

**Second Sunday before Lent,
Sunday, 7th February 2021**



Dear Friends,

***'For whoever finds me finds life, and receives favour from the Lord.
But those who miss me injure themselves. All who hate me love death.'***
(Proverbs 8: 35-6)

As the Church calendar moves us out of Epiphany-tide and into a short phase of the irritatingly named 'Ordinary Time' before we begin our Lent, I am mindful that we are, not for the first time, in the midst of rather extraordinary times! The UK has reached a milestone of 10 million people being given their first Coronavirus vaccine and infection rates look to be slowing – all of which is to be rejoiced.

Equally, it has been heartening to join with our nation in giving thanks for the life and witness of Captain Sir Tom Moore, whose great life of 100 years came to its earthly close on the day of Candlemas this past Tuesday. How fitting that on the very day we commemorate faithful Simeon's encounter with the Christ-child in the Temple at Jerusalem Captain Sir Tom was called home to meet His Lord and Saviour face to face. May he rest in peace and rise in glory, and may his family know the comfort of Jesus' healing love.



Credit – Associated Press

What Captain Sir Tom would have made of the questionable wisdom of an Anglican clergyman calling the 6pm #ClapForTom tribute on Wednesday evening a 'cult of White British Nationalism' I cannot know, though I imagine he would have extended his familiar blend of compassion and self-deprecating humour to diffuse the situation. What we do know, as stories of this last year of his life begin to come to the fore, is that Captain Sir Tom used every second of every day for good; doing what he could within the limitations of his ageing frame to radiate his Christian faith in service to God's people.

One such light-filled example is the remarkable relationship which has flourished between the Centenarian veteran and a little six-year old boy, Tony Hudgell. Tony saw Captain Sir Tom using a walking frame and sticks around his garden to raise funds for the NHS at time when he himself was facing some profound personal difficulties. The two corresponded, and it was through Captain Sir Tom's letters of encouragement that Tony found the strength and support he needed. It is evident that this beautiful little boy is just as extraordinary as the man he has come to adore! For in his young life, Tony has needed to have had both his legs amputated as a result of abuse from his birth-parents. Through Captain Sir Tom's example, Tony agreed to be fitted with prosthetic legs, and has now walked 10km to raise funds for the Evelina London Children's Hospital, raising over a million pounds in the process! Tony's (also rather wonderful) adoptive mother, Paula, has said that she doubts if Tony would be walking now without Captain Sir Tom's inspirational support.



Credit – Press Association

The Archbishop of Canterbury described Captain Sir Tom as ‘The very best of us,’ and went on to say that ‘Where he walked a nation followed.’ I suspect little Tony won’t be far behind! I pray that, whatever he has to face as he journeys through his life, he will continue to inspire our nation as a force for good, in the wisdom of his mentor.

The question of the suffering of God’s Creation and our response to it is tied up in this weekend’s scripture readings. Underpinning it all sits the question so often asked by disbelievers and those for whom the plight of others is too terrible to imagine that a loving God could have created it all. Ancient wisdom apposite for our current times!

Wisdom demands of us to listen to her; to value her divine authority, and respond to her eternal truth. The Book of Proverbs is a sort of self-help manual, which has gathered up the diverse and rich oral and aural cultural wisdom of Israel across time: Wisdom which is rooted the life experiences of God-fearing men and women. Attributed to the wise king, Solomon, its biblical perspective is to teach us how to attain Wisdom through spiritual discipline, thereby learning how to live Godly and moral lives - a wise choice in and of itself; especially so, as we prepare to journey with Jesus to the Cross.



‘Solomon and Lady Wisdom’ by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld

There is a differentiation between *having* knowledge and possessing the wisdom to *use* that knowledge. Through Solomon’s own erudite distillation, we are blessed with a blue-print which sets out how those who listen to Wisdom’s counsel and choose to live by it will know eternal life. This, of course, is the consolation destined for faithful witnesses like Simeon and Anna, Lord Michael Shaw and Captain Sir Tom Moore. Equally, those who are foolish enough to gamble against God and disregard His divine and creative Wisdom, are given an understanding of eternal death as their fate: *‘For whoever finds me finds life and receives favour from the Lord. But those who miss me injure themselves. All who hate me love death.’*

As we had in last week's lessons for Candlemas, so we are again seeing the invisible God at work in and through the visible presence and saving action of Christ. Just as little Tony has been given an inspirational role model in the form of Captain Sir Tom, so God has come into the world in a way we will understand, helping us shape our lives and steward His creation in the way He designed. We must begin to comprehend that God is doing everything in His creative power to bring us back into right relationship with Him, so that we can understand His purposes and *choose* to live our lives by them. And that, of course, is the rub for disbelievers, for persecutors of the faith and for those who stand on the side-lines passively hoping *someone else* will do all the hard work of making the world the beautiful, harmonious place God envisioned for us.

We are playing the victim and demanding of God that He simply comes down and sorts out earth's problems. But God, in His wisdom is refusing to buy into our drama! God wants a deeper, trusting, equal relationship with us. So how does he deal with our demands? His wise judgement is in giving us the Word.

God embodies the traits of His own created wisdom into the human experience by bringing Jesus into to the world. Just as any astute parent, who knows the way to teach their children is not to control them but to give them knowledge, autonomy and space to learn from their own mistakes, God sends us Jesus to light our way, to guide our faltering steps and help us focus on the right way to live.



'Pentecost' by Daniel Rice

In response to Jesus' presence as God's answer to our cries against the suffering and injustice of the world, theologian, Jane Williams, says:

Jesus suggests God's anger and love in the face of suffering. He also suggests a way of living that confronts injustice; that has compassion for suffering; that brings the vitality of God into everything. And He suggests a way of dying that might hold, contain and transform evil and suffering.

