

**New Year's Eve,
Thursday, 31st December 2020**



Dear Friends,

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' (John 1:1)

Throughout the course of this (dare I say it!) tumultuous year, these weekly Newsletters seem to have developed their own identity, with their mix of scripture, art, theology and Benefice news. I am deeply grateful to the many of you who have taken the time and trouble to respond to these musings and, and to share how my own heart's prompting has resonated with the experiences and situations of your own lives. More often than not, what sets out to inspire *you* results in *my own* soul's shaping through your humbling encounters. For that I am truly grateful.

Yet isn't this exactly how it should be? As a faith community, we gather and are fed by Word and Bread broken open, and whether we are physically able to meet for worship in times such as these, we grow in the reciprocal bond of God's love together, as Priest and Poet, John O'Donohue so beautifully put it, through the *'slow light of the Eucharist,'* which illumines the dark recesses of our souls; cleansing us and bringing us home.



'The Word Made Flesh' by Mike Moyers

In recent times, I have been reminded of the fierce theological debate I dared to have as a 'wet-behind-the-ears' Curate at Romsey Abbey, with a retired Dean of Westminster Abbey, who held a prominent place in our congregation there. It was The Very Reverend's view that my sermons were flawed because I would insist on preaching about God's love in the context of people's (extra)-ordinary lives. We hit an impasse. He had no time for the constant reference to Love, and I had no intention of giving up sharing that message of Love - God's love, which comes to us through the Holy Spirit in the being of Jesus, and through whom we are all united in a common humanity.

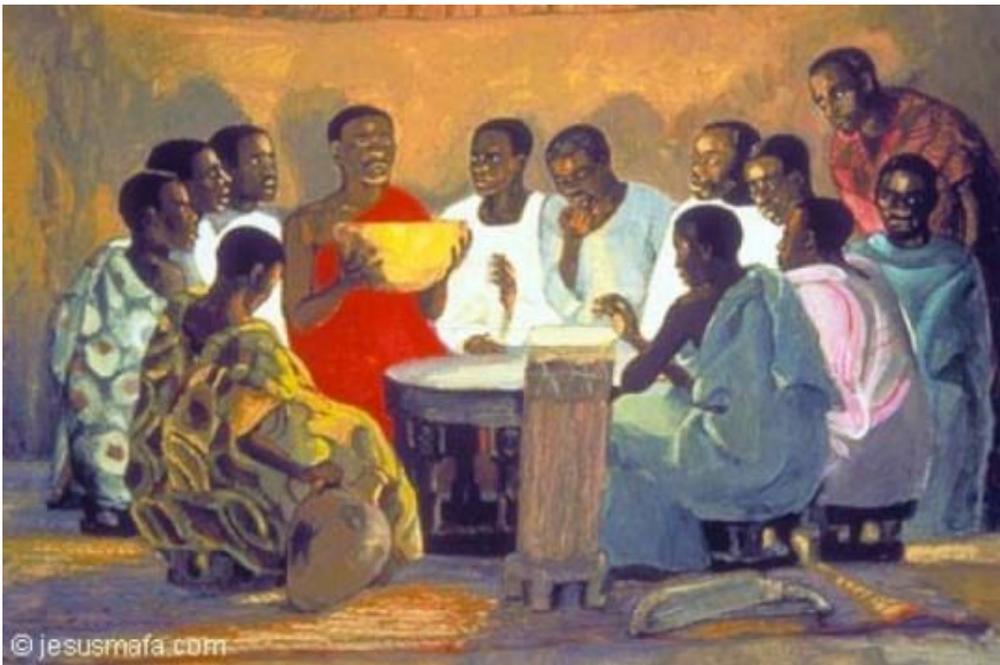
Sadly, the outcome was that he used to avoid the services at which I was preaching, and I continued as a thorn in his side, exasperated as to what else there was to preach about *but* for the action of All Love at work in our world. Finally, he settled the matter, by giving me a copy of his own book on theology as a gift upon my Priesting. Bless him, I miss that learned man of God – both for the robust theological education he gave me and upon which I continue to draw, and for those moments when I want to share with him those liminal moments of grace where the action of All Love in and through the Holy Spirit is incontrovertible and tangible.



'Incarnation' – blogspot.com

One such example of this came early this morning as I was sipping green tea with a migraine-head and listening to Radio 4's 'The Today Programme.' This week, guest-Editors have been giving regular editors a well-earned break from all things Pandemic, and on this morning's airing, I was delighted to have my thoughts fuelled by the spiritual wisdom of Bishop Rose Hudson-Wilkin. Currently the Suffragan Bishop of Dover and in the thick of the impact of Channel Tunnel/Brexit negotiations, Bishop Rose is truly a light shining out the Word of God as the first black woman to become an Anglican bishop, and previously as Chaplain to the Speaker of the House of Commons and to Her Majesty the Queen.

