

**Sermon for Epiphany 4 (A)– January 29<sup>th</sup> 2017**  
**St James' Church, Cambridge – The Revd Deborah Ford**

**Lectionary Readings:**

**1 Kings 17:8-16**

**Psalm 36:5-10**

**1 Corinthians 1:18-end**

**John 2:1-11**

**“How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights.”**  
**(Psalm 36:7-8)**

- At a service here a few weeks ago, I found myself sitting in a pew (do we still call them ‘pews’ here?) with Martha.
- Martha, whose eyesight is really failing – to the point where it’s now almost impossible for her to distinguish the words of the hymns or the liturgy or the weekly sheet: however much they’re magnified.
- It gave me a real insight into how isolating it is: although it was wonderful to hear her joining wholeheartedly in so many of the prayers, words and hymns she knows by heart.
- We were talking afterwards about how difficult it is: not just the tasks in ‘everyday living’, but the sadness and loss of being able to do so many things she’s always loved: and loss of sight being particularly difficult when you’re someone who’s always been a voracious reader, writer of letters & loves to sing.... Really, really hard.
- But Martha was also telling me about how one of the highlights of her week is now when someone comes to read to her.... Someone else in St James who has herself really been through it and suffered in recent years and yet is able and willing to give such a wonderful gift and draws Martha back into the community of God’s love through reading to her.
- I had no idea this was/is happening: I find it very moving.

- There's something about God's economy of generosity and abundance in it that is very beautiful: just as there is in today's readings.
- Elijah and the widow (in our OT reading) reminded me of Corrie Ten Boon, a Dutch woman who was sent with her sister to Ravensbruck concentration camp for their part in helping to hide Jews during the Second World War, who tells a similar story.
- Her sister Betsie was desperately ill in the camp and Corrie had managed to smuggle in one little jar of liquid vitamins, from which she carefully administered one precious drop to Betsie each day – in the hopes that she might somehow begin to pick up a bit.
- But no matter how much Corrie tried to hide and keep the drops for Betsie, other women soon cottoned on and began to crowd around to get some too. "It was hard to say no," she writes, "to eyes that burned with fever, hands that shook with chill. I tried to save it for the very weakest — but even these soon numbered fifteen, twenty, twenty-five . . . and still, every time I tilted the little bottle, a drop appeared at the tip of the glass stopper."
- When Corrie struggled to find a rational explanation for how this could possibly be, Betsie reminded her of the widow of Zarephath's faith in feeding Elijah and said 'Simply accept it as "a surprise from a Father who loves you."'
- 'Simply accept it as "a surprise from a Father who loves you."'
- The story of the wine at the wedding at Cana, where Jesus transforms gallons and gallons of water into delicious wine, has the same dynamic.
- It's an economy of generosity and *abundance*: an economy of God's life-saving care through the faith of another person: this time, it's Jesus' mother Mary, who takes the initiative and Jesus (even though he says his hour has not yet come) responds.
- The economy is something like: you/I pray for something/someone and God responds through the faithful prayer, openness and gifts of someone else, as more and more people are drawn into his life and grace and opened up together.
- *That's* what the body of Christ is about.

- We can't *be* the fullness of who God has created us to be in isolation: we are bound together in him and we find ourselves in serving and *loving* one another.
- The resurrection of Jesus isn't just about *Jesus* being brought back to life: it's about the whole world being swept up into an explosion of new energy, new life, new grace, new freedom and new possibility.
- That's the movement of God's Spirit in the world: every moment of every day and night: every *second*: *bursting* with new life and potential for good.
- As Corrie Ten Boom writes: "If there's one thing I've learned at 80 years of age, it's that I can't store up good feelings and behaviour – but only draw them fresh from God each day."
- God's grace does not always come in the ways or circumstances we would choose, does it? Often it's a journey of us having to learn to *receive* in a place of emptiness, rather than being in a position of strength and being able to give.
- It's about simply being open to accepting as surprise all that our loving Father wants to give us. It can be very costly: sometimes the 'glory of the cross' – feels completely foolish and upside-down – even to those of us who dare to try to believe. The logic and economy of the world around us is very different. The question is, are we willing and open enough to being radically *surprised* by God?
- For if we *are* willing to trust, and to *keep* trusting God, and the wisdom of God in Jesus Christ, *whatever* life throws at us - we are rewarded in the most mysterious and yet amazing ways.
- Paul writes from dire suffering and persecution, and yet has discovered the secret of joy in the midst of it all. What a gift! The glory is *God's*: that's why he can say "Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say, rejoice." People who've discovered that usually have a deep peace and radiance about them, don't they? It's a very beautiful thing. As Elijah reassures the widow: "For thus says the Lord the God of Israel, the jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail..."

