**Reflection for Sunday 24th May**

**In grief and joy, in life and death**

**Opening words**

Please light a candle or electric tea light if you are able, and think of everyone else in our community, local and global.

Each morning, we wake and face a day of possibilities and opportunities, of fresh starts and new growth, of developing, and flourishing, and becoming.

Each evening, we go to sleep having lived through a day of choices and options and forks in the road, knowing that each door opened means many others closing, and that each green shoot leads to a death elsewhere on the vine of our life.

Each morning, each evening, we are surrounded by birth and death, by beginnings and endings, by grief and joy. And all should be celebrated and honoured, for together they are Life, in all its multi-coloured, multi-faceted glory. And so we come to give thanks for Life, and for our part in it.

Let us begin.

**Hymn**

193 in the purple hymn book is by Shelley Jackson Denham – it’s my absolute favourite hymn, if I’m allowed to have one, and I know that many in our congregation love it too. As usual I can’t print all of it (though I would love to), but here are three verses, each with their integral choruses.

We laugh, we cry, we live, we die, we dance, we sing our song.

We need to feel there’s something here to which we can belong.

We need to feel the freedom just to have some time alone.

But most of all we need close friends we can call our very own.

And we believe in life, and in the strength of love,

And we have found a need to be together.

We have our hearts to give, we have our thoughts to receive,

And we believe that sharing is an answer.

A child is born amongst us and we feel a special glow.

We see time’s endless journey as we watch the baby grow.

We thrill to hear imagination freely running wild.

We dedicate our minds and hearts to the spirit of the child.

And we believe in life, and in the strength of love,

And we have found a time to be together.

And with the grace of age, we share the wonder of youth,

And we believe that growing is an answer.

We seek elusive answers to the questions of this life.

We seek to put an end to all the waste of human strife.

We search for truth, equality, and blessed peace of mind.

And then we come together here, to make sense of what we find.

And we believe in life, and in the strength of love,

And we have found a joy to be together.

And in our search for peace, maybe we’ll finally see;

Even to question truly is an answer.

**Prayer**

Spirit of Life and Love, we have joined together in our hearts and minds and souls, because there is comfort to be found in knowing that we are not alone in this labyrinth we call Life.

Sometimes the complexity of Life is exhausting – so many options, so much emotional upheaval, so many conflicting opinions – we can find ourselves longing for a simple path, a clear set of instructions, someone to tell us what to do and to make all the difficult decisions for us.

And sometimes the swings from high to low, from joy to grief, from hope to fear, and back again, can feel too much for our hearts to bear – we long for the roller coaster ride to be levelled out, arguing that though we’d miss the highs, being spared the terrifying plummets into the depths would make it worth it.

But we know equally that we don’t really want that – we defend our right to make our own decisions, choose our own paths, and we know that it is only by knowing the depths that we can truly savour the heights – and even if those heights are only reached once or twice in our lifetimes, the vision of celestial beauty, glimpsed just once, is enough to last a lifetime.

And so we ask not for deliverance, but for endurance, not for smooth roads, but for companionship on rough roads, and not for less emotion, but for a greater heart to hold it all.

Amen.

**Story – The Sunflower and the Sparrow – by Margaret Silf**

Between an old wooden chest and a rusty washing machine drum, a little sunflower grew. She was surrounded by rubbish and dereliction. She was the only flower for miles around. Why the sunflower should be growing there, of all places, no one knew. The flower was often sad, and at night, she would dream of lush meadows, of fields of bright flowers where the butterflies flew around her.

One day, a bedraggled little sparrow came and perched in front of her and gazed at her, his beak hanging open.

“How beautiful you are,” he chirped, “really beautiful.”

“I’m not,” retorted the sunflower sadly. “You should see my sisters. They’re ten times my size. I’m small and ugly.”

“For me, you’re the most beautiful of them all,” piped the sparrow and flew away.

The bird visited the sunflower every day from then on. And every day the sunflower grew a little taller, and every day her flower became a little brighter. They became friends.

But one day the sparrow didn’t come. And the next day he didn’t come. And the next. The sunflower was very worried. Then one morning, when she awoke, she saw the sparrow lying in front of her, his wings outstretched. What a shock it gave her. “Are you dead, my little friend? What’s happened?”

Slowly, the bird opened his eyes. “For the last few days I’ve not found anything to eat on the waste tip. Now I haven’t got any strength left. I’ve come to you so that I can die close to you.”

