

# Sunday 29 November: Advent Sunday

## Love bade me welcome

### Readings: 1 Thessalonians 3.9-end; Luke 21.25-36

On Monday last week we held the memorial service here at St. Martin's for Kath Shaljean. Kath, married to Roger, was well known and much loved by many at this church, having worked in the Social Care Unit and as a warden at St. Martin's House providing accommodation for homeless people. She was also the one who also started the St. Martin's pilgrimage to Canterbury each year, and more recently The Queen Eleanor cycle ride and walk. The service reflected all this. Kath was the builder of community, a poet, a pilgrim, and someone who in her life was able to make the excluded feel included. But what was also evident in the service though perhaps less known was Kath's struggles and pain, her battle with depression, a painfully broken relationship with her first husband, and then the death of her seven year old daughter and the deep grief that followed. Kath had been through some pretty dark places during her life's journey. She was, as Nick Holtam described, the archetypal "wounded healer" – becoming in her later life a Quaker, social worker and carer of others, finding a grace and love in her marriage to Roger in the last years of her life which touched all those who knew them.

What was so moving about the memorial was that a real person was revealed. We recognized Kath in our own hopes and fears; in so many ways her life was like all of ours – as Katherine Hedderly writes on the front cover of this week's newsletter: "lives which are often overwhelming, complex, discordant, messy," and yet, as in Kath's case, for all that able to reach towards something beautiful, compassionate and life affirming. And Kath was someone, who because she had been there herself, could really help others in need. "Kath," said one social worker who worked with her, "taught me to forgive myself."

Chris Carter, who studied to be a social worker with Kath, gave a reflection in which he described a model for social care which he thought Kath embodied perfectly: First, to be genuine: genuine without artifice or pretence; truthful.

Secondly to have accurate empathy: an understanding of others which comes from having the experience and the imagination to know truly how others feel, and to be there with them – not a façade of professional sympathy but the intuition and the heart which hears and knows deeply the needs of others because they are one's own. Thirdly, to have non-possessive warmth, which welcomes and heals without trapping. And finally, to have persuasiveness – for if you are to bring real transformation then you have to inspire and convince others to join with you.

I have thought a lot about these qualities in the last week: to be genuine, to show accurate empathy, non-possessive warmth, and persuasiveness. I have been struck they are not only characteristics of good social workers, they are actually Christian qualities, the qualities of Christ himself in his own reaching out to others. The theme that we have taken for this year's advent is taken from George Herbert's poem 'Love bade me welcome'. I remember reading this poem several years ago when I was struggling in my own life and feeling I wanted to learn this poem by heart, so that I could recite and hold onto it, and its journey and resolution could be my own. It is a poem which seems to contain the movement and shape of God's love: from the dust of sin to the feast of belonging. It is the story of God's invitation: a call of love for each one of us; but an invitation from which we recoil, shrink back from, convinced in our guts that we are unworthy, that this will lead nowhere, or is nonsense – that this call to love will expose us and reveal our inadequacy and our failure and even our shame. And yet this call does not give up. It is gentle but persistently persuasive. This love has stood in our

place. It has the most accurate empathy in all the world. It knows our deepest wounds, for these wounds are love's wounds too. It has been there at the centre of the very darkest point and loved us there – loved us again and again. And again we have turned away, doubting that our own actions can ever change anything. But again Christ has treated us not with revulsion, but as those loved as his own: his creation, his image, his likeness. The journey of this poem is the journey into grace – the journey into free and undeserved gift and blessing. It is Kath's journey. It is the journey of each person who is saved by love. The love which bids us welcome does not stop there; by its very nature it must be reflected by the one on whom it is bestowed. Here we have the movement of God, the circle of God's life. God welcomes us, in our frail raw humanity and we welcome God: a frail child, flesh and blood in total poverty. This is the Advent journey: God's invitation to us; our invitation to God. It will be our journey through suffering into truth. It will be truth's journey through suffering into us. A call, a response; a response, a call. An invitation received, an invitation given. A persuasive dialogue of love.

Our Gospel calls us to open our eyes to the signs of God's call, the signs of his coming. The coming is one which creates confusion, fear and foreboding. Around us there are many who see destruction and disaster, and become prophets of doom and despair. How easy it is for us all at this present moment in history, to see signs of the end of all things. "How do we live on this incredible planet without killing it and killing each other?" the Archbishop of Canterbury asks. We witness to a world ravaged by greed, conflict, and natural disaster, where the powers of order are shaken: economic melt down; climate chaos; the escalation of an unwinnable war; religions of prejudice, hatred and death; the lies and deception of leaders and institutions we were always taught to trust. And yet our Gospel never allows us to despair. The Gospel tells us not to fear but to stand up and raise up our heads because our redemption is near; that it is at the very moment when our world is shaken that the son of man comes, his glory and the power of love breaking through into our lives, when it seemed least possible. Have we not also seen the signs of hope, the signs of new life, signs of love when they seemed most impossible? – like the panel downstairs by The Dick Sheppard Chapel from the Hard Rain exhibition which shows young girls in spotless yellow dresses like butterflies picking their way through the filth of a slum to go to school: signs of the astonishing human potential to overcome and rise above adversity.

Last week I discussed the Hard Rain exhibition with a group of homeless people at the Connection - those who in many ways seem most powerless to change anything and had most reason to despair. And yet their wisdom gave me most hope. One of them said "I think many of you who live in your houses and flats do not see the natural world. When you come outside you do not see. You are walking too fast, too far away. You look through us. But when you are homeless you see. I see the skies and the cold and the rain when it comes and know the wind. I see the night coming. I know the hours of darkness and I see the dawn breaking. I see each season for they are my life: the coming of the cold, or the beginning of spring. I see plenty – I see hundreds of people eating in restaurants, cafes, fast food, tables on the street, 24 hour consuming and I see hunger and waste, as the supermarkets and restaurants throw away piles of food into dustbins." "So what must we do to change?" I ask. "What must we learn to see again?" "We must become aware of one another – see the needs of one another and of our natural world. We must plant seeds!" he said. Look at the leaves which sprout and start to grow, so small so insignificant, so seemingly inconsequential, but look, that is how all hope begins. Look again. The whole tree can become green and bears fruit. It is strange that here among those who have least I hear shared genuine values stripped of pretence; accurate empathy with the world and one another, non-possessive warmth and sharing, and the persuasiveness of these lives, also made in the image of God, for the world to

change: not trying to “live the dream” of virtual reality but the miracle of life with eyes wide open.

In Advent we wait with eyes wide open to hear and see the call and see the wisdom of the most vulnerable child. ‘Be alert at all times’ the Gospel tells us –a child welcoming us, a child we must welcome. Listen. If you miss the cry of this child in the night you will miss the sound of salvation. Listen.

*Silence*

A few months before her death Kath Shaljean wrote this poem:

*I Am the Call*

I am the call  
And you are the wind

I am the bird  
And you are the ground beneath

I am the sea  
In between the cliffs  
As waves move in  
To the shore and the lone bird calls

I am the whirling of leaves  
As you pass by in the breeze

I am a sparkle of stars  
In the firmament

I am a calm lake  
And you are the reflection

As a feather drifts down  
A sigh goes up from the earth

Aeons on  
The water’s ripples  
Are etched on the sand  
Love persists

I am existence  
And you are the mystery beyond  
I am the call  
And you are the answer.