

THE CUP OF COLD WATER

Jesus said in today's gospel, 'Whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water – he'll have his reward.' A cup of cold water – it doesn't sound like much...

David Nott is a surgeon who does extraordinary work in the midst of the most desperate theatres of war. In his book *War Doctor* he tells of being invited to lunch at Buckingham Palace and sitting next to the Queen. She turned to him and asked where he'd just come from. 'Aleppo,' he replied. She asked what it was like. 'My mind instantly filled with images of toxic dust, of crushed school desks, of bloodied and limbless children... My bottom lip started to go,' and he was unable to speak. The Queen touched his hand and then took some biscuits from a box in front of her. 'These are for the dogs,' she said. And for the rest of the lunch the Queen and the doctor fed and petted the corgis under the table. 'All the while, we were stroking and petting them, and my anxiety and distress drained away. 'There,' the Queen said. 'That's so much better than talking, isn't it?' (1)

If we're to give a cup of water to someone who needs it, we could do no better than follow the sensitivity of the Supreme Governor of the Church of England.

It seems to me that in this whole long period of lockdown there have been a lot of cups of cold water, given and received, across the whole of society. We've come to appreciate small things, and previously un-noticed people, as never before. NHS nurses, care home cleaners, neighbours we don't really know asking if they can help, phone calls and emails from almost-forgotten friends, an old soldier who sets off walking a hundred times round his garden to raise £1000 and ends up getting £42m and a knighthood, a call for 250,000 volunteers to contact vulnerable people that gets 750,000 responses. And so it goes on.

Millions of cups of cold water. A cup of cold water doesn't seem like much. But try telling that to someone in a desert. Feeding corgis under the table doesn't seem like much, but try telling that to the corgis!

Small actions have meant so much in the lockdown.

In a strange way it seems as if society has been aligning itself with the values of Jesus and the way of the Kingdom. Pray God it continues.

Because it's the continuation that matters. It's compassion as a way of life. It's society become a more aware, a more generous, a kinder place. It's about us not returning to our burrows without speaking to our neighbours. It's about letting love grow.

In apartheid South Africa a white English priest, Trevor Huddleston, raised his hat to a black domestic worker as they passed in a hospital corridor. She was Desmond Tutu's mother - and eventually apartheid came down. In December 1955 Rosa Parks refused to move to another seat on a segregated bus in Montgomery, Alabama, and civil rights for black people moved centre stage until this day. Black Lives Matter.

These things grow. Small actions eventually move the world. A cup of cold water could lead anywhere.

The alarming truth is that Jesus never invited anyone to church. He just got involved with people in the community, giving out cups of cold water. We could do worse than count the number of cups of cold water we receive this coming week – and the number we give.

Of course, wherever the Kingdom arises, there's a fightback from the forces of evil. Thugs take advantage of the Black Lives Matter rallies; police brutality against the media increases all over the world, scammers find new Covid-friendly ways to attack the vulnerable online, fighting breaks out on British beaches. It was ever thus. But as Desmond Tutu once said to a struggling congregation, 'Don't worry. I've read to the end of the book. We win!'

The psalm set for today is psalm 13 with its haunting phrase 'How long, O Lord?' How long until justice and love prevail? How long?

We need to hear the words of Martin Luther King in a speech in the dark days of the civil rights struggle. He said: 'I know you are asking today how long will it take? I say to you, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because truth pressed to the earth will rise again. How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever. How long? Not long, because you shall reap what you sow. How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice.'

It was in this faith that Rosa Parks said 'I can't take this any longer,' and started a revolution.

It's in this faith that we pursue *the way of the cup of cold water*, a way that leads ultimately to a society aligned with the life of the Kingdom of God. A world where love is the way. It's a long way off, but wherever we see signs of it, as in the compassion and care we've seen in the covid-19 crisis, we need to welcome, encourage, foster, and multiply those signs, until society is fundamentally changed.

Of course this vision won't grip everyone. But it must take hold of enough of us – as, day by day, we practice the ministry of the cup of cold water.

You remember Lionel Blue, he of the wonderful Jewish Thoughts for the Day? He once said, 'Do something for the sake of heaven, and heaven happens.'

Let's think about these things...