**Reflection for Sunday 3rd May 2020**

**Jumping off the Edge**

**Opening words**

Please light a candle or electric tea light if you are able, and think of all those who are also lighting a candle at this time.

We come here, looking for a safe space and time when we no longer have to hide our true selves. When we can take off the mask and the disguise, and show the world our true face.

So often we feel we have to conform to certain ways of being, of behaving, of looking, of living. But conforming can often mean contorting – twisting our true selves into a shape that does not fit.

And yet not contorting or conforming, but showing our true shape, brings vulnerability, brings fear, brings risk – of rejection, of mockery, of hurt.

In this community, may we know that we are loved for who and what we are, our true shapes, our true colours, our true, deepest selves. May we feel safe enough to let down the guard, take off the disguise, and take that risk of being – us. It is a risk – for ourselves and for others. For in a moment of true encounter, both parties are changed.

But yet I invite you, despite the risk – come. Come as you are – exactly as you are – but do not expect to leave in exactly the same condition.

**Hymn**

In our purple hymn book, number 167 is by Don Besig, called ‘There is a place I call my own’. These are the first and last verses.

There is a place I call my own, where I can stand by the sea,

And look beyond the things I’ve known, and dream that I might be free.

Like the bird above the trees, gliding gently on the breeze,

I wish that all my life I’d be without a care and flying free.

So life’s a song that I must sing, a gift of love I must share;

And when I see the joy it brings my spirits soar through the air.

Like the bird up in the sky, life has taught me how to fly,

For now I know what I can be, and now my heart is flying free.

**Prayer**

Spirit of Life and Love,

In this current situation, risk is ever-present. Stepping outside our own front door – is a risk. The simple act of shopping for food – is a risk. Talking to a friend or a stranger over a garden gate, or in the street – is a risk. Living itself is a risky business.

And while we know that life always came with risks – random traffic accidents, sudden onset health problems, heartbreak – at present, it is leaving many of us in constant states of anxiety, and exhaustion, because there is no let up from it. When we face risk, our senses are heightened – we enter that ‘fight or flight’ state of mind – but we were not made to live permanently with such anxiety. And we are tired.

Let us know that here and now, we do not have to hide how we are feeling. We do not have to pretend that we are full of good cheer. If that is truly how we are feeling, then of course, let us share it – but let us feel equally able to acknowledge our tiredness, our sadness, our fear. Let this community be one which can hold us no matter how we are feeling – a community that doesn’t judge our varying ‘coping abilities’ – a community that can celebrate cheery smiles and equally honour breaking hearts.

Spirit of Life and Love, comfort us when we are feeling sad. Hold us together when we feel like we are breaking. Rock us gently when we are exhausted. And help us know that whether our spirits are high or low, whether we are celebrating or mourning, whether we are flourishing or collapsing, we are held tightly in the arms of Love. Amen.

**Story – Going Ape!**

I’mnot known for any great physical prowess – or even any mild physical prowess! Sport was most definitely not my thing at school – I was in the hockey team for one event, as goal keeper – I let in the only goal of the whole competition, and was never picked again, thankfully! And I certainly never had anything to do with events that involved going ‘up’ – climbing walls, for example – not a chance. Standing on a chair is bad enough, that’s height enough for me, thank you very much.

Which left me in a crisis when my daughter Amy, for her eleventh birthday, decided she wanted to do Go Ape. For those who don’t know what that is, it’s basically one long obstacle course – 10 metres high in the trees of Delamere Forest. To be sure you are permanently attached to safety ropes – but! If it was just her wanting to do it, there wouldn’t have been a problem as Mike her dad could have gone with her. But she wanted to take two friends – three children in total, which meant a requirement for two adults. Oh dear.

Well I must have decided I loved her enough, because on the day there I was, balancing on rope lines high above the ground. Talk about outside my comfort zone! In theory the adult is supposed to be guiding and supporting the child – quite a lot of the time it was the other way around. At one point, while heading over a wobbly, twisting plank structure, my footing slipped, and I was left dangling – and crying! I did pull myself together eventually, but it took a while!

The whole course took over three hours to get round. By the time we were on the last stretch, my nerves were exhausted, as was my body. The problem was, I was now faced with the ‘leap of faith’ – jumping off a ledge to swing forward and down into a ‘spider’s web’ net. I knew the rope was attached, I had seen numerous people do it before me, but I was paralysed. Amy, her two friends, and Mike were already over the other side waiting for me. A father and son were waiting behind me. Everyone was calling advice and encouragement. And I sat there.

It took me about ten minutes, I think. The realisation that no-one could rescue me, but me – and that the only way to get home to a cup of tea (or something stronger) was to jump, finally sunk in. And so, with one last deep breath, and a prayer to any and all gods that might have been listening – I jumped. And dropped like a stone. And swung through the air. And hit the net. And grabbed on. And eventually pulled myself up despite shaking like a leaf, and carried on. The reward – after eventually getting up to the highest point of the course (15 metres up on a tiny ledge) – was the 200+ metre zip wire back down to the forest floor and the knowledge that it was over. That and knowing that Amy owed me big time!

But looking back, there was a much deeper reward. The reward of knowing that ‘jumping’ is something that can be survived – that jumping off the edge doesn’t mean annihilation – that taking risks can lead to exhilarating views and greater self-confidence. That putting ourselves in situations where we are completely vulnerable can bring us support and encouragement and understanding from friends and strangers alike. That far from falling, that step off the edge can show us that we can fly.