- *That's* how the poet Patrick Kavanagh describes the resurrection: “a laugh freed for ever and ever.”<sup>1</sup> And it's the incarnation too: just think how exciting it is when a baby gives its first smile. It's wonderful, isn't it? And this is *Jesus* showing us the light of his Father's smile and love.
- It's not that terrible things won't ever happen in this life, but that the power of God's grace and resurrection life is not only sufficient, but *way* more than sufficient.
- One of the really distinctive things about these few chapters in Paul's letters is in his use of language.
- They're full of what's known as 'agglutinative compounds' (they sound rather sticky, don't they?) He's coming up against the limits of language in trying to do justice to the wonders of God.
- So, instead of just using a word on its own, he intensifies it by sticking something on at the beginning of it (a prefix). It's often the Greek *huper* or *sun* (meaning 'unusually full of energy' or 'together with' – in relation to: growing in faith; working, living and dying together; being filled with overflowing joy in affliction; sharing spiritual gifts for mutual encouragement; being bound together in glory...and there are a whole lot more).
- And then if that is not enough, he sticks on *another* bit, or accumulates or combines a whole lot of bits, like in the word 'supercalifragilisticexpialidocious' (in Greek, of course!) - and then when even *that's* not enough, inventing a whole series of variations on it, one after another: word after word, verse after verse. It's powerful stuff!
- There's a crescendo of them in Romans 8 (where there are no less than eight in the second half of the chapter), where those of us who follow Christ are described as co-sufferers; co-inheritors; co-heirs; co-groaning and co-agonizing in labour together; *never* on our own: always co- helped in our weakness by the Holy Spirit and by others in the body: even if they are not physically with us.
- How exciting is that (even if the English doesn't quite get it!)! Paul is getting us into the Spirit of what he's talking about by using

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick Kavanagh: *Lough Derg: A Poem* (Martin Brian & O'Keeffe, London 1978)

language itself to stretch our capacity so we can take in more of all God wants to share with us: and it's nearly all about *being in it together*: with God and with each other. *All* so that we might gradually share and become more and more conformed (one with)-the God's image and glory *in and among* us.

- *That's* why we need to stretch our hearts and minds to first be able to *imagine* (at least) the sheer abundance of God's peace and energy and life. It's only if we can first *imagine* something as a possibility then it can begin to *be* a living reality.
- The media fills our minds and imaginations with disaster (whether it's bombs or tsunamis; earthquakes or avalanches – not to mention all the un-sensational miseries like the millions starving in Sudan; the ongoing plight of refugees world wide; those in prison; or the many in our own community: people living in debt; addiction of one sort or another; illness; poverty; houses being repossessed; people living on the streets...)
- We have no trouble imagining disaster, do we? But what if we were to imagine and try to glimpse and speak of God's *goodness* and *fullness of life in the Spirit* instead? Denise Levertov describes it as "*an energy field more intense than war*".
- That's the real scandal of the cross: the amazing love and life and peace it brings.
- But it's much harder to imagine than the pain or the 'bad' things, isn't it? An intensity and abundance of life that's "*more intense than war.*"
- But that's what we need: and what our children and grandchildren and all the generations to come need – to shape their minds and imaginations and capacity for God.
- What are the stories that speak and take us deeper into the reality of hope and goodness and joy?
- In one of the later Narnia books, Lewis uses the image of Aslan *singing* as he calls creation into being....
- Just imagine how a new song that hits the top of the charts simply explodes as it spreads and more and more people hear and are

swept up into its rhythm, music, dance and energy. Think how the songs of the Beatles took the world completely by storm!

- And that's just the beginning – as others join in and begin to sing, play and improvise on it.
- Epiphany is the season when we celebrate and improvise on the new song that the angels began at Jesus' birth and that we celebrated at Christmas, as it spreads further and further for the whole world to hear and be swept up in its life.
- I wonder what it might mean for us here at St James?
- So as we prepare to receive God's love for us in Jesus' body and blood, let us give thanks and open ourselves afresh to the abundance of God's life in and among us as we pray (in the words of the psalm):

**“How precious is your steadfast love, O God!  
 ...For with you is the fountain of life;  
 in your light we see light.”**

Amen. (DPF 29.1.17)

**Collect:**

God our creator,  
 who in the beginning  
 commanded the light to shine out of darkness:  
 we pray that the light of the glorious gospel of Christ  
 may dispel the darkness of ignorance and unbelief,  
 shine into the hearts of all your people,  
 and reveal the knowledge of your glory  
 in the face 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.