

GOOD FRIDAY DEVOTION

By Rev Janet Bayly

Welcome and Introduction to Good Friday Devotion

Welcome to our Good Friday Devotion as we spend time in words, music and silence reflecting on our Lord's time on the cross. I have based this year's three hours on the time spent attending the Passion Play in Oberammergau. I think that all of us who went, were deeply moved by our experiences. The three hours is divided into six half hour reflections and as you will see in the booklet, there is a similar format for each session. If you cannot stay, please use the hymn to leave.

On the pews are postcards with a Bible verse. Please feel free to take one to keep or to send to someone you know.

If you have brought a cross with you, you may want to hold it or look at it as we reflect on Christ's sufferings and our own journey of faith.

Let us pray

Lord we take this time to step out of life and sit at the foot of the cross. May your Holy Spirit support, challenge and guide us during this holy time. Amen.

Part 1 A vow is a promise

On Thursday 16th June 2022 a group of us from the Schorne Team of churches set off on a great adventure. For many of us this was something that we had hoped and planned for, for many years. We were going to Oberammergau to experience the world famous Passion play. Personally, I had visited this village of about 5000 inhabitants, 60 years ago when I was a student at Bishop Otter

Teacher Training College Chichester. Although the play was not being shown in that year, nevertheless the beauty of the village and the backdrop of mountains was a wonderful experience and I knew that I would one day return to see the Passion play. My children are always amused when I talk about travelling as a student. "How did you get there?" they ask. "I think I went by coach with some friends but the details are extremely vague." The village and its history of staging the Passion play every ten years captured my interest all those years ago. Fortunately there were others in our Schorne team who wanted to see this amazing spectacle and we were all ready to go in the appointed year of 2020. However, Covid came and the play was postponed for two years. The other times that it had not been staged was during the world wars.

Oberammergau is a village in Bavaria, southern Germany set in the foothills of the Alps. The Passion play is performed by the villagers every ten years since 1634 in thanksgiving for the end of the Black death. Not only is the village surrounded by beautiful mountains but the cross on the front cover of your booklet is clearly visible. The history of the play dates back to the 17th century. In Bavaria the Thirty years war was raging from 1618-1648 but alongside that suffering the Bubonic plague was claiming many lives. In Oberammergau the village council met and gave a solemn oath that they would perform the tragedy of Christ's Passion every ten years if they were spared. From that day on not a single person died of the plague. This vow was sworn in October 1633. The only documentation is not of The Vow itself but a register of 80 plague deaths from September 1632 until October 1633.

Can we bargain with God? If I attend church every Sunday/ if I read my Bible and pray every day will you God please help me/ cure my loved one? whatever we desperately need at that time. I wonder how many of us have been down that route? Realistically we cannot bargain with the One who created heaven and earth. There

is nothing that we can offer to God that he does not already have. But we can make a vow or promise that we will serve God and others and in so doing our lives will improve as we look away from our own needs to the needs of others.

Bible reading: Matthew 7 1-12

Jesus said “Do not judge so that you may not be judged. For with the judgement you make, you will be judged and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbour’s eye but do not notice the log in your own eye. Or how will you say to your neighbour, Let me take the speck out of your eye while the log is in your own eye. You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour’s eye. Ask and it will be given to you, search and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds and for everyone who knocks the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who if your child asks for bread will give a stone, or if the child asks for a fish will give a snake. If you then who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him.

I everything do to others as you would have them do to you for this is the law and the prophets.”

These verses follow Jesus’ great swathe of teaching in chapters 5 to 7 of Matthew’s gospel. In chapter 5 we have the Beattitudes and then Jesus continued to use the opportunity to teach people about how to live lives honouring to God his father. He often began with the words: You have heard it said ...but I say. He was interpreting the laws set down by Moses and the prophets. And in this passage he urged his disciples and followers not to judge or behave unreasonably but to be kindly to all: “In everything do to others as

you would have them do to you. For this is the law and the prophets.”

Prayer: A prayer before the Crucifix of the Vow

Lord Jesus you came into the world to be near us
To feel the joys and hopes, the sorrows the fears of human life
For this, people crucified you
You know the suffering of our lives and our world
Because you experienced them in your own body
But you overcame them
And so your cross became a symbol of salvation.
For this reason it was to you that our ancestors turned and prayed
to you for help
To rescue them from death and the terrors of the plague.
You heard them and accepted their promise
To re enact the Passion play, your life death and resurrection.
Now I come to you and I ask you to be near me in the muddles and
tangles of my life
I will listen to your words and base my life upon them.

