

Pastoral Letter – East Anglia District

Chair of the District - Revd. Julian M. Pursehouse

April 2022

Dear Friends,

It has often been suggested that the birth of the Christian Church corresponds to the events of the Festival of Pentecost, as recorded in the second chapter of the Book of Acts. The Gospel writer Luke employs all the rhetorical gifts of his art, to convey the transformative effects of the coming of the Holy Spirit. Tongues of fire, ecstatic language, the sound of a rushing wind and a company of disciples eager to worship God, emerge from locked rooms, publicly witnessing to the Gospel of God's love in Jesus Christ – the case is undoubtedly compelling! This is the stuff of poetic utterance and inspiration.

*from darkened room to public square
a church renewed through fervent prayer
she rises from the ashes of death
alive again through the Spirit's breath.*

I wonder whether there is another perspective on the birth of the Christian community that we might draw from the Passion narrative of John's Gospel (John 19:25-27) – one that is relevant to the current liturgical season and one that resonates with the wider cultural context that we inhabit. In this passage of scripture, peculiar to the Gospel of John, we witness the crucified Christ commend the beloved disciple to the keeping of Mary (the mother of Jesus) and vice-versa. What if we consider this moment to be the beginning of a new ecclesial community, forged at the foot of the cross, amid human brokenness and pain? Mary the mother of Jesus finds a new kinship with the beloved disciple, bound together by the transforming love of a gracious God who has drawn all humanity to himself in restorative and redemptive love. Nothing will be the same again for the disciple community and for the wider community of humanity made in the Image of God. The American theologian, Stanley Hauerwas, speaks eloquently of this interpretation in the ***Cross-shattered Christ – Meditations on the Seven Last Words;***

'At this moment, at the foot of the cross, we are drawn into the mystery of salvation through the beginning of the Church. Mary, the new Eve, becomes for us the firstborn of a new reality, of a new family, that only God could create.'

The other day I was speaking to a couple who were preparing to host a family of Ukrainian refugees – they are expecting a mother and two young children who miraculously have found their way out of the living hell that is Mariupol. The hosts are under no illusion that this family will be traumatized by the worst effects of human conflict in terms of what they have seen, heard, and felt. Nevertheless, they feel called to be good neighbours, to use the living space that they have and to share their resources as best they can with the vulnerable. We are witnessing the beginnings of a new community – forged through the worst consequences of conflict and mass migration – but based upon simple human values of compassion, kindness, and hospitality. I hope and pray, that in the season of Passiontide, we will find the community of the broken, lost and vulnerable in the shadow of the cross and recognise our kinship with all who are loved, saved and kept through the faith of Mary, the mother of God and through the redeeming work of the Beloved Son, Jesus Christ. And that in doing so, we will discover the Church!

With joy and peace to you all, Julian