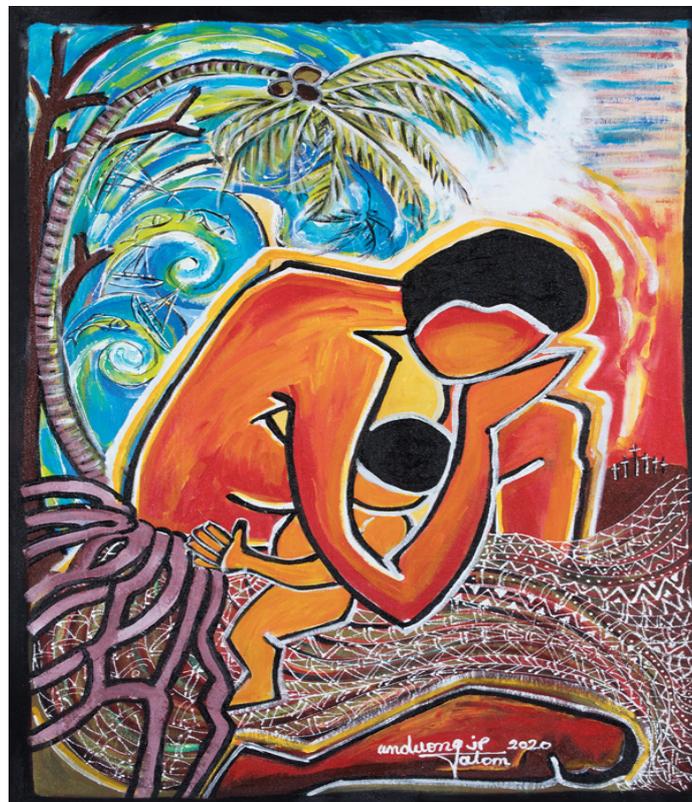
Can you believe this is the 60th weekly newsletter I have written since the beginning of the Pandemic! Thank you for your many contributions, comments and encouraging emails and for sharing the letters with family and friends. As a result, we have grown the circulation – and more importantly, grown our worshipping community! Isn't it amazing how the Holy Spirit works – though our physical worship in church is sadly on hold, it has not stopped the Spirit using the opportunity to welcome people who might otherwise have found it intimidating to walk off the street into a service. Even though some might fear our temples of worship might be destroyed, see how the Lord works to raise us up! As we hopefully move to safer times, we are planning to hold Easter Day services in our parish churches, along with other Holy Week reflections. It will be wonderful to praise God together in person again, yet I hope we do not lose the impetus for change the Holy Spirit has blessed us with, by falling back into old patterns and habits which feel like exclusive, ‘members only’ clubs to many.



Signs of new life - ‘Crocus’ by Diana Adams-Fuller, great niece of the late Norris Fuller and his wife, and Pam at Sparsholt

Friday, 5th March 2021 marks Women's World Day of Prayer (WWDP). The movement aims to bring together women of various races, cultures and traditions in closer fellowship through an annual Day of Prayer, with their motto of '*Informed Prayer and Prayerful Action.*' Each year, our local ecumenical WWDP committee organises an uplifting service, often held in Wherwell or Chilbolton parish churches. I have always found it a privilege to take part.

Year by year, Phyllis Harding at Wherwell and Jane Brown in Chilbolton have spearheaded our Benefice contributions. In a year when such physical services cannot be held, now feels a blessed opportunity to thank these prayerful ladies for their commitment and devotion – not only to ensuring local WWDP services take place, but in helping to keep the flame of prayer alive across the world, as women meet to learn about the lives of other women; raising funds to help those in precarious circumstances caring for their families and wider communities.



Source – WWDP

The Women's World Day of Prayer was brought to life in America by Mary Ellen James, who called for a day of prayer in 1887. She was simply reacting as a Christian, to the society in which she lived. The wife of a Presbyterian minister in New York and the mother of seven children, Mary Ellen was aware of the problems faced by many women around her, particularly new immigrants to America - the awful slums with their poverty, unemployment, poor housing and lack of health or educational facilities. Something had to be done. Two years later, Methodists and Baptists joined in the call for a Day of Prayer for the World Mission. The Day of Prayer initiated by these women expanded to neighbouring countries, then on to Europe and other continents. Since 1927 the day has become known as Women's World Day of Prayer.

This year, WWDP is focussing on the lives and witness of the women of Vanuatu, an archipelago of 80 islands in the South Pacific, 2000 miles east of Australia. With sandy white beaches and black, volcanic rocks, beautiful coral reefs, tropical coloured fish, forests full of lovely birds, abundant flora and fauna, and spectacular cascades these are wonderful islands. The climate is temperate and the soil fruitful, yet this region is prone to natural disasters including earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and many destructive cyclones in the hot and humid season from November to March.