Fr Thomas Groner, Parish priest of Oberammergau.

Music: God so loved the world from Stainer's Crucifixion

Silence:

Stations of the cross: Malcolm Guite

Jesus is condemned to death

The very air that Pilate breathes,
the voice with which he speaks in judgement
Are given by this prisoner, freely given.
The man who stands there making no defence
Is God. His hands are tied, his heart is open

He gives himself again with all his gifts into our hands.

Hymn: 111 Dear Lord and Father of mankind

Part 2 A Vow is a Covenant

Welcome to our Good Friday Devotion based on the Passion play in Oberammergau. The play is performed every ten years apart from during the world wars and the Pandemic of 2020. A group of us went from the Schorne team in 2022 and experienced something which will be with us for the rest of our lives. All the actors singers and musicians were born and live in Oberammergau or have resided there for at least twenty years or are married to a resident for 10years.. The play has a cast of hundreds and all parts are auditioned. The costumes are handmade and the men grow their hair and beards to look authentic.

There are 64 vocalists, 44 choristers with 55 instrumentalists. Each major part has two actors as the play has over 100 performances between May and October. The people taking part often have jobs which they attend in the morning and then perform the play in the afternoon and evening. The village of Oberammergau is bustling and colourful and is reknowned for its wood carving. The cross on the table is the one I bought in one of the woodcarving shops. It reminds me of Christ's sacrifice and seeing his passion so sensitively portrayed in the Passion play.

This section is entitled A vow is a covenant. Realistically covenants and promises are not always easy to keep. The circumstances of life can change us and the covenant we made in good faith seems difficult or impossible to hold on to. It is then that we need God's help. Circumstances may not change but maybe our perception and attitude may. The words by Thomas Merton, the 20th century Trappist monk reassure us.

My Lord God I have no idea where I am going, I do not see the road ahead of me, I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you and I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road although I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death, I will not fear for you are ever with me and will never leave me to face my perils alone.

You may have heard of the Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei – he of the 100million handmade sunflowers seeds. He has suffered greatly in his life and was exiled in 2015. He says: Nobody wants to struggle but not to make effort in daily life makes the human lose a lot of humanity. We just want a comfortable life but that will paralyse our mind.

Jesus' life particularly in his three years of ministry was a daily struggle – a struggle against the temple leaders; against the doubts of his disciples and followers; against the Roman authorities and possibly against his own calling of humility and sacrifice. The foundations for the coming of the Messiah were laid thousands of years previously when God made covenants with his people.

So in Genesis 9 we read of God's covenant with Noah. . A covenant, like a promise is a binding agreement. In the bible a covenant is relational between people or a person and God. Sometimes the covenant was accompanied by oaths, signs or ceremonies.

Genesis 9 8-16

Then God said to Noah and his sons with him, as for me I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants and with

every living creature. Never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth. God said This is the sign of the covenant. I have set my bow in the skies and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and a bow in the clouds I will remember my covenant and never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life.

God marked this covenant not to flood the earth again with the sign of the rainbow. It would remind people of God's promise. This was one of the Old Covenants that God made with Noah, and he made others with Abraham, Moses and his people the Israelites. The Old covenant was based laws, ceremonies and sacrifices for forgiveness. In Leviticus 4 we read that a lamb was sacrificed and sins would be forgiven. Paul writes in Hebrews 9 v 22 "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness." This was the Old Covenant. Animals needed to be sacrificed in order for peoples' sins to be forgiven. Jesus brought in the New covenant which is symbolised in the Eucharist with the wine. Jesus was sharing the Passover meal with his disciples. This was his last meal with them. The disciples had prepared this historic meal enacting the flight from Egypt of God's people. There would have been a hard boiled egg, bitter herbs, a roasted bone, wine and flat bread. Jesus used the bread and wine to symbolise his body and blood. "This is my body broken for you." Then we read "After supper Jesus took the cup saying: This is the New covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you." The new covenant was ratified when Jesus died on the cross. His was the sacrifice made once and for all people. The New covenant would be based on faith rather than laws. The resume of Jesus' life of love, humility and sacrifice is encapsulated in these familiar words.

