

Sandy Parish Church Revd Huw Davies

12 Loaves and a Starfish

28.5.20

Everybody's experience of lockdown and this containment of the virus has been different. I hope yours hasn't been too difficult. There's been some wonderful stories of care and help, simple acts of kindness that have made a huge difference to people. This was posted on one Facebook: *"Shielding has been hard, sad and lonely, frightening. The fear that you're never going to see your children, grandchildren and family and friends again. Planning how you're going to prepare leaving your children without a goodbye when you're so far away. It's been tough. But it's been learning a great deal about yourself has been good. Strangers have had a massive difference in your life, they've got you through and become friends. There's no words to say thank you to them, but these people have given me something I lost so long ago: spirit; hope; believing in myself. Thank you so very much, you are amazing people. You will never know the difference you have given me, made me believe that I will one day find my rainbow."* What a lovely thing, that simple acts of kindness can make a huge difference to people's lives, so thank you for the way in which you have prayed for people and put that prayer into action. Just as we said a few weeks ago in this video putting things into action, it's time to get into gear

Last week we talked about epitaphs and the legacies that we leave behind. Just behind me here is the vestry. In that vestry, which you don't normally see as members of the congregation or visitors to the church, there is a plaque to a man called John Wynne and several others who left legacies in the 1600s to the church and to the people of Sandy. John Wynne died in 1660 and left a legacy to the church and to the people of the town. The 1660s were a difficult time, we had just come out of twenty years of civil war, the Roundheads and the Cavaliers, those that were for the king and those that were for parliament. This now is the year of Restoration when the king is invited back from France to come and to sit again on the throne.

It's also a time of great trade. Many people had become adventurers; trade across the Atlantic had grown. It was a time when the west coast of Africa had been discovered as a trading place and gold and ivory and human trafficking were rife. Taking people from Africa, transporting them across to the Americas, a shameful time in British history. It shows the power of human greed, it shows how inhuman we can be sometimes to one another, how hard the human heart can be.

But not everybody was involved in that trade and John Wynne, from Sandy, was a simple cloth merchant and what is known as a dyer of wool. In those days a lot of money could be made by taking the wool that comes in from the continent and dyeing it and adding value to it. And so when it came to the end of his life he was able to leave a legacy to the town of Sandy which would benefit the people even today in what we now call the Sandy Charities.

After the plagues of the Middle Ages there was a shortage of labour, food was more available, land was more available and the middle class began to rise. People could become merchants and make a good living and some of them make a fortune and it is interesting to look across the nation and see how many of those people in those days had a sense of social conscience and not only made money for themselves but left it in their wills to ongoing charities, alms-houses, schools and hospitals.

The Sandy Charities today is part of that legacy. It has a small amount of income and it is tasked with the education and relief of the poor in poverty. You'll find a website for it and there is a simple application to ask for some support and help.

Some people are determined to make a difference with their wealth. You may know of the work of the Cadbury family in Bourneville, Birmingham or the Port Sunlight village in Birkenhead near Liverpool, where business people were making money but also taking care of their workers, often because of a religious conviction. The Quakers were very big philanthropists in England.

Not all of us have the resources of a John Wynne, he was able to leave the equivalent of a four bedroomed house today so his £140 in those days is equivalent today to perhaps three or four hundred thousand pounds. He left it in his will, a penny loaf to be given to twelve families in the church on a Sunday.

In the Old Testament, God told the people of Israel that he was going to give them more than they needed and that extra was not for them it was to bless them by making them generous to other people. And so they lived in a culture of what they called the tithe and a tenth of what they had would be given to the poor and to the worship of God and to the support of others around them. And it was to be given to the poor through the auspices of the worship of God; the Levites and since then monks and nuns and friars and church wardens helping and supporting the poor.

Many Christians have taken up this theme of ten per cent. A friend of mine explained it like this – if God were to give you 110% that extra 10%, it's not yours, it belongs to others and he's just giving it to you so that you will have the privilege of being generous and kind, that you will have the joy of giving to other people.

Francis Pym who died at the age of 70 in 1860, when this church was just being rebuilt, it was said of him that he did his kindnesses to others in a disinterested way, disinterested in the sense that he wasn't benefiting personally from the gift of money to others, that it truly was beneficial to others without having a return to himself.

Many people's concern is that the Government is changing our overseas aid so it might be linked to the interests of the British government and to British trade so that it is no longer disinterested but actually very interested in the response that people get. We will give you overseas aid in return for which you will give us certain things that will enhance the interests of the British government. There will be different political opinions about it. Some will think it more effective but I would turn you to Francis Pym of 1860 and his disinterested kindnesses to others. Not a quid pro quo, but simply a gift of grace, undeserved, no strings attached.

But if we are encouraged to do acts of kindness to others, some would say random acts of kindness can be of great benefit to the giver as well as to the receiver. Why do we need to complicate this by calling upon God or invoking Jesus into this equation? Why not just say that as human beings we should care for one another? That's very true, and all human beings have that at heart.

According to the Bible we are made in God's image and therefore this desire to help one another is innate and actually is part of our mental health. To be kind to others is to be kind to yourself, to give to others is to give to yourself. It's a health thing to do rather than to be selfish.