Our Creator God's radical solution to the question of suffering is resolved by gifting us with the free will to change the world for ourselves; embodying the human experience with the source of all wisdom in the suffering Christ. As my own enlightened (Yorkshire) mother would likely conclude: 'Jesus is the holy example God asks us to follow. So just get on and do it!'

Colin Sheath at Chilbolton has given me permission to bring you his reflection from this week's Morning Prayer gathering by Zoom, and Alastair Barron at Sparsholt has collated some apposite prayers which were also used during this moving service. They speak eloquently into our need to be part of Christ's saving action in our deeply flawed world. The **Café Church** Team at St Catherine's, Littleton has also brought us a worship video on the Creation theme of Eco-Church this weekend. Scroll down to click on the link to our website to view it. My grateful thanks to them all.

Yours, inspired by the extraordinary people 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/>

This Sunday, you will find a **video from the Café Church team on the theme of Loving God in Creation - EcoChurch on our Website** and there will be more to come from our wonderful Ministry Team as we journey into February and Lent, starting with a **recorded service for Ash Wednesday** which will be ready to view on our website from 17th February 2021.

Call to Prayer for the Nation

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.



Thought for Today - Morning Prayer 2.2.21 - Seeds of Hope

Last week we were hearing about the UK reaching a sobering milestone of 100,000 deaths linked to Covid 19, and last Tuesday was also Holocaust Memorial Day.

Two events of devastating significance, one looking back at what happened and one looking at what is happening right now. These two milestones are both emotional, tragic and moving, each for different reasons yet they are linked by one devastating fact, the enormous loss of life and the inevitable consequences of that loss. How we reconcile such things in our minds, with our faith, with our belief in God and with our trust and reliance in our fellow man will have different answers for many of us

Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, recently said there is no easy or quick answer to this question. He also asked people to reflect on the 'enormity' of the pandemic, saying:

This is 100,000 individuals
This is 100,000 families
This is 100,000 friends
This is Millions of people affected
Remember Each of those 100,000 *is an individual* in the sight of God!

As we ponder the enormity of these statistics, we must find hope in the fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ - our central core belief. The outpouring of love from our fellow man which we have seen over the last 10 months in hospitals and food banks and in all individuals showing love for their fellow man gives us hope for the future of our society

There are many signs of hope that all these deaths *will not* be in vain, but will lead to a better country and a better society.... A better world. And remember: *God is with us* in our grief and in our struggles *He is alongside us* through all these times.

John the apostle says 'Walk in the light' so let the light and love of Christ heal and lead the way. Whatever each of us are struggling with - Take it to God in Prayer!

While we deal with the facts of both the past and the present it is important to have an eye on the future, an eye on how we move forward, some of that will come from our faith, and some of it will come from the way we conduct ourselves.

While we cannot change what has already happened we can surely learn from it and apply that knowledge to the future going forward. And '*Walk in the light.*' May we and all in positions of power and influence be guided by our knowledge and learning, and by our faith in God - that we will all walk into the light of a hopeful future!

**Colin Sheath
Chilbolton**

**A prayer for the Holocaust Memorial Day or Yom HaShoah, written together by
Chief Rabbi, Ephraim Mirvis, Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby and
Senior Imam, Qari Asim, to be used by people of any faith:**

Loving God, we come to you with heavy hearts, remembering the six million Jewish souls murdered during the Holocaust. In the horrors of that history, when so many groups were targeted because of their identity, and in genocides which followed, we recognise destructive prejudices that drive people apart.

Forgive us when we give space to fear, negativity and hatred of others, simply because they are different from us. In the light of God, we see everyone as equally precious manifestations of the Divine, and can know the courage to face the darkness.

Through our prayers and actions, help us to stand together with those who are suffering, so that light may banish all darkness, love will prevail over hate and good will triumph over evil. **Amen.**



Prayer to Follow the Light

God our Saviour,
help us to follow the light, your light, and to live the truth.
In you, we have been born again as sons and daughters of light.
May we be your witnesses before all the world,
Showing your light to others.
Grant this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever.
Amen.

Collect Prayer for the Second Sunday before Lent

Almighty God, you have created the heavens and the earth and made us in your own image: teach us to discern your hand in all your works and your likeness in all your children; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit reigns supreme over all things, now and for ever.
Amen.



Proverbs: 8: 1; 22-31

Listen as Wisdom calls out! Hear as understanding raises her voice!
The Lord formed me from the beginning, before he created anything else.
I was appointed in ages past, at the very first, before the earth began.
I was born before the oceans were created, before the springs bubbled forth their
waters.

Before the mountains were formed, before the hills, I was born—
before he had made the earth and fields and the first handfuls of soil.

I was there when he established the heavens,
when he drew the horizon on the oceans.

I was there when he set the clouds above,
when he established springs deep in the earth.

I was there when he set the limits of the seas,
so they would not spread beyond their boundaries.

And when he marked off the earth's foundations,
I was the architect at his side. I was his constant delight,
rejoicing always in his presence.

And how happy I was with the world he created;
how I rejoiced with the human family!

And so, my children, listen to me, for all who follow my ways are joyful.

Listen to my instruction and be wise.

Don't ignore it.

Joyful are those who listen to me, watching for me daily at my gates,
waiting for me outside my home!

For whoever finds me finds life, and receives favour from the Lord.

But those who miss me injure themselves.

All who hate me love death.

Colossians 1: 15-20 - Christ Is Supreme

Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation, for through him God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can't see - such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world.

Everything was created through him and for him. He existed before anything else, and he holds all creation together. Christ is also the head of the church, which is his body.

He is the beginning, supreme over all who rise from the dead. So he is first in everything. For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ, and through him God reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ's blood on the cross.



John 1: 1-14 - The Word Became Flesh

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.