“No, no!” cried the sunflower. “Wait. Wait just a moment.” She lowered her heavy flowerhead towards him, and a few sunflower seeds fell to the ground. “Pick them up, my little friend. They will give you new strength.” The sparrow cracked open a few of the seeds with his last ounce of energy, and lay still, exhausted.

But the next day, he was already feeling stronger. He wanted to thank the sunflower, but he was devastated when he saw her. Her yellow flower petals had all gone limp, and her leaves hung down lifelessly. “What’s the matter with you, sunflower?” he chirped in his distress.

“Don’t be concerned for me,” said the sunflower weakly. “My time is over. Do you know what? I always thought that my existence was meaningless, here on the waste tip. But now I know that there is a purpose for everything, even though we can’t always understand it. Without you, I would have lost my will to live, and without me, you would have lost your life. And look, there are still plenty of sunflower seeds on the ground. Leave a few of them behind and maybe one day there will be lots of sunflowers here, and lots of bedraggled sparrows will fly around them, like butterflies.”

**Reading – The Prophet, Kahlil Gibran**

That was the story – this is a more serious reading – an extract from a book called The Prophet, by Kahlil Gibran. This book is written as a series of questions and answers between a community and a travelling wise man.

Then a woman said, “Speak to us of Joy and Sorrow”. And he answered, “Your joy is your sorrow unmasked. And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was often times filled with your tears. And how else can it be?

The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain. Is not the cup that holds your wine the very cup that was burned in the potters' oven? And is not the lute that soothes your spirit the very wood that was hollowed with knives?

When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy. When you are sorrowful, look again in your heart and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight.

Some of you say joy is greater than sorrow, and others say, nay sorrow is the greater. But I say to you, they are inseparable. Together they come, and when one sits alone with you at your board, remember that the other is asleep in your bed.”

**Reflection**

It’s a week of joy and pain. For Muslims around the world, today marks the start of Eidh-ul-Fitr, the celebrations at the end of the month of Ramadan. For a month, Muslims have been fasting and praying – now they have reached the end of their fast, and so it is a time of feasting, and celebration, and heartfelt worship.

A time of celebration – and yet these celebrations are painful because the community get-together’s and the communal worship that are so much a part of it cannot happen – the mosques, like churches and synagogues and meeting houses, are all closed. Though I did see one solution beautifully demonstrated by a small child, who had made little prayer mats for all their teddies – a true prayer community of love if ever there was one!

It’s also a time of pain – three years ago, on 22nd May 2017, a man believed that he was called to an act of terrible violence – he walked into a building full of happy people, full of life and spirit after an uplifting concert, and detonated a bomb. He took his own life, alongside those of twenty-two other beloved souls, and inflicted both physical and mental pain on so many others. As a city we swore we would never forget – and on 22nd May Manchester Cathedral led a time of online prayer and lament, and others lit candles and held silences in their own private remembrances throughout the day.

And yet within that lamentation there is joy – joy that those people lived and shared their love; joy that those injured are yet still with us, and slowly finding healing; joy that after that horrendous event, despite the pain and the horror and the grief, the people refused to give in to bitterness and hatred, but instead joined together again and sang, and danced, and held each other, and pledged themselves to love, love and love again.

In our own community these past couple of months, we have grieved the loss of a friend – celebrated the birth of a child – and been forced to rearrange weddings. We have honoured birthdays – and supported each other through illness. All around us, people find healing, fall in love, make mistakes and make miracles, and are blessed with crisp dawns and glorious sunsets.

In life we are in the midst of death, and in death we are in the midst of life. Even while we are crippled with overwhelming grief, we are surrounded by glimpses of incredible joy.

Knowing that there is joy all around us does not lessen the pain, nor should it – every loss, every hurt, every heartbreak is owed its full acknowledgement. And knowing that there is grief around every corner does not stifle our joy, and nor should it – for celebration, like deep grieving, is an act of gratitude and thankfulness.

So let us always give thanks for whatever comes our way, whether it is pain or joy, for it is Life, and we are privileged to be a part of it.

**Blessing**

Each day of this coming week,

may you wake with the anticipation of possibilities and opportunities.

May you wake with the courage to face the road ahead of you, with all its twists and turns.

May you wake with the wisdom to navigate the choices and decisions ahead of you – and the grace to allow others to make their decisions for themselves.

May you wake with the gentleness to let doors close with honour and respect, and with the willingness to grieve for what was not to be.

Most of all may you wake with love in your heart, with compassion in your hands, and with peace in your mind – and may your mind, hands and heart be ready and open to lift up all the pain, and all the joy, and give thanks for Life.

Amen.