Passiontide, 2020
Pastoral Letter – 5.4.20

Dear friends in Christ,

On the 31st of March – the anniversary of his death (1631) - the Church of England commemorates the poet and priest John Donne. This year, the commemoration falls within Passiontide, which seems apt, as Donne was, in the best sense of the word, passionate. His poetry - at least to my uncultured ear- is somehow metaphysically earthy; he speaks of faith with an exhilarating directness and robustness that puts me in mind of a similar characteristic expressed in a different medium by another (dangerously) passionate man, Donne's contemporary, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio: we find in both men the same unflinching directness which serves to awaken our spiritual senses to the mystery of God – their art is a beautiful shock to the system.

Take, for example, the opening words of Donne’s Holy Sonnet 14:

*Batter my heart, three person’d God, for you*  
*As yet but knock breathe, shine, and seek to mend;*  
*That I may rise and stand, o’erthrow me, and bend*  
*Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.*

One does not need to be a Professor of English Literature to feel the ardency of Donne’s words, or his deep desire to know God. Perhaps his most familiar words are these:  
*
No man is an island,*  
*entire of itself;*  
*every man is a piece of the continent,*  
*a part of the main.*  
*If a clod be washed away by the sea,*  
*Europe is the less,*  
*as well as if a promontory were.*  
*as well as if a manor of thy friend’s*  
*or of thine own were.*  
*Any man’s death diminishes me,*
because I am involved in mankind;
and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
it tolls for thee.

These are surely words for our time, as we are forced by present circumstance into the recognition of our absolute human interdependence through the paradox of our necessary separation in social distancing and self-isolation. Those refugees moving hopelessly across hostile alien landscapes are you and I. Those children picking over rubbish heaps, sleeping in drains, sold into prostitution, drinking filthy water, sweated in workshops, are our children. The man or woman washing the toilet floor in the airport is performing an act of service for me. The food on my plate was grown, harvested, cooked, packaged, transported, sold, by men and women who are intimately, not remotely, part of my life. My well-being depends on them- theirs, upon me. As Christians, that awareness should be part of our daily living: St Paul tells us in the first letter to the church at Corinth:

15 If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. 16 And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? 18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. 19 If all were a single member, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 21 The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” 22 On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23 and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; 24 whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, 25 that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. 26 If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.
We are told, very clearly- and, it seems to me, humorously- that each one of us is a part (a member) of a greater and unified body- and the “weaker” members are indispensable. Notions of superiority and inferiority are overturned; though Paul does not speak very directly of the kingdom of God, these are most definitely kingdom values. Paul’s teaching – like Donne’s poetry- are words for our time, and for all time. We need each other, to be whole. Let us remember, then, sisters and brothers, in this Passiontide, our sacred interconnectedness- let us give thanks that we are knit together as members of the same body, each one very precious and honoured in the sight of God; so precious and so honoured, indeed, that Jesus Christ was willing to take upon himself all of our shame, fear and failure, in order that we might enter into the presence of the Father with him.

With every blessing and prayers,
Fr Keith

Live streaming, on St Mary and St Laurence Facebook Page, Sunday 10am, Tuesday 6pm, Thursday 10am