

**Twelfth Sunday after Trinity
Sunday, 30th August 2020**

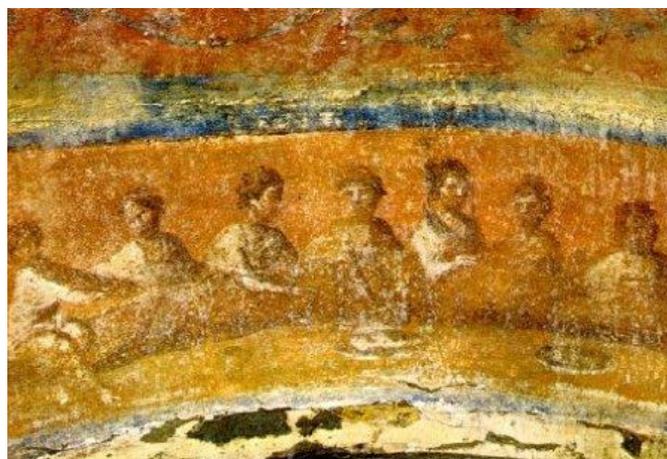


Dear Friends,

'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.' (Matthew 16: 24)

I wonder how many of you wear a Cross? Or perhaps you have one at home to reflect upon or to bring Christ's peace into each room?

Earlier today, a conversation with a dear Littleton couple on our shared love (and consequent hoarding!) of books, blossomed into an unexpected reverie of life in London during the Blitz! For the husband of the couple, memories of his childhood in a large family of ten children sharing a two-bedroomed flat chimed with my own father's experience of being born at the outbreak of war into a family of eleven children in similar circumstances on the other side of London. For both boys, whose playgrounds were the bombed streets, nourishing food was a luxury and possessions such as books an impossible dream. Yet both boys knew the love of their mothers and the value of faith. My grandmother kept a small wooden crucifix, which adorned the wall of her sparse home during that time of desperate poverty, to the end of her life. It was a constant reminder to her family that, whatever earthly trials they were facing, their Lord and Saviour had suffered death to bring them all the hope of eternity and the prospect of 'a heavenly banquet in the kingdom of heaven.' (Matthew 8: 11).



'Wall art from the Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome depicting a heavenly feast'

It might surprise you to learn that, during the first two centuries of Christianity, images of the cross of Christ were rare in Christian iconography as they depicted a gruesome and contemporary method of public execution. Not unsurprisingly, Christians were reluctant to use it. The marking of a cross upon the forehead and chest was regarded as a talisman against the powers of demons.

Slowly, the cross became a symbol of atonement, of the reconciliation of God and mankind through Jesus Christ, and reminds Christians of God's love in sacrificing his own son for us. It represents Jesus' victory over sin and death. Paradoxically, the Cross is at once a powerful symbol of suffering and defeat but, even more than that, it is also the greatest symbol in our world of triumph and salvation. The cross of Christ is the universal Christian symbol of our faith.



'The Crucifixion' by Peter Gertner

In today's reading from Matthew 16, Jesus prepares to face the cross for us. Back in Chapter 15, the Canaanite woman had challenged Jesus to hear her. Her faith in Him was a pivotal moment for Jesus as He began to see His ministry as not just for the Jews, but for us all. In last week's Gospel, remember how we were shown another pivotal moment for Jesus and for Simon Peter. Jesus asks of His disciples *'But who do you say that I am?'* and the disciple to whom Jesus confers the honour of being the rock of the Christian church answers, *'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'*

This week, poor old newly-named Peter falls off his perch as we hear Jesus admonish him for trying to reassure his Master that He won't die! In what feels like an unnecessarily harsh rebuke, Jesus calls Peter *'Satan'* which is translated not as *'the devil'* as we might imagine, but rather as a *'stumbling block'* or an obstacle to Jesus. Peter has misinterpreted Jesus' Godly mission.

Because he is human, Peter struggles to see things God's way; to think God's way. Jesus wasn't really being *rude* to Peter. He knew that He must die on the Cross – Jesus was simply afraid himself, and in that moment of *his own* human agony as He contemplated all that was to come, his friend Peter was no help to Him when he told Jesus He wouldn't die.