One solitary life

He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He worked in a carpentry shop until he was 30. He never wrote a

book, he never travelled more than 200 miles from the place where he lived. He taught and healed, showed love and compassion and collected many followers including 12 ordinary men. But he was betrayed, tortured and crucified, deserted by most of his friends. He was even laid in a borrowed tomb. And yet today over 2 billion people call themselves Christian; he has affected the lives of people across the centuries and across the world. Jesus Christ truly is the Son of God.

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ you were lifted up on the cross for us and for our salvation. We thank you for your sacrifice and for the promise of forgiveness for our sins. Help us to remember you with thankfulness every time we celebrate the Eucharist and take the bread and wine – symbols of your broken body and shed blood. Amen.

Music: Gymnopedie by Satie

Silence

Stations of the cross: Malcolm Guite

Jesus is given his cross

He gave the earth that bears, the air that lifts
Water to cleanse and cool, fire to burn
He saw it all and saw that it was good
We took the axe and laid it to the tree
We made a cross of all that he had made
And laid it on the one who made us free.

Hymn: 755 When I survey the wondrous cross .

Part 3 A vow is commitment

Almost 400 years ago the people of Oberammergau vowed to stage a passion Play every ten years depicting the life death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Black Death had been sweeping through Bavaria and their village had lost many to this terrible disease. The elders met and made the Vow praying that by so doing God would in his mercy save them from losing anymore villagers. From that day in 1633 no more died and apart from world wars and Covid, the play has been faithfully performed every tenth year.

Our coach load set off from Munich and travelled to Berned where we stayed in a lovely hotel for five days going out on excursions. We visited the Neuschwanstein castle and Linderhof Palace and had a cruise on Ammersee lake. The climax was on Sunday 19th June when we went to Oberammergau to experience the Passion Play. The play is in German and so many of us bought a translation book to follow the script. People travel from all over the world to see the play so booklets are produced in many languages. The theatre is open air although the audience of 5000 is covered. The stage is not so if it rains, the actors, musicians, choristers and animals get very wet! The atmosphere is electric and full of expectation and excitement. But nothing prepares you for that moment when a hush descends and the choir start to sing. We will hear that beautiful opening music in Part 4 of these reflections. Needless to say there were a few tears.

We make many commitments in our lives, whether it is to a club, a school or college or to family and friends. Many commitments are unspoken but nevertheless they are strong and lasting. Some are made to others or in front of others - Brownies and Scouts, baptism and confirmation and of course marriage. Many are also made to God as people take on Christian responsibilities. They are solemn

and binding and are not undertaken lightly. In a way the words from the marriage service bring many of these thoughts together. At the beginning of the service there is a part entitled The Preface. Here are some of the words:

“We have come together in the presence of God to witness the marriage of N and N to ask his blessing and to share their joy. This is a way of life created and hallowed by God. They will join hands and exchange solemn vows and in token of this they will each give and receive a ring.”

So encapsulated there are many of the commitment of vows, promises and covenants that we have been exploring today.

There are not many examples of Jesus making promises but his life of ministry was one of commitment to God his Father to fulfil his will; commitment to teaching, healing and service and ultimately sacrifice. He made these two specific promises to his disciples and to us: Both come after his resurrection and just before his ascension:

Bible reading: Matthew 28 16-20

“Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshipped him but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said: All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age.”

John 24 v 49-51

“Jesus said I am going to send you what my father has promised but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high. When he led them out to Bethany he lifted up his hands and

blessed them and while he was blessing them he left them and was taken up into heaven.”

As Jesus said his final farewells to the loyal men who had committed their lives to following him over the past three years, he commissioned them to carry on his work. But he promised two things – firstly that he would be with them always and secondly that The Holy Spirit would come to them and anoint them with the power that they needed to continue his ministry. Those promises are available to us as we seek to follow Jesus Christ in our daily lives. He promises to be with us always – in the good times and the difficult and challenging times. He also offers to us the blessing of the Holy Spirit the Spirit who will give us the gifts of wisdom, understanding, healing, discernment and resilience.

Prayer

Almighty God, we give you thanks for your great love towards us and the whole world. We thank you for the commitment of our Lord Jesus Christ to fulfilling the prophecies of the Old Testament that he would be the promised Messiah and that he would give his life for the forgiveness of sins. We claim the promises made to his disciples that he will be with us in all events of our lives and that he will fill us with the gracious Holy Spirit so that we can live and work for your praise and glory. Amen.

