

SUNDAY 7TH MARCH LENT 3

Thought for the week: "From this place (Ur of the Chaldeans – Gen 11:31 – what later became Babylon), where faith was born, from the land of our father Abraham, let us affirm that God is merciful," Pope Francis said. "Hostility, extremism and violence are not born of a religious heart: they are betrayals of our faith."



Meeting of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani with Pope Francis, at Najaf in Iraq

Yesterday (Friday 5th March) was a good day. It saw the meeting of Pope Francis with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the spiritual leader of millions of Shiite Muslims around the world, and both leaders not only called for peace but for all from both faiths to recognise the common heritage we share rather than the differences that so often have divided us, even today.

It's a reminder of a somewhat similar meeting eight hundred years ago between Francis of Assisi and the Sultan Al Kamil, of Egypt. This meeting, at the height of the time of the Crusades, not only brought two like-minded men together in mutual respect and friendship but also brought about the protection of so many of the Christian holy sites throughout the Middle East as the Muslim armies advanced and the Christian Crusaders retreated. In years to follow the Sultan's heirs also offered for the Franciscans to become the spiritual custodians of many of these sites because, as Sultan Al-Kamil put it, "I have met a holy man and a friend in Europe."

This little-known story has recently been made into a docu-film by a joint project made up of benefactors in America and the Middle East both Christian and Muslim. The first time such a venture has been embarked upon. It is highly recommended and is now available in this country, from HMV and Amazon, albeit with a different front cover (the one on the right) which is sadly far more violent and sensationalist than it needs to be in order to sell copies – a sort of opposite to the point the film is trying to make.



Recent film highlighting the meeting of Francis of Assisi and the Sultan Al-Kamil.

As we each as individuals, and also as a Christian community, begin to emerge from Lockdown and the global pandemic, one of the key questions will be how do 'we,' as individuals and as a Church, begin to interact with those around us again, especially with those who may hold different views, different beliefs, different faiths and ideologies to our own?

We may not be on the grand stage of world or spiritual leaders, like Pope Francis or the Grand Ayatollah, but many of us will have our own awkward and painful situations of

difference that are no less real to us. Hurts and pains caused, even a long time ago, can sit and fester building division whereby we don't talk any more. Which is an irony, given that we are in a world that has more communication and more communication devices than ever before. Instead of a world becoming more of a 'global village' however, as once was hoped and thought, it can seem as though we are, in fact, becoming more 'tribal,' based simply on whether we 'like' or 'dislike' a particular person rather than maybe finding it easy or difficult to agree with their beliefs or expression of a point of view.

That is where what Pope Francis and the Grand Ayatollah were able to achieve yesterday is so much to be respected and valued. Rather than simply trying to find bland 'common ground' upon world issues or positions upon which they could agree, they showed a spiritual maturity that chose instead not to find the other threatening, but instead to look into the heart of the other for what they each considered was good and which unites us – the fact that Muslims, especially Shiite Muslims, value deeply the fact that they trace their line and lineage back to Ishmael whilst Christians and Jews trace their line and lineage back to Isaac and Jacob, both of whom, Isaac and Ishmael were and are children of a common father, "Abraham" (see the Book of Genesis).

In other words, our first call and responsibility as children of Abraham, is to see that we are members of the same family, 'brothers' and 'sisters,' and that because we share this heritage, we can indeed both worship the Creator God, each in our own way, and at the same time unite in His mission and vision of caring for both humanity and creation. Jesus, in this scenario, becomes 'Jesus' to us all, taking to Himself both sides' failings and inability to risk and to trust, and also the violence, either in words or actions, that so easily can then result.

What may be true between faiths, especially those faiths that trace their ancestry back to a common 'source' can also be true for families, for friendship groups, for political systems and for churches.

If we are to be able to address so many of the larger problems that face our world as we look to the future we will need to find ways of looking to what unites us rather than focusing on what divides us if we are going to be able to make lasting change, whether in big ways or little ways, on the world stage or in our own individual lives.

To God, we are all His children. That is why I love images such as Psalm 86:9 which talks about all the nations being welcomed at "the House of the Lord" (the then great Temple in Jerusalem), or the way Jesus so often calls the foreigner or the Samaritan to be the true 'expresser of faith' in so many of His stories inspiring us all to look beyond ourselves and to see with His eyes the Way of Love.

Of course, the challenge then for each of us is, "who do we then need to reach out the hand of compassion or reconciliation to?" And even if we feel we are not able to do that at present, can we at least pray that one day we might be able to?

Matt Thomson

Mothing Sunday – Sunday 14th March 2021:

In the old tradition, this was the Sunday and weekend when those ‘in service,’ whether in households as domestic servants or on farms as farm labourers were allowed to ‘go home’ to visit their families and so go to their ‘mother’ churches, often the churches where they had been baptised as infants. This can seem a long way from the “Mother’s Day” we have turned it into and celebrate today. But maybe if we focus next Sunday principally around the life-giving love that we find in Christ then all expressions of love can be valued and cherished.



With this in mind, at the online Livestream service next Sunday we will therefore be celebrating it as an “Agape” Service. To do this you will need:

- Some bread, preferably Pitta Bread or something similar
- Some grapes or fruit – to give thanks for the gifts of the earth
- And something to drink – water or juice, or whatever you prefer.

If you find it hard, or can’t, join in as part of the Livestream service online, then you can obtain the words of the prayer for the Agape Service either from the Church Office, from the website, or if you let your Church@Home co-ordinator know we will try and get the words in a physical form to you.

What is happening “Worship wise?”

Just to re-iterate, back at the beginning of this current Lockdown, when it was decided to move to Church Online only for the time being, we agreed as a Senior Team, made up of Wardens and others from both Churches, to review the situation at the end of each month. At the meeting of the Senior Team on Thursday 25th Feb the majority decision was that we should continue with “Church Online” only for this coming month and that this would include Holy Week and Easter (April 4th). We would look at the situation again at the end of March with a view as to what should happen during April and thereafter.



We will, of course, try and enable physical worship as well as soon as possible. In the meantime, both churches are open each day for private prayer.

We will also be looking at trying to provide physical resources at home in order to enable the individual celebration of Easter and I hope we can share these with you as soon as possible.

We will make any further announcement as soon as we can so please look out for details and through the Church@Home co-ordinators.

Matt Thomson

North Somerset Remembers – Sunday 14th at 7pm.

Sunday 14 March marks the anniversary of us losing our first resident in North Somerset to coronavirus. Over the past year many more people from our communities have passed away. The year has been hard for everyone, but especially for those of us who have lost someone and not been able to mourn or pay our respects in the usual way.



On **Sunday 14 March**, North Somerset Together, with whom Banwell and Congresbury Parish Councils and Love Banwell and Congresbury have been working with throughout the pandemic to bring aid and support to our communities, are asking us all to come together for a moment of quiet reflection and to remember all those who are no longer with us.

Please join us in a moment of remembrance and unity across North Somerset on that day by lighting a candle, or shining a light in your window at 7pm to the memory of those no longer here, but never far from our thoughts.

If you would like to take a photo of your candle, you can share them on New Creation, Love Banwell or Love Congresbury Facebook pages using the hashtag NStogether.

#NStogether

FoodBank Donations

Thank you so much to all those who have so generously donated to the Foodbank in both communities. These gifts are really needed in these difficult times and are greatly appreciated.



If anyone is kind enough to make a donation over the next couple of weeks, can we ask that you might be able to donate a treat for Easter? There are some families facing hardships for the first time and it would mean a lot to be able to provide Easter eggs or perhaps Easter biscuits or Hot Cross Buns.

Thank you.