But Jesus' death was exactly what God *did* want! In this encounter with Jesus, Peter shows us how hard it is to follow Jesus. Following Jesus means forgetting our human ways of thinking and behaving, and challenges us to be guided by Jesus to put God's way of thinking first. It challenges us to sacrifice our lives in a mirroring of how Jesus sacrificed Himself for us: *'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'*

Forgetting ourselves affects how we respond to others. We are to love one another, not just people we like! No revenge. No bad-mouthing. No pride ... Jesus asks us to take up our cross and follow Him. This doesn't sound very comfortable does it?



***'The Master's Touch'* by Greg Olsen**

But Jesus never said it *would* be easy!

Behaving as God wants us to *is* difficult because the world notices we are different and often reacts against us in an attempt to preserve the behaviours of greed and vested interest which Jesus asks us to change. If we walk through our lives with a cross on our backs it is hard, and so very tempting to lay down the weight of it and walk back the other way. These moments, which we share with Peter as we falter in our clarity of faith, are our own personal 'stumbling blocks' - our obstacles to following Christ.

I wonder if Peter's experience could help us to see the Cross from a new perspective today? Not just as a symbol of suffering or a symbol of hope and salvation, but also as a symbol of the stumbling blocks which keep us from following Jesus!

Remember last week when Jesus asked the disciples '*But who do you think I am?*' Today, we are challenged afresh to think through that profound question in our own hearts. For if we decide that *Jesus is the Christ*, then we also have to think sacrificially about how we follow Him, just as Peter has had to do. Remember Jesus' words to Peter now: '*And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul?*' (Matthew 16: 26)

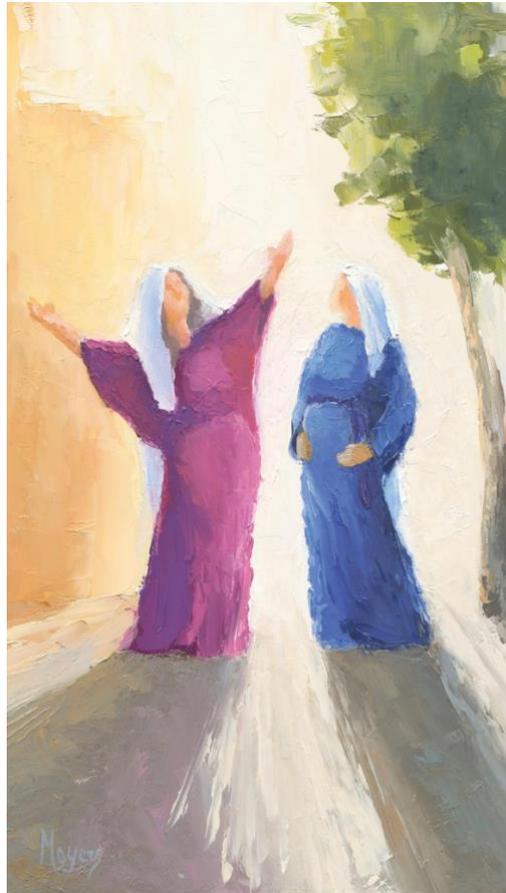


'The Spiritual Journey' by Elizabeth Wang courtesy of Radiant Light

In his letter to the people of Rome, St Paul encourages us to pray whenever we can, especially when times are hard: '*Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.*' (Romans 12: 12-13)

Through the experiences of his own profound stumbling blocks, Paul helps us to see the virtue in being patient, letting God's hope guide us through even the darkest times, just as my Grandmother encouraged her children to do during the Blitz when they were hungry and scared, by pointing them back to the Cross of Christ and what it stands for. We are reminded by Jesus to sacrifice our lives to His care – to hold onto our cross, even when it really hurts, and to share our faith with each other; share our difficulties, and to put each other first.

Jesus asks us to grow together in faith and discipleship by speaking and living from the eternal fire that burns in our hearts. In this way, as Christ's prayerful community here on earth, we will show the world we are different. This is a discipleship which embodies costly grace.



'Rejoice' by Mike Moyers

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German (Lutheran) priest and theologian, who carried his cross to the death in opposing Nazism described costly grace as:

'... the Gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for ... such grace is *costly* because it calls us to follow, and it is *grace* because it *calls us to follow Jesus Christ*. It is costly because it cost Jesus His life and it is grace because it gives us believers the only true life...'

