

Sunday 20th January

Isaiah 62:1-5

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

John 2:1-11

Tomorrow – Monday 21st January – the third Monday of the new year has for a number of years been given the title Blue Monday.

Its supposed to be (in the Northern hemisphere at least) the most depressing day of the year. Calculated by taking into account the short daylight hours, the cold and damp weather, post Christmas blues, size of credit card bills, travel conditions and a whole host of other things. This year I guess we can add Brexit blues to the list.

The trouble is that such predictions tend to be self fulfilling. Many people will wake up tomorrow knowing that it's Blue Monday and behave accordingly.

The Samaritans organisation have taken this to heart and have re-designated it Brew Monday, taking cups of tea to commuters at railway stations across the country and offering listening ears to any who wish to talk about how they feel.

But there are certainly some days when we do feel lower and more depressed than others. And maybe some of the factors mentioned contribute towards this.

In our Old Testament reading this morning, Isaiah was writing to the Jewish exiles and recognised their feelings of desolation and abandonment. Where was God when they needed him – did He care for them any more? Was he even aware of their plight? How were they supposed to cope with all this on their own?

And in his prophecy we have some wonderfully encouraging words.

*You shall no more be termed Forsaken,^[a]
and your land shall no more be termed Desolate;^[b]
but you shall be called Hephzibah (a name which means My Delight Is in Her),^[c]
and your land Beulah, (a name which means Married);^[d]*

*for the Lord delights in you,
and your land shall be married.*

There is hope; God has not forgotten you; you are important; you are not seeing the whole truth about yourselves or your situation. Things will change.

Isaiah is essentially saying that God is a god who deals in transformations. He helps us see things from a new perspective, from a new position. He helps us to see a greater truth about reality, about who we are and what we are capable of. And he helps us bring that about - note that - he helps us, he doesn't do it all for us..

Our gospel reading picks up a similar theme.

It's the story of Jesus changing the water into wine at the wedding, the first of the seven signs of glory in John's gospel. Signs which point to who Jesus is and why his life and death and resurrection are so important and world changing.

You know the story well I'm sure.

Jesus is a guest at a wedding. And at this wedding, we discover that the wine has run out. Now Jewish weddings celebrations were lengthy affairs – lasting perhaps for as long as a week - so it's easy to see how this might have happened. But this wasn't simply an inconvenience; it was a social disaster. There would be shame to live with for many a year; and the bride and groom would see it as foretelling bad luck on their future married life.

So, at his mother's request, Jesus acts and turns ordinary water into wine. Not just wine, but choice wine. The best wine.

John describes this as the first of the signs that revealed Jesus' glory. He sees the event as looking forward to Jesus's death and therefore his resurrection; pointing to the saving work of Jesus and anticipating the final heavenly banquet to which we are all invited because of what Jesus did. As such we can clearly see how it illustrates his glory.

But this morning, let's see in this story the theme of transformation. Jesus takes ordinary water and transforms it to something extraordinary. Wine that is better than the best. More than could have been imagined or hoped for..

Jesus shows us that we can look to the power of God transforming our ordinary lives; transforming our ordinary selves into extra ordinary lives for God.

Transforming our weaknesses into his strengths. Turning our Blue Mondays into days of joy and celebration. Turning our feelings of abandonment into knowledge of being loved.

Taking our gifts and abilities, our possessions and passions, our thoughts and deeds and transforming them into something special for him. Helping us to achieve more than we ever hoped or dreamed.

This week both the St John's and Christ the King committees have met. These meetings give us time to think about how things are going; talk about our worship and our people; look forward to coming events and much more besides.

And interestingly at both church meetings this week the issue of our aging congregations, our fairly low attendance figures and the questions about our futures were – in one way or another – raised.

And it can be a bit depressing. Look around. How many people are here? How have numbers changed in the last 5 years? Where are those who will carry these churches into the years ahead?

Blue Monday could easily become Blue Sunday for us – as churches and probably leading on from there - as individuals.

So we might ask – where is God in all this? Why can't we see new people coming in and guaranteeing our future? We could easily feel, like the people of Israel, forsaken and desolate. Our energies and hopes could, like the wine, have run out.

And we might well ask - If God is in the business of transforming lives, turning feelings of being forsaken into joy, why isn't he acting here?

But we have to remember of course that the church is us. People. And any transformation of the church that we might hope for or dream about can only

come about through transformation of the people – through change to us. Our attitudes, our motivations, our mindsets and most likely in some way, our actions – what we do.

This is something that that Peter and I and the leadership team across the Parish are looking at.

At the last PCC meeting Kate, myself, Denise and Graham fed back about the conference we went on in the Autumn about leading our churches into growth. The PCC recognised that we need to transform our thinking from the 'keep the church going' mentality to the 'get the church growing' mindset. And they agreed that we should think and pray about how this might be achieved and implemented.

We are planning a series of sermons from Candlemas through to Lent looking at ourselves - the three churches that make up the Parish, looking at the things that we do and the way that we do them. Looking at what motivates us and excites us; looking at what our faith means for us and how we might become more confident in our faith.

We will ask questions like – what would a visitor or stranger think if they came into one of our worship services? Would they feel welcome? Would they recognise a joy and excitement in the worship of God? Would they see a people of faith and love? Would they want to come back and become part of us?

We will think about our own faith journeys, and about how we might encourage others by sharing with them something of our experience of God.

And we will pray that God will use us and transform us to help grow his church.

In Lent we will put on a Lent course – meeting at a number of different times throughout the week across the parish – thinking about how we can be transformed into churches where we expect to see and do see our own faith growing and deepening and new people joining us week by week.

Our readings today should encourage us as we think about these things. Isaiah's prophecy that God wants his people to be joyful and fulfilled; the gospel story of Jesus taking the ordinary and turning it into something special. And the NT reading where Paul talks of gifts that God gives to his church – to

individual people like you and me – to enable the church to thrive and grow. Gifts some of which might seem strange – the gifts of healing or prophecy or speaking in tongues – but others in linked passages of scripture being much more understandable – encouragement, generosity, helping.

I am sure that God has some great things in store for us. But he can only achieve them if we make ourselves available to be used. If we offer back to him the skills and abilities we know about – and those we have yet to discover.

God is a god of transformation. He can turn desolation into life and growth, but he can only do it using seemingly ordinary people, using you and me. Its not just the leaders of the church, or those on the committees. Its all of is ... (maybe name names). God wants to use us all. Each in our own individual way.

PCC members have agreed to pray for growth in our churches. The conference suggested a template prayer for us to use and I'll finish this sermon by praying that prayer now. I encourage those who lead our prayers in church to use it week by week in our Sunday worship

God of Mission

**Who alone brings growth to your Church,
Send your Holy Spirit to give
Vision to our planning,
Wisdom to our actions,
And power to our witness.
Help our church to grow in numbers,
In spiritual commitment to you,
And in service to our local community,
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.**