Music Agnus Dei from Faure’s Requiem

Silence:

Stations of the Cross: Malcolm Guite

Jesus falls for the first time

He made the stones that pave the roads of Zion
And well he knows the path we make him tread

And now he falls upon the stones that bruise
The flesh, that break and scrape the tender skin
We flinch back from his *via dolorosa*
He sets his face like flint and takes our place
Staggers beneath the black weight of us all
And falls with us that he might break our fall.

Hymn: How deep the Father's love for us 988

Part 4 A vow is an expression of faith

We have been considering the visit last year to Oberammergau by friends from our Schorne team and the impact that it had on us. In the words of our late Queen – memories differ! We all brought with us our life experiences, expectations, hopes and even fears. I feared that I would weep all the way through! I always find Holy week and particularly Good Friday extremely emotional. Some years ago I was working in All Saints church Leighton Buzzard. I needed to have the experience of serving in a high church as part of my training for ordination. I chose All Saints as it is an Anglo-Catholic church and I was also privileged to be there during Holy Week. I have many lasting memories of that time – being told off for letting go of the chalice while serving at the Eucharist, being nurtured by the curate Ann and being offered so many different experiences. But one which I will always remember was the annual raising of the wooden cross in the town's square on Good Friday. Many gathered to watch the event and at one point I turned away to see who was there. Suddenly I heard hammer on metal. They were securing the cross in place but it sounded exactly as I imagine it would have when the Romans nailed Jesus to the cross. It was devastating.

A poem by Ann Lewin captures that moment:

The rood tree

I might have been his cradle rocking him
Folding securely against harm
I could have been a ship turning my sturdy timbers
To the wind keeping him safe from the storm.
Instead they used me as his cross.
I bore through his body
The weight of the world's pain
The weight of his agony.
No comforting protection could I offer
Or deliverance, only support.
They say it was a tree whose fruit brought
Sorrow to the world
The fruit I bore brought salvation
My glory was it then to be his tree.

There are times when we feel that Christ's call for justice, peace, love and compassion gets drowned out by injustice, war, hatred and greed. As Christians we are aware of being a minority and that some of our brothers and sisters in faith are actively persecuted or tortured. We sometimes feel that our message of Christ's life, death and resurrection is an irrelevance to many people. So do we give up in despair or do we faithfully live our lives prayerfully looking for opportunities to show that love and compassion in small acts of kindness.

The late Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote: Do your little bit of good where you are; its those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world. Mother Theresa and John Wesley wrote similar words. We have all received small acts of kindness and we know what they can mean to us. We are not called to be successful but to be faithful. The good folk of Oberammergau showed

tremendous faith when they made their vow to faithfully put on the Passion play every ten years. No doubt it started quite small in the 17th century but decade by decade, century by century, the message of God's love and deliverance to that village and to the world in Christ's death and resurrection has touched and transformed many of lives.

Jesus spoke many times about faith – sometimes admonishing people for their lack of faith. “O you of little faith” He said to those who worry about trivial things. (Matt 6 30) He also praised those who showed much faith – the woman who touched his cloak and was healed; the centurion who believed that Jesus could heal his servant even without seeing or touching him.

St Luke recounts the story of the ten lepers who were healed.

Bible reading: Luke 17 11-19

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance they called out saying: Jesus Master have mercy on us. When he saw them he said to them: go and show yourselves to the priests. And they went and were made clean. Then one of them when he saw that he was healed turned back praising God in a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked: Were not ten made clean? But the other nine where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God Except this Foreigner. Then he said to him Get up and go on your way. Your faith has made you well.

Here we read that Jesus was travelling between Galilee and Samaria. Hatred between Jews and Samaritans was fierce and long standing so for Jesus this was potentially enemy territory. Leprosy was a dreaded disease, incurable in those days, disfiguring and ostracising. Ten lepers approached Jesus but kept their

distance as leprosy was thought to be catching. They longed to be healed as it meant that they could return to their homes and families. Jesus sent them to the priest because it was only he who could examine them and allow them to return to their normal life if they were clean. They did not hesitate showing that they had faith in Jesus to heal them and they were cleansed and renewed. A wonderful example of the faith that so many had in Jesus. But at the end of this story there is the disappointment that Jesus must have felt perhaps on many occasions – only one of the lepers returned to thank him and he was a Samaritan. Jesus sent him rejoicing on his way: Give praise to God, your faith has made you well. We live by faith because we cannot see or prove God but let us always acknowledge that faith is a gift from God and may we thank and Praise him as we experience him at work in our lives and the lives of others.