When we live in this way, others will want to come and share in the peace and contentment we have found in our faith. And then we *really will* be listening to God! Filled with His Spirit, His peace, His hope and His love.

Yours, carrying the cross with Christ,

Jax

Rector, The Downs Benefice

Box for Socks: Many thanks to each of you who has donated socks to this worthy cause. We now have **two boxes brim-full** of new socks for men and women which I will take to Winchester Nightshelter to support the 'Foot Health' programme for the hungry and homeless people on our streets. **!! THANK YOU SO MUCH !!**



Schedule of Services for September and October 2020

Whilst we are fine-tuning our service provision for September and October, please see the services on offer for next **Sunday, 6th September**. I am trying to increase the number of services in the benefice to ensure we have two weekly services on offer, one in the northern parishes of Chilbolton and Wherwell and one in the southern parishes of Crawley, Littleton and Sparsholt. I am also trying to ensure that we have one Holy Communion service and one Lay-led service on offer across the benefice each week.

Remember that our churches are open for daily prayer and for Sunday services - please see our website for more details at: <http://downsbenefice.org/>

All seats at our services need to be booked in advance. Please see the table below and book your seats by either calling or emailing the **Benefice Office** on **(01962) 880845** or office@downsbenefice.org.uk

	Chilbolton	Crawley	Littleton	Sparsholt	Wherwell
6 th Sept	10am HC		<u>11am</u> Outside + 'Show'		CLOSED after Wedding on 5th

Please continue to hold our Ministry Team and our Organists in your prayers as we navigate these changes:

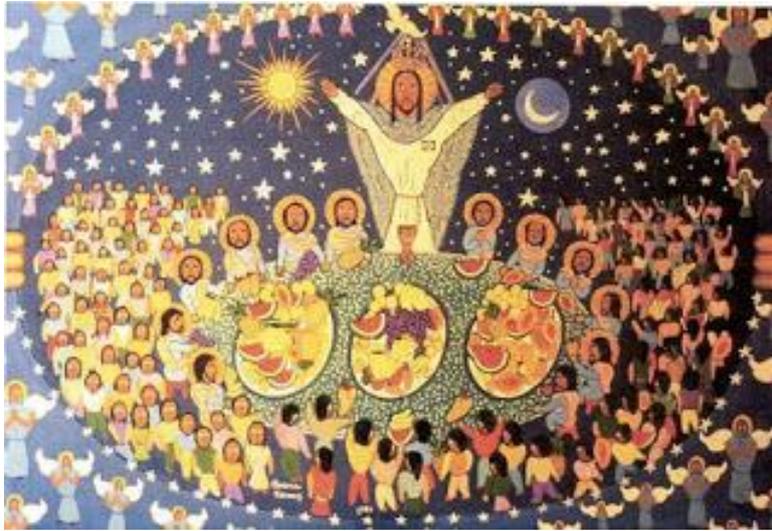
Charlotte Nash LLM, Alan Disher LLM, Alastair Barron, Anthony Burns-Cox, Carol Coleman, Andrew Kent, Rev Bruce and Lucy Kington, Keith Tomkinson, Ros Penny, Tim Rogerson, Carol Ward, Sally Wesley, Deirdre Wratten, David Wright.

Please also pray for our Churchwardens and those acting in lieu of Churchwardens, the members of our five PCCs and Benefice Council members; Bell Ringers; Clock Winders; Flower Teams and all those keeping our churches opened and closed, cleaned and operational at this time. Please also pray for our Administrator, Caroline McAulay, as she manages our benefice in tandem with nursing her husband, Peter, who is sadly very poorly.

We are indebted to them all, and my grateful thanks cannot be sung highly enough for all they are doing to keep the word of the Lord alive in our parishes at this time.

Collect Prayer for the Twelfth Sunday after Trinity

Almighty and everlasting God,
you are always more ready to hear than we to pray,
and to give more than either we desire or deserve:
Pour down upon us the abundance of your mercy,
forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid,
and giving us those good things which we are not worthy to ask,
but through the merits and mediation of 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.



Matthew 16:21-28 – Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.' But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

The Cross and Self-Denial

Then Jesus told his disciples, '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 will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.'