**New and Old Seventh Sunday after Trinity, 26/7/20**

**Margaret Joachim**

The last words of this morning’s gospel: ‘New and Old’, have a particular significance for us. Back in 1889, when the Executive Committee of the old iron church of St Andrew was considering building a much larger and permanent church, they asked various architects to submit designs anonymously. The winning design was called ‘New and Old’. So here we are, a hundred and thirty years later, sitting in a treasure of what is both new and old.

Some things are very clearly new: taped-off pews, people wearing masks, a sanitiser-dispenser replacing the holy water stoup by the door. Other things are reassuringly old: the building is largely unchanged, our faithful church community (individually not that old, but a long-established continuity), the tradition we follow and the liturgy we value, now in 20th-century English but easily traceable back through the centuries. And these last few months have compelled us to think again about many new and old things. New behaviour in public: stepping aside to avoid each other, not hugging friends, not going anywhere unless it’s essential. Old books read again for comfort, old board games dug out and played (often with distant friends using very new technology to keep in touch). Old skills revived and new ones learned: gardening, baking, sewing. New separations: from family, work colleagues and maybe from work itself, sometimes almost unbearable separation from a dying relative or a distant new grandchild. Old connections re-established by the old-fashioned means of letter-writing and friendly phone calls. Neighbourliness and generosity rediscovered.

Some of us, especially if we have not had to juggle home-schooling with walking the dog, working from home and trying to keep in touch with elderly relatives, have found something which, while very old, has been very new in our lives – the gift of time. Time to read, to listen to the birds or the radio or each other, time to think, time to just be. Time for contemplation, to reconsider our priorities, time to join on-line Compline and end the day in worship, time to pray. Time to pray can be frightening. How do I do it? What should I say? For how long? How do I know when I’m praying properly? Should something happen? What if it does? (That could be really alarming.) St Paul recognised the problem: ‘We do not know how to pray as we ought.’ I don’t like ‘ought’. It sounds as though there is a correct way of praying, a template we have to follow – so many Hail Marys or Our Fathers, a set of tasks to tick off which, if we line them all up right, will deliver some sort of heavenly jackpot. But Paul also recognised that the Spirit would help us, that God searches our hearts, and that nothing can separate us from God’s love.

God also knows that we are all different, and that there is no ‘one size fits all’ in prayer. Abbot John Chapman, a very wise spiritual director, told the people who came to him for advice to ‘pray as you can, not as you can’t.’ One elderly lady who confided in her vicar that she couldn’t pray properly any more because she could no longer kneel down was asked: ‘When do you feel most relaxed and comfortable?’ ‘When I’m sitting in my armchair knitting’, she replied. ‘Well’, said the vicar, ‘all you have to do is sit and knit in the presence of God.’ Working in the garden, alive to the sound of birds and wind in the trees, the feel of the soil, the colours and textures of plants – being alive to creation – can be profound prayer. Immersing oneself completely in a piece of music, or feeling flour and sugar and dough between the fingers, or plodding along a path and finding a lovely view, or watching your child enjoy something you’ve taught them – all these things can be prayer.

Above all, being open in heart to look for signs of the Kingdom, however improbable, and seeing God at work in ordinary, everyday things, is prayer. The Kingdom of heaven is like the yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened. It’s like the elderly priest in Bergamo who gave up his respirator to a young man who still had his whole life to live. It’s like the three different people in my street, none of whom I knew, who came round at different stages of lockdown to see if I needed help. It’s like the shopping volunteers who are going to carry on doing the shopping for their people even though the shopping service is coming to an end. It’s all those things, new and surprising or old and familiar, that make you stop for a moment, think, and say ‘Thank God’.