First Sunday After Trinity, June 14, 2020

*This being the 13th Sunday since the cessation of public worship and the closure of church buildings, it is welcome news to say from yesterday the church building can again be opened for private devotion. These are the first tentative steps on the long road ahead as we consider many challenges and questions which do not have immediate answers. Please refer to the separate document if you wish to make a time to come pray in the church building.*

Somewhere in the church archives and Church Council minutes of the Second World War period (in fact May 1944) there is a reference to a bequest from a Miss Roper. The funds were used to purchase much needed ladders to protect the church from incendiary bombs. I want you to think about how extraordinary this is and consider the lives of the war generation. While I do not know any facts of Miss Roper's life or her death, I am heartened she remembered the church as a significant part of her life and honoured this relationship in her giving and her estate planning. I am also aware of the leadership required during a time of war, as bombs fell around the parish and families were scattered around the globe - buildings and lives were left broken and shattered. I am mindful that some group of people in the church family were agreeing to purchase ladders and climb them to extinguish fires in the roof of the church. Just think about that for a moment. We make sacrifices for what we love – survival depends on it.

I come from a place where the volunteer fire department is an essential part of community. The fundraising events in the Fire Hall to buy and maintain equipment and encourage the team are an annual fixture and supported by all. The community come together for a shared meal – a BBQ, a strawberry supper, maybe an annual dinner dance. People belong to one another in their love and support of the community and in the shared meal. This is the heart of discipleship and survival depends on it. This is the same love we see in the community of Notting Dale, in the Grenfell Tower families who we must hold in our hearts. Peace on the left – Justice on the right.

In our Gospel passage today, Jesus has just left his home town where he has caused controversy and awe. He has healed the paralytic, the woman suffering from haemorrhages, two blind men and a mute demoniac; He has raised from the dead the daughter of a leader of the synagogue; He has associated and eaten with tax collectors and sinners (including Matthew by name) – he has smashed down all barriers and restrictions to love people into wholeness.

We join Jesus as he continues his ministry in the countryside going from town to town, synagogue to synagogue – a ministry of teaching, preaching and healing – revealing His primary purpose – the Good News of the Kingdom of God. We are introduced to his twelve disciples who represent the tribes of Israel – the embodiment of the human generations. And we are given our Commission – we are sent to Proclaim the Kingdom by acts of kindness, generosity and forgiveness – Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. We are asked to love what has been presented as unlovable – more so we are asked to risk our lives, give up what we know and venture into the lies we have told ourselves and believed – lies which have only harmed ourselves and others. Hatred is taught. Self-hatred is taught. Love is also taught. In deed we live in a world full of lost sheep, and many lost wolves too – but we are called to be disciples, both serpent and dove. Maybe it is snakes and ladders? Maybe it is snakes and adders – in which case it is all snakes. Stay alert!

In our days it is easy to see teaching, preaching and healing as professions – the work of dedicated and educated people working in institutions. While this can be true, it is not the entirety of the story – learning, listening and wellness are the responsibility of each and every one of us. If we have learned anything in these past 13 weeks it is our lives are inextricably linked – from Wuhan to Bergamo to Manaus, the Twin Cities to Huston to Washington to Nine Elms to Shepherd's Bush. Discipleship rests on one standard of justice – we are members of the same Body: there is not one Resurrection for the rich and another Resurrection for the poor. In fact, we are all poor until we Arise in the Kingdom of God.

Jesus tells us the risks of Discipleship – there will be pain, frustration, loss, uncertainty – we will be handed-over, flogged, dragged before overlords, betrayed by family, put on trial and hated. And what is our defence? The Spirit of our Father will speak, the Son of Man will come. This is the messy process of learning how to love ourselves and others as God loves us. The one who endures to the end will be saved: disciple, teacher, slave, master are all alike under God's Sovereign rule. Messy it may be, but it leads to God's peace.

You know, there are just over 60 depictions of angels and their wings in the art and architecture of our church building – made in plaster, tesserae, wood, metal, glass, paint and graphite. It is a wonderful meditation to walk around the building and gaze on each set of wings – and I hope in the days to come you will all take the opportunity to do this. Chances are you have never really noticed this detail – is this part of what we are leaning in these days – attention to detail? And it seems right to go from our discussion of discipleship to the presence of angels – the messengers in our midst who point the way and hover over us.

But it is just as interesting to walk around the church building and look at the scars and graffiti left over the decades by generations past, struggling as we struggle. When it comes to the stained glass it is hard to tell what is bomb damage (the entire south transept was blown out) or storm damage or human intervention. When you look at the Henry Holiday window *Suffer the Little Children* there are two amputees where the glass has been poorly repaired. I, at first, thought this was shrapnel damage or a job poorly done when the window was moved. Turns out it is where an assistant curate put a ladder through the window back in the early 1950s. So maybe ladders are not always helpful but they do help the angels ascend and descend – and when your roof is on fire you need them.

What happened to Miss Roper's ladders? I have no clue. But the angels are still with us. And we are left to build and climb our own ladders in each and every generation, to reach the height of our task, the fullness of our stature as disciples of the Living Christ.

Mother to Son

*By Langston Hughes*

Well, son, I'll tell you:

Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

It's had tacks in it,

And splinters,

And boards torn up,

And places with no carpet on the floor –

Bare.

But all the time

I'se been a-climbin' on,

And reachin' landin's,

And turnin' corners,

And sometimes goin' in the dark

Where there ain't been no light.

So boy, don't you turn back.

Don't you set down on the steps

'Cause you find it's kinder hard.

Don't you fall now –

For I'se still goin', honey,

I'se still climbin',

And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.