Through Bishop Rose's editorship, the BBC has commissioned a poem from Poet, Playwright and Writer, Roy McFarlane on the philosophical concept of *Ubuntu* – referenced through its South African origins as being 'a quality that includes the essential human virtues of compassion and humanity.' We heard Roy read his poem, 'Dreaming of a New Dawn' on air this morning. As he spoke, I found him expressing in words far more eloquent than my own ever could, the experiences, fears, prejudices and hopes of humanity as we have traversed this single year: A blessing of hope and light in the darkness of the year.



'The Last Supper' by Jesus MAFA, Cameroon

After the programme finished, I immediately contacted Roy McFarlane to ask whether I might be able to use his poem in my Newsletter this week and to discern copyright and any fees he might wish to charge for doing so. With such public exposure, and with the inevitability of his own life's issues all around him, Roy had the grace to respond to my message by immediate return. Not only that, he has waived his fees and has spent the day ensuring that I have the appropriate copyright to enable me to use his work. In the moment, I have been reduced to tears by Roy's lived out embodiment of what it means to be *Ubuntu*. Bless you, Roy, and thank you.

Eloquent, apposite, charged with a Wisdom call upon all our hearts and filled with hope, I have the humble pleasure of bringing Roy's poetic labour of love to you here. I pray you will be as moved and as blessed as I have been to absorb his words.

May the truth of Roy's heart for humanity fill you with the love of God we find broken open for us in Jesus, our hope and our salvation, in this coming year and for eternity.

Yours, in bond of Christ's love,

Jax
Rector, The Downs Benefice

Dreaming of a New Dawn by Roy McFarlane

Inspired by the theme Ubuntu – humanity towards each other. Commissioned poem for Bishop Hudson-Wilkin guest-editor of BBC Radio 4 Today Programme on New Year's Eve 2020

They say it's always darkest before the dawn.
Although I've heard blackbirds play their morning symphony,
I've seen trees yawn in the silhouette of the dawn,
I've heard rivers roar awake from rain-soaked dreams
and I've watched hillsides shake off their morning dew.

They say it's always darkest before the dawn.
And we've seen fires burning, sweeping the land
like a plague; water banks bursting beyond
their calling; and a virus running
rampage knowing no borders.

And yet, after empty stadiums, empty roads and empty streets we heard nature sing
a new song. After lockdowns, stay-in, and quarantine we saw the beauty of clear
blue skies, wild goats taking a stroll through town. After daily briefings with spikes on
graphs, flattening of curves there were tweets, TikTok and Instagram spreading the
Don't Rush Challenge.

They say it's always darkest before the dawn.
News report ringing out the death tolls;
day by day, channel by channel.
Fathers and mothers, brother and sisters,
loved ones and lovers lost to this cruel foe.

They say it's always darkest before the dawn.
The pandemic of hate still lingered;
Breonna Taylor and George Floyd
names to add to an ever-growing list
and here Blacks, Jews, and Muslims
knew the vile bile, of prejudice that
flowed along our streets and into our homes –
a plague on all the houses of bigotry.

And yet, after the chants of make Britain great again, the greatness was already
found in our diversity. After taking the knee for black lives lost, there was a gathering
of a people standing at the banks of change. After the falling of statues stained with
the blood-shed of slavery and Empire there was a rising of a people of all colours,
caste and creed rooting a flag of unity in a shifting ground of racism.

They say it's always darkest before the dawn.
Although I've seen new moons part open
the darkness and remind us of a glow so amazing,
a moon haze over a valley in the darkest hour;
food banks; standing and applauding the NHS;
communities crying out black lives matter;
Sing for Freedom Choir; Hospitality for Heroes;
Captain Tom walking a 100 laps;
Marcus Rashford feeding the 1000;
tens of thousands of lives saved
by brave doctors, nurses, helpers
and carers - some who have lost their lives
on the frontline, trying to turn the tide.

They say it's always darkest before the dawn.
But let our bodies sing and dance across new horizons,
let our arms be the brush stroke of belief for better days,
let us be the books of faith and healing that we should read,
the voices against division versed with victory,
the collective hearts beating a drum of harmony,
and like a river flowing, roaring with love into the new year.

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Roy McFarlane is a poet born in Birmingham of Jamaican parentage and spent most of his years living in Wolverhampton and the surrounding Black Country. He is a former Birmingham's Poet Laureate.

Roy is the author of Beginning With Your Last Breath (Nine Arches Press 2016) followed by The Healing Next Time (2018), nominated for the Ted Hughes award, Jhalak prize, Poetry Book Society recommendation and one of the Guardian's best poetry titles of 2018.



Credits: Michael Paris Photography