

I was doing the washing up with my ordindands in Ampleforth Abbey, the famous Benedictine monastery. Over the sink was a notice, drawn from Ephesians 4: ‘Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.’ Below someone had scrawled in capital letters: ‘And please leave this kitchen as you would expect to find it!’ There had obviously been issues.

I spent my late teens attending a church in West Hull where my dad was vicar. The congregation were cross, not cross at anything in particular, just cross. Their ancient church close to the river Humber had had to be demolished because of subsidence. The

diocese decided to do away with the parish entirely, but the parishioners were having none of that. They took on the diocese and won, and built a new church. But the massive fund-raising and building programme had left them tired, along with a confrontational mindset where you opposed everything, whatever. The Gospel didn't get much of a look in, which understandably deeply upset my dear dad.

For instance, next to the church was a Church of England Children's Home, orphans and unwanted children who came to the Eucharist on a Sunday and had their own three pews at the back. When it came to receiving communion the rest of the congregation, who hitherto had not displayed any inkling of athletic prowess suddenly put a spurt on to get to the altar rail

before the Children's home kids. 'I don't want those brats tainting the wine,' the Queen Bee of the congregation once explained. You won't be surprised to know I sat with the brats.

One Sunday morning though it was utterly brilliant. There was the usual stampede of about thirty people to the communion rail, but the leader of the pack lost her footing and tripped, those racing behind powered into her and stumbled themselves and in a few seconds it was just a pile of bodies. To be honest it looked like a stall of old coats at a jumble sale but with people in them, very strange people. Nobody helped each other because they were obsessed with scrambling out and getting to the communion rail first, so it became a scrum which was going nowhere. Me and the brats

walked past bemused. That day the last were truly the first.

My dad saw it out for three years. I used to write long letters to him from Cambridge, encouraging him to hold on, hold to his God-given call. But in the end we moved to a rural parish which was happier in its skin.

It happens. Richard Hanson, Professor of Ecclesiastical History was appointed bishop of a cross-border diocese in the Church of Ireland. Cross was the operative word. Having described the Orange Order as a cross between a Victorian Sunday School and the Mafia he decided enough was enough and left after three years, a significant tenure. 'It would take me thirty years to get anywhere here,' he concluded.

‘And to be honest I’ve got better things to do with my time.’

Before my parents moved in my Easter Vac I bussed to their new vicarage every day with my decorator’s holdall and painted every room to cheer them. God bless clergy spouses and children who keep dad or mum sane and keep their priesthood on the road.

Talking of the road, as we drove away from West Hull for the last time, following the removal van, my shy dad pulled the car to a halt, got out, took off his shoes, and banged them together. ‘Even the dust of your town which clings to our feet we wipe off in protest. Yet know this, the Kingdom of God has come near.

It's an extreme example, but there again, not that extreme. Kind, tender-hearted, forgiving? Mm. See how these Christians love one another! What can be done? Well, at the end of the day, all is grace, and God's grace doesn't need our permission to exist.

Marvellously after he left, the parish blossomed. We sow, others reap. More often than not, grace comes from some surprising directions.

Like in John's account of the Samaritan woman at the well. Before the event, Jesus has got into a terrible row, overturning the tables of the money changers and dove sellers, shrieking 'My house should be a house of prayer. You lot have made it a den of thieves.' That would not make him popular. Not so much turning over the tills of the cathedral shop, but

bursting into the cathedral on Sunday morning and turning over the altar and tipping over the chalice. Just imagine the fury. Jesus was a man on the run.

And as so often happens, out of the frying pan into the fire. Jesus ends up in Samaria, bandit country. The disciples desert him and go off to the nearby town for shopping therapy. So Jesus ends up by a well at noon.

A Jew on the run, alone and thirsty at high noon. *Who*

is on the Lord's side?

Who will serve the

King?

Who will stand against the world

And for him sing?

Who will watch

with him in Gethsemane's dark hour? Who will weep

at Calvary Humbled by Love's Power?

*By Thy grand redemption, By Thy grace divine, We
are on the Lord's side, Saviour, we are Thine.*

A woman surprises him. Come to draw water. Hard toil, better done in the cool of the evening. But we learn she is much married, five husbands and now another man. This man-stealer wouldn't be popular with the other women, so she had to fetch the water in the baking heat when the rest of the world was having a siesta. 'Please give me a drink,' Jesus asks her. A woman, a Samaritan, with a dodgy reputation. A good Jewish boy should have kept his distance. But there again, he had the thirst, she had the bucket, so there we go. And there they went, giving him a drink springing all sorts of things. Talk about her deepest desires and loves. Talk about worshipping God in

spirit rather than in this place or that place. Talk about Jesus, the living water, the Messiah. All sprung by a glass of water. Those who wander into our bandit territories. What do we give them, how do we quench their thirst? May be nothing more than a drink, a smile, a listening ear. ‘What are you doing for the rest of the day?’ I often ask people at the church door. A neutral question. ‘Anything I can help you with?’ Less neutral, more risky, but whatever.

We used to have a system called Helping Hands in my last parish. I had a team of volunteers with various skills, and I linked them with anyone in need. I knew the need and knew the volunteer and matched them accordingly. It sprang from an incident where a recently widowed lady had been charged £100 by an

unscrupulous electrician just to change a simple lamp bulb.

