

## A Reflection for Mary Sumner Day, 9<sup>th</sup> August 2021 at St Cuthbert's Prospect

Deuteronomy 10.12-22, Psalm 147.12-20, Matthew 17.22-27, and Mary Sumner's Personal Prayer from the MU Worship and Prayer Book page 6 and a prayer from page 7.

In the name of God, Creating, Redeeming, Sustaining. Amen.

Have you had the chance to welcome a stranger recently? With Covid restrictions, probably not. I was given an interaction with a complete stranger a few weeks ago. It was in a Norwood street, just at sunset, and I was about to go into the Mary MacKillop centre for the course I'm doing. A youngish woman's voice behind me stammered out: "Are you one of the Sisters, can you give me five cents, I have to go to Foodland to buy food for tonight, I'm having a panic attack, can you give me something, anything?"

It was easy to see that she was not in a good state of mind. I don't like opening my purse in front of people, but I did, and found that I had a five dollar note, when usually I carry no cash. "Here you are. Go well. Stay safe," I said, as she turned quickly away, blessing me as she went. No, I'm not one of the Sisters of St Joseph, but I trust that I can be a sister to someone like that woman.

In the Deuteronomy reading, the Lord reminds the Israelite people of their duties: to love God and walk in his ways. The Lord "set his heart in love on their ancestors alone." They were just 70, strangers in the land of Egypt, and now they are "as numerous as the stars of heaven" because God freed them from their slavery. They have a duty to love God and walk in his ways. Like God, who cares for the orphan, the widow and the stranger, they, the chosen people, have a special responsibility to love the stranger, for their ancestors were strangers themselves. God could have chosen any people, or any aspect of creation for his special concern, so they must feel awe for God, worship him, be loyal, and keep the commandments.

The psalmist emphasises the idea that God deals directly and closely with his people – even with each one of us. God expects us to live "in awe and hope."

The passage from Matthew's gospel is such a good example of how we **hear** only what we want to hear. Once more, Jesus warns his disciples of terrible events which will happen to him. They hear the words "betrayed" and "killed," but they don't seem to be able to hear that "on the third day he will be raised." They cannot take in the amazing good news of resurrection while they are "greatly distressed" that they will lose their beloved teacher to betrayal and death. Jesus is sensitive to their distress, as he is to ours. We see his awareness of human frailties once again as they come to Capernaum. The collectors of the temple tax see a chance to trap Jesus. I find it interesting that Peter is already the spokesperson for the group. Jesus performs a small fishing miracle for Peter the fisherman to prove a point about his and their standing in society. Kings don't tax their own children. The disciples are children of the reign of God, so they might reason that they don't need to pay tax. But Jesus will not be trapped. "Give the coin from the fish's mouth as our temple tax, so that the collectors will not be offended." It resonates with "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God." We've just heard what we owe to God – love, worship and obedience, and a welcome to strangers.

God can only care for widows, orphans and strangers through humankind, through us – through our prayers, our actions, our words and our giving. As St Teresa of Avila says in her beautiful prayer: *Christ has no body now but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours, yours are the eyes with which he sees, yours are the feet with which he walks, yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world, yours are the hands.\**

Those words from a woman of the 16th century really touch my heart with a sense of responsibility. They also send me straight to Mary Sumner's Personal Prayer (on page 6 of our

Worship and Prayer Book). I want to spend a few minutes looking at the details in a prayer we are so familiar with:

*All this day, o Lord, let me **touch** as many lives as **possible** for **thee***; so, not just while we are here, praying in this lovely church, but when we are in the supermarket, or on the bus, may we touch people for God - not physically – no chance of that at the moment, but by our courtesy, our friendliness, our awareness of the needs of others – yes, as much as possible, and for God, not for our own kudos.

*And **every** life do **thou** by thy **spirit** quicken*. Ah, so this is the work of God in us. We don't do good things in our own strength. The **Spirit** prompts us. And what about the word "quicken"? It would have been an everyday word for Mary Sumner in the latter years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the early 20<sup>th</sup>. "Quicken" is a good word – to give life to, or restore life to, or, in another context, to make a fire burn brighter. It also describes the first fluttering movements of new life growing in the mother's womb. It's a reminder that a smile from us may brighten someone's day, and a kind word can lift their spirits. As Mary Sumner concludes, we do God's work through *the **word** we speak, the **prayer** we breathe* – and our thinking and praying can be as gentle as a breath – and others judge you and me, and see what a Christian is, by the life that you and I live. That is the way we bring strangers to Christ - when they see in us something that they would like to have.

I want to finish with another familiar prayer (from page 7). It honours Mary Sumner, and reminds us of her purpose in founding Mothers' Union. It also speaks of God's call to us to new adventures, new possibilities and new visions for the work of Mothers' Union. We know God hears us. Let us fully **hear** the prayer – hear the excitement in it - as we join together to pray:

*Faithful and loving God, ..... **Amen**      **Dawn Colsey***

\*Version sung by Josh Garrels of 'Porter's Gate' on Youtube. It's easy to find. This is a lovely version of the prayer, well sung, and with a pretty, young Downs woman signing the words for the deaf.