'Vanuatu' – Source WWDP

Whilst the islands, which vary greatly in songs, dances and customs, are proud of their cultural identity, life there is far from idyllic. Poverty is rife. Violence affects approximately 60% of women and girls. Education is not compulsory or free. Most families can only afford to educate their firstborn child, and boys get priority. Malnutrition is a growing problem, accounting for most of the deaths in children under 5, aggravated by the introduction of processed, western foods.

Visiting missionaries opposed cannibalism and regarded local religion as witchcraft. Currently 83% of the population is Christian. So far, only one Coronavirus case has been reported in Vanuatu, though the indirect effects of the Pandemic have caused devastation. Tourism, a major source of income, has disappeared and the Ni-Vanuatu people are no longer able to work the harvests in Australia and New Zealand. The World Health Organisation has pledged support for vaccination programmes in Vanuatu and other islands, but nothing has yet begun.

Please pray for the people of Vanuatu throughout this week, and particularly for the women who hold their communities together, physically and spiritually. Pray also for the temples of our own making as the richer nations focus on domestic wellbeing and not the plight of poor and vulnerable peoples. Should you feel moved to donate to the remarkable work of the WWDP, please visit www.wwdp.org.uk



'Christ Driving the Moneylenders from the Temple' by Theodoor Rombouts

For our Third Sunday Lenten reflections, scripture points us to John's Gospel and Jesus' famous rage in the very Temple in which Simeon and Anna proclaimed Him as the Messiah. Now we find Him overturning money-lenders' tables and screaming with righteous anger at the hypocrisy of a Temple system which allowed the exploitation of the poor under its very roof. John describes the stark reality of the Pharisees' reaction to Jesus. They can't *begin* to comprehend that the Temple Jesus talks about is not the building and all its trappings but His own body! His words would, of course take on a new meaning for Jesus' disciples after His death and resurrection, but for now they fall on deaf ears.

When we hear all this, how can we help but feel something of the tension between Jesus and the establishment; between the old, corrupt religious system and the new order of God's Kingdom in the radical passion of Christ. The Pharisees simply didn't recognise Jesus for who He really was. They didn't recognise Him as the Messiah; as God incarnate. Instead, they took a defensive and closed approach to the man they saw in front of them and scorned Jesus. Many of these men of power in the Temple hierarchy were intensely jealous of Jesus because He undermined their authority and challenged their deeply held views.

We hear this story today, because midway through Lent is a good point for us to pause: A blessed moment, in fact, for us to stop and ask ourselves: Where are we on our journey of faith? Do we, like Simeon and Anna, recognise Jesus for who He really is, or have we, like the Pharisees, missed the point of Jesus? Who *is* Jesus to us? How can we come to understand more about Him and His message? How can we grow more like Him – as individuals and as the body of Christ, the church? And how can we re-imagine church worship to be truly welcoming those who wish to meet Jesus?



'Casting out the money changers' by Giotto di Bondone

Lent is an opportunity for us to think carefully about de-cluttering our lives – freeing our heads and hearts from all the material idolatry and excesses which bind us: beginning a new page, with Christ the first word. God has sent Jesus into the world to enlighten us, to upturn tables in the temples of our own making; to ruffle our feathers and make us feel uncomfortable as we allow His light to shine on the reality of our daily lives – in those secret places of our hearts where we are closer to the position of the Pharisees than we would wish to admit.

The good news that Simeon and Anna saw in the infant Christ was that Jesus has come to draw us inwards, to a personal relationship with God, and to help us focus outwards, on the physical and spiritual needs of our starving, impoverished brothers and sisters, like the people of Vanuatu, whose cries we rarely hear beyond ourselves.

As we contemplate our faith this Lent, let us pledge to journey on with Jesus, growing as disciples and learning more about what it truly is to be a living part of His mission. Just as John's Gospel begins by showing us the truth of His divinity: *'In the beginning was the word...'* so Jesus should be for us the beginning and the end; our Alpha and our Omega; our light and our guide in this world and the next.

Yours, in the reality of 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/>

We are currently recording a **Mothering Sunday Service** which will be ready to view on our website next weekend, along with details of our Holy Week and Easter Day services.

In another turbulent media week for the Royal Family, it is wonderful to hear that Prince Philip has undergone successful heart surgery at St Bartholomew's Hospital in London during this past week and has now returned to King Edward VII hospital to recuperate. Praise God for that. Our continuing prayers go with Her Majesty and her beloved consort at this time:



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 Third Sunday of Lent

Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen.



'Christ Cleansing the Temple' by Bernardino Mei

John 2: 13-22 - Jesus Cleanses the Temple

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!' His disciples remembered that it was written Zeal for your house will consume me.' The Jews then said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?' Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.