This time of year when the clocks went forward I'd spend a couple of weeks flat out on old ladies' floors changing the clock on their videos, something which was beyond them and was a considerable challenge for Maths geek me. But you'd be surprised the deep conversations I had whilst I was prostrate on their axminster. Grace comes from some surprising directions.

The thing about John's Gospel is that people come and go. Nicodemus at the beginning comes to Jesus by night and is met by light. At the end of the Gospel all is night as Jesus dies on the cross. Nicodemus pops up

again then, with Joseph of Arimathea when all the disciples have forsaken him. They do a brave deal with Pilate. 'Please, no common grave for this man, Jesus, no lime pit. Let us take him to our private tomb.' And they do, paving the way for resurrection and Easter Day's dawn.

And the Samaritan woman at the well? We are told that women he had cheered followed him to the ends of the earth. Did she follow him to Jerusalem. Did they catch her at it, this woman who had had at least six men? Did they, Sun Readers to a man, bring her into the temple and try to catch Jesus out. 'This woman was caught in the very act of adultery. Moses said she should be stoned. What do you say?' 'Let the one of you who is without sin who has never ogled

Page Three cast the first stone.’ Once again, as at the well, they are left alone together, an orthodox Jew with this dodgy woman. ‘Has no one condemned you?’ ‘No one, sir.’ Neither do I condemn you. Go, and sin no more, you little minx!’ All is grace. Grace comes from surprising directions. Grace is always returned.

Fresh Expressions is the term for outreach and new initiatives. In Middlesbrough I got the girls from the local brothel to come to church, one of them had had a baby and wanted her baptised. The other girls were godparents. Baptism was in the main service of the day, so it was quite a meeting. My very respectable members of the congregation and these lasses with a definite attitude. It didn’t last. The girl and her baby

came along for a week or two. God bless her for having the baby God bless her for having her daughter baptised. But my congregation, good people, gave her a wide berth. I understand. We are all frightened of those who are different. Their dress code so different, their take on life, at least on the surface, so different. She got the message. I'd see her around the estate, pushing her babe in her pram, and have a friendly word. I'd see the godmothers around the estate, pushing something else and we'd smile and chat with each other, a scrawny youth in a dog collar who presented no threat. We could have done more for them, so much more. In Wales I met with an ordinand whose call was basically to minister to women on the edge. 'Be kind to one another, tender-

hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.’

I have been researching into 14th century Norwich. I clearly need to get out more. At that time Norwich was clearly far from the sleepy place we know and love these days. More like present day Aleppo.

Mercenaries returning from the 100 year war with France, unpaid, looting and pillaging where they could. French pirates attacking coastal towns like Norwich, doing to the English what the English had done to them. Black death and plague halving the population at a stroke. The church had a real problem with lack of clergy, not because there were no vocations or the clergy were all retiring, but because they were all dying tending their plague-ridden

parishioners. There was the threat of revolution, the Peasants rising up and executing the ABC. Never mind the ABC, there were religious extremists who wanted to do away with all bishops, and you can't get much more extreme than that.

What was the Church doing during all this turbulence?

She was screaming about an angry, judgemental God, full of wrath. Bishop Dispenser, bishop of Norwich rather than don robes wore a suit of armour. He heard confessions, but if there was a whiff of treason, he had the supplicant arrested, found guilty and executed, impaling their heads on Norwich's city walls. A somewhat harsh penance, even by Norfolk standards. Turbulence is not new.

But in the midst of all this Mother Julian of Norwich bravely declared that there was no wrath whatsoever in God. A lot of wrath in humankind, but no wrath in God, who is total love, a love which is patient and kind that keeps no score of wrongs. We need to catch his habit. No meat on Fridays, the day our Lord died, used to be the rule of the day. But how about no wrath on Fridays or Sundays, the day our Lord died and rose. How's that for starters? We love a good gossip, we love to put people down, see them getting their just deserts. But none of that on Fridays and Sundays.

In an intense vision of the crucifixion, where she actually conversed with Jesus on the cross, Julian realised that the purpose of the cross was not to satisfy God's wrath but our wrath. 'Are you satisfied that I

love you,' Jesus asked. 'If I could suffer more, I would suffer more to win your heart.' As the spear is driven into his side and water and blood gush out, Julian sees the world being flooded with God's love, a tsunami of love. Mother Julian's catchphrase is All shall be well, all shall be well, all manner of things shall be well. Mother Julian's challenge is to hold to that with all our heart. Accept that God who is love has got it all in hand, is fazed by nothing, not even cruel crosses, so no problems with the mess we make of life or of the world or of the church All shall be well. Even in the midst of wars and rumours of wars, Nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Or as Sonny, a latter day Julian, said in the Best Exotic Marigold Hotel: 'Everything will

be all right in the end, and if it's not all right, it's not yet the end!'

From the day of our birth we think we are the centre of the universe, because from our perspective we are. But a very vulnerable centre indeed, and we learn to hit out before we hit, hurt before we are hurt. The Christian Gospel is that actually we are not the centre of the universe, Christ is, and we need to shift a gear and realise that. Christ who says to us, you have no need to be frightened, no need to fear being vulnerable. Look at me, I am vulnerable, look at God, his is vulnerable, but far from putting an end to us it enables life in all its fullness. Crosses are not the last word. Easter is, or rather Easter is the first word. If the church could be full of Sonnys, what a lovely place it

would be. 'Everything will be all right in the end, and if it's not all right, it's not yet the end!'

But it is full, full of the Son. Make sure you give him a look in. 'Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.' And please leave this Church as you would wish to find it!