**Reflection**

I went through a period in my life a few years ago – in fact some would say I’m still in it - when if asked how I was, I would settle for the ubiquitous, oh I’m fine, and how are you?, even though the answer I sometimes wanted to give, though generally didn’t, was that I was “on the edge”. On the edge of what, I’m not sure I could have told you.

Living on the edge is a phrase that means many things to many people. It brings different images – cliff edges, shorelines – poverty, being a stranger in a strange land. While it can mean being on the edge of something miraculous, or exciting, or beautiful or adventurous, a complete change of direction or as Lady Gaga put it, on the edge of glory – it can equally mean on the edge of panic, fear, or despair, or isolation from society, or on the edge of complete brokenness as a person.

Whatever edge we find ourselves on can be terrifying because however we deal with it will involve risk. Risking our identity – we may feel so committed to something that is so different to what we did before, that it will be seen to alter our identity if we follow it through. Risking our faith – if our beliefs are challenged by events that shake us to the core, or confronted by different truths, are we willing to sit down and really examine what we believe? Risking our reputation – if we are on the edge of a marriage break-up, or a career upheaval, that we know will not be approved of or understood, do we have the courage to do what we believe is right despite criticism and disapproval?

To risk ourselves we must want something very much. We must also have the courage to commit ourselves to that which we want so that in the face of difficulty, of criticism, of possible disappointment, we will go forward anyhow. Commitment of the heart is the basis for risk, a commitment to something we believe in - to an ideal, a way of life, a person whom we love. Even though there are other motives that push people into taking risks, commitment of the heart is the one that stems from the spiritual side of life because it bases risk-taking on what we value and on what we love.

In the everydayness of life, there are many opportunities for taking risks as we strive to create deeper, sacred relationships with others. When we meet someone, we have the choice of relating to them in the roles they and we are playing: customer-at-a-store, cashier, bus-driver, carpenter, banker, housewife or househusband, etc., or we can relate to them as fellow human beings, as souls within the one great Spirit. Often, the rush of life puts us on 'automatic pilot' just trying to get through the day. We feel we cannot take the risk of stepping beyond roles because we are in 'functional mode', just getting done what needs to be done.  We look at people in terms of what they can do for us, rather than who they are. But what is more important in the end: whether we have accomplished all the things on our list, or how we have treated the souls we met, with whom we might have shared a sacred space?

And yet isn’t that the biggest risk of all? To jump off the edge of the superficial world, and into the abyss of unknowing that comes when we are brave enough to risk revealing our authentic self? Our true self. Not just the functional self but the real, deep down, US. Since most people operate in 'functional mode' a good deal of the time, anyone who steps out of this mode is taking the risk of doing something different. Anyone who steps out must be willing to face awkwardness in a situation that has left the familiar and the ordinary. Yet, awkwardness can become a friend, too, signalling to us that something new is happening. When we risk being new, we bring a sacred possibility to the table.

Jane Blackall from our Kensington congregation, has this to say about being brave enough to be your authentic self.

“We can give a great gift to others, by sharing our struggles and brokenness, showing our vulnerability, revealing our particular, unique, authentic self to the world. Often this can open up a point of connection. Authenticity can be contagious. Your openness and sincerity can give others permission to shed their own masks. By unilaterally practising this way of being you can teach it to others (and to the next generation). … But I’ve got to acknowledge that it requires great courage or at least a certain amount of self-confidence to be fully authentic in this way. The prospect of revealing your authentic self can be quite terrifying, in some circumstances. Self-revelation makes you vulnerable. As I’ve said, this can be a good thing, as it opens up the possibility of connection, inviting and enabling other people to be themselves too… but you can also get hurt. What if people see the real you and then reject it? People might betray the trust you have put in them. It’s an understandable urge to hunker down and stay safe and unseen. We often – legitimately – put on masks and disguises for self-protection.

But Jane didn’t just talk about the importance of each of us taking the risk of our being authentic with others – she also talked about the responsibility we have to provide an environment that is safe for others to be authentic. She said:

We can create safer spaces – softer spaces – kinder spaces. We can create communities – or just small moments – of refuge and sanctuary. I’m imagining something almost like a nature reserve for authentic selves: a protected space, a carefully cultivated habitat, set apart from the harshness of the prevailing culture, where people are free to flourish. … There’s a phrase that Rev Danny Crosby uses at the start of every service: ‘All are welcome here; come as you are, exactly as you are, but do not expect to leave in exactly the same condition…’ This is a strong statement of intent... Church is a place where you are received as you are, and supported to grow, in your own way. If this is true, then it’s radical.

We are all standing on the edge – of fear, of excitement, but most of all of being who we truly are. To follow our heart, to be true to ourselves and fully authentic, involves taking that terrifying risk of jumping off the edge into the unknown. We too can take that risk, and jump. As one unknown author put it, quite beautifully,

When we come to the edge of all the light we have   
And we step into the darkness, the unknown,   
We will find something solid we can stand upon,

Or I believe that we will surely learn to fly.

**Blessing**

As the world re-shapes and re-forms around us, and the future is unknown, may we each have the courage to stand tall and proud as who and what we are – our true, beautiful, unique selves – and create a world where everyone else can also stand tall and proud. A world where we can lay down the masks and disguises – be open and vulnerable and honest – without the fear of judgment or rejection, but where instead each of us, in our own individuality, is truly welcome and cherished and celebrated. And together, may we be brave enough to jump off the edge of our former, tied-down selves – and learn to fly.