Faith hears the inaudible, sees the invisible, believes the incredible and receives the impossible.

Prayer of St Richard, Bishop of Chichester: Thanks be to thee my Lord Jesus Christ for all the benefits which thou has given me; for all the pains and insults which thou hast borne for me. O most merciful Redeemer, Friend and Brother, may I know thee more clearly, love thee more dearly and follow thee more nearly Amen.

Music: Opening chorus and music from Oberammergau

Silence

Stations of the Cross Malcolm Guite

Simon of Cyrene carries the cross

In desperation on this road of tears

Bystanders and bypassers turn away

In others' pain we face our own worst fears
And turn our backs to keep those fears at bay.
Unless we are compelled as this man was
To face and feel and carry someone's cross
So Simon, no disciple, still fulfilled
The calling: Take the cross and follow me.

Hymn: In Christ alone

Part 5 A vow is an Expression of Thankfulness and Praise

“When someone’s heartfelt prayers are answered and they do what they promise to do in return, it’s not just them keeping their side of the bargain. It’s much more – it’s an expression of their thankfulness and celebration. So when the plague in Oberammergau ended, and the villagers performed the Passion play, it was their way of praising God whose help they had so recently experienced. They declared their faith publicly in a God who can be moved by human suffering and through the person of his Son born into humanity, shared that suffering and ultimately overcame it.” These words come from an Oberammergau booklet entitled The Vow.

There are many occasions when we feel moved to thankfulness and praise to God – when a child is born perhaps into our family; when someone recovers from a long illness, when we attend a wedding or baptism and even a funeral. When someone who has led a long and fruitful life and dies we express thankfulness and celebration for their gifts and legacy of love. Sadly like a lot of families we have lost significant members in the past few years. But they have all left wonderful legacies captured in photos and paintings and in our memories.

Good Friday is a day of great sadness – the culmination of walking with Christ through Holy Week and experiencing the bafflement of

the disciples as Jesus washes their feet and shares his last meal with them. WE know what is to come, but at this point it seems that the disciples do not, despite Jesus spending much time trying to prepare them for the events ahead. How could they possibly think that he their perfect Lord and Master would suffer the torture, humiliation and ultimate cruelty that the Romans meted out to criminals.

The hymn we sing My song is love unknown, has the verse:

Why what has my Lord done

What makes this rage and spite?

He made the lame to run

He gave the blind their sight

Sweet injuries yet they at these

Themselves displease and gainst him rise.

And yet we have named this day Good Friday which makes us think of a day of joy and happiness and thanksgiving. It is thought that the origin of the word good in centuries past, meant Holy – the day that the son of God sacrificed his life for the world:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

So in that way Good Friday embraces sadness in Christ’s suffering but thankfulness and praise for his great sacrifice.

On Thursday mornings a group meet to share Celtic morning prayers together. There are scripture readings and a meditation to read and discuss leading into a time of prayer. One of the meditations that we have used is very powerful written by Godfrey Birtill.

When I look at the blood all I see is love, love, love

When I stop at the cross I can see love, love, love

I can't see competition, prejudice, abuse, rage, anger or selfishness.

I can't see unforgiveness, hate, envy, jealousy, self-importance or arrogance.

I see surrender, sacrifice, salvation, humility, righteousness, faithfulness, grace, forgiveness love, love, love

When I stop at the cross I can see the love of God.

THERE is the reason to be thankful and full of praise.

Bible reading: Luke 23 26-46

As they led him away they seized a man Simon of Cyrene and they laid the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. A great number of people followed him, and among them were women beating their breasts and wailing for him. Daughters of Jerusalem do not weep for me but weep for yourselves and your children.

Two others who were criminals were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called the Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said: Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.

One of the criminals who were hanging there with him derided him saying: Are you the Messiah. Save yourself and us. but the other rebuked him saying: Do you not fear God. We have been condemned justly but this man has done nothing wrong. Then he said : Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom. Jesus replied: Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.