There are people in this world with more money than they know what to do with. You do not need gold taps on a bath made out of marble. You do not, not when half the world is hungry. Others don't have clean water and it doesn't have to be for the rich and the powerful and the famous, for you and I, for the small people, we can do our small pieces to help others.

Marcus Rashford has made a huge difference to a lot of families simply by standing up and using his influence. A 22 year old young man, a footballer at Manchester United and saying when I was growing up my family were poor, I needed those free meals at school. People were kind to me and in

return I will remember that and I want to use my influence to help them. And the government have listened to him and he has made a huge difference to hundreds of thousands of families during this coming summer.

The Sandy All In It Together group have made donations now to many families in the town, or if you yourself are in need of help the Need Project, the Sandy All In It Together and the Sandy Good Neighbours are all there to be helpful. Perhaps you can make it known on your social media.

But why invoke God or Jesus into the equation when it might just simply to be human to be kind. Well, I would say that it's because it's not only human to be kind, it is also human to be selfish. Where does war come from? Where does all the issues and problems in the world come from? The writer in the book of James says it comes from the heart. Wars and inequality and kindnesses to others. Differences between black and white, rich and poor, between countries, James is very clear these problems come from the human heart, they come from the desires that grow and that we cultivate within ourselves and they need to be tackled. James explains that having faith is no good in itself if it doesn't become a thing of action. As we said a few weeks ago, it's time to get into gear, to put this into action. As we said in the talk a few weeks ago, the Holy Spirit comes as the helper, the one who gives us strength and energy to look beyond ourselves. He is the one who comes alongside us, the paraklete who teaches us to be generous. He gives us wisdom to know how to put things into effect so that we in turn might have life in all its fullness, its richness because we share it with others.

Why Jesus? Because he has the power. He is the one who came to show us what God is like in the very heart of God and what it is to be truly human. To lift us up and beyond ourselves. And some of the generosity that we see that is spontaneous in our nation and in our world, across faiths, across cultures, to be human, to be kind, to look out for the other, that comes from the heart of God. That comes from the example of Jesus. In our society today we've lived with Jesus's teaching for so long it's part of our culture and we hardly know that it's there, but strip away his teaching and we find the human heart can sometimes be incredibly hard.

Jesus has the power to change us, the power to inspire us, the power to motivate us. His were the words that challenge us, to love our neighbour as ourselves. Who is my neighbour? He is the one of another culture, another colour, another creed; he is the Samaritan to the Jew.

Last week the Black Lives Matter protests in London were on occasions moved from peaceful protest into pockets of violence. And here we have a picture of one of the Black Lives Matter protestors seeing one of the white extremist thugs, who had come to cause trouble and violence, being injured and lying on the floor. The man picks him up and carries him to safety. This is not just 'love your neighbour', this is what Jesus said when he said 'love your enemies, do good to those who persecute you.' And we need strength to do that, we need God's help to do that.

The Holy Spirit, the paraklete, the spirit of Jesus who comes to inspire, to motivate and to give an example. When he hung on the cross and the soldiers nailed his arms to the cross and he said, 'Father forgive them.' We may not know that this is the way of Jesus but instinctively we are following him and he not only motivates, not only inspires, not only gives us an example but he also gives us the power to do that, to give away what is precious to you, to sacrifice your life for a stranger. Thank you to the Fire and Rescue service who do that daily, to the Police who put themselves in harm's way.

It is in moments of crisis that we see the human heart at its best and its worst and my experience has been that Jesus is the one who is able to restore, to resurrect if you like. When life has been hard

and our hearts have been touched by injustice, by pain, by the unfairness of other people's behaviour, we too can become hard and in our hardness sometimes transfer that to others. Hurt people hurt people, and it takes grace and underserved kindness to remake a heart and life.

Paul writes and says that we are called to good, made for it, built for it. Enjoy it! Being kind to others is a blessing to yourself. These sometimes random acts of kindness are a good thing. You may not be able to change the world, you may not be able to make a big difference, but you can make a difference to that one, one person at a time. John Wynne, twelve penny loaves.

Some would say that the needs are overwhelming and what difference can my little contribution make to the overall troubles in the world?

Well perhaps we can take to heart what Dr Martin L. King said – "It is better to light a candle, however small, than simply curse the darkness"

Or we can learn a lesson from the modern parable ...

One day a man was walking along the beach when he noticed some children playing in the distance. As he got nearer he could see they were busy throwing things into the sea. He asked what they were doing and the little girl explained. "all around on the beach there are starfish which have got washed up by the tide. With the heat of the sun and the hungry gulls if we don't throw them back they will die!" Now the man had been so absorbed in his own personal thoughts and problems he had not even noticed the starfish and their life and death plight but now that he looked he could see that the beach was full of them. "But children" he protested "Don't you see. There are tens of thousands of starfish, your throwing one or two back can't possibly make much of a difference!" After a little hesitation the little boy picked up a starfish and with all his might hurled it back into the ocean. Then without missing a beat he turned to the older and wiser man and said "Well, I guess I made a big difference to that one!" And he and his sister began picking up starfish after starfish and throwing back into the ocean with such abandon and glee that the man could not resist any longer but joined them in their enterprise to make a difference – one starfish at a time!!

May God bless you. Thank you for reading this. I hope it's helpful. Huw