Taize chant: Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom x 8

Prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ you came to our world as light in its darkness
Bringing life and love, hope and forgiveness
You came not to condemn but to save

Not to judge but to show mercy
Forgive us that so often we continue to walk in the dark
Teach us to walk in your light and to follow where you lead
Knowing that you are the Way, the Truth and the Life.
We thank and praise you for your great love shown to us in the life,
death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. To him be praise
and glory though out all the ages. Amen

Music: Oberammergau 15. Jesus is laid in the tomb

Silence

Choir: When I survey the wondrous cross

Stations of the cross: Malcolm Guite

Crucifixion

Love is firmly fastened on to loss
But here a pure change happens
On this tree loss becomes gain and death opens into birth
Wounding heals and fastening makes free
Love and hatred meet and love stays true
Sin meets grace and darkness turns to light.
His love is free, his arms are open wide.

Hymn: My song is love unknown 478

Part 6 A Vow is a Blessing

“The Oberammergau Passion Play, performed down the generations presents God afresh. It allows us to see God with new eyes in our own day. And in view of the hurt and brokenness in this world and in the lives of every single one of us, it makes complete sense. Of course, today’s villagers are not obliged to fulfil the vow made by their forebears nearly 400 years ago to keep it alive. Yet

they can, as descendants of those people, choose to take on the promise for themselves. They make it their own by taking part in the “Renewing of the Vow”. By doing so they offer their thanks and praise to God for saving the village from the plague in 1633 and all who experience the Passion play are blessed.”

These are words from the booklet accompanying the play. I’m sure that we were indeed blessed by the sights and sounds, the words and music, the actors and animals as the story of God’s sacrificial love unfolded before us.

From the beginning of the Bible until the end – from Genesis to Revelation there are examples of God’s blessing upon people’s lives. In Genesis we read that God blessed the seventh day and made it holy because he rested from all the work of creating that he had done. As I get older I often look back and reflect on the changes that I have experienced in my life and there have been many particularly in technology and communication. But one of the saddest was opening shops on a Sunday. It seemed a relatively simple change but the repercussions on people’s lives have been tremendous. Not only do people shop on what was a day of rest but people now have to work. I still cannot shop on a Sunday unless it’s an emergency. I realise that many have no option, but Sunday has lost a great deal of its specialness.

The priestly blessing is one that I often use. It is found in the fourth book of the Old Testament.

Bible reading: Numbers 6 v 24

“The Lord said to Moses Tell Aaron and his sons This is how you are to bless the Israelites:

The Lord bless you and keep you and keep you

The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you

The Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace.”

It is humbling to be using the same blessing that God gave to Moses about 4000 years ago. We shall shortly listen to John Rutter's arrangement of these words.

Many of the Psalms have encouragements beginning Blessed is the person who.. and then Jesus in the sermon on the Mount urges his listeners to trust God in all situations of life:

Blessed are the meek, the peacemakers, the poor in spirit, the merciful, the pure in heart for they will experience God's abundant blessings.

Blessings continue through the bible with Jesus blessing children and speaking about it is more blessed to give than to receive. I came across a lovely saying on a board outside a shop in Winslow. It said: The happiest people are those who spend their lives looking after others. If you've tried it, you know that it's true.

And finally in Revelation we read: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord. They will rest from their labours for their deeds will follow them. How often I have attended or led a funeral and thought – I knew so little about them. They achieved so much in their life. I wish I had known that before. But the blessing is that they touched many people's lives in different ways and so their legacy lives on in others.

Prayer: A blessing by Gerard Hughes

May you who are restless find rest

And in rest restoration

May peace be yours.

May you who are frozen find freedom

And in freedom the strength to face the fire

And the thawing of your ice gripped heart

May peace be yours

May you who live in tension find tenderness
And in tenderness the tendency
To kindness and the miracle of mercy
May peace be yours

And you who are seeking
May you find God and in God
The grace and growth you need
For fruit and fruitfulness
And the love that will last you
Through the long haul
Of a life lived for others
May peace be yours.

Music: John Rutter, The Lord bless you and keep you.

Silence

Stations of the Cross Malcolm Guite

Jesus is laid in the tomb

Here at the centre everything is still
Before the stir and movement of our grief
So they anoint the skin that cannot feel
And soothe his ruined flesh with tender care
He blesses everyone that weeps and grieves
And makes our grief the pangs of a new birth
The love that's poured out is never lost
In him all love is found and sown with him
A seed in richer ground.

Hymn: O Jesus I have promised. 501

Blessing: May the peace of Christ go with you

Wherever he may send you

May he guide you through the wilderness

Protect you through the storm

May he bring you home rejoicing at the wonders he has shown you

May he bring you home rejoicing once again into our doors.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen