**SERMON FOR MIDNIGHT MASS | 24.12.20**

Isaiah 52: 7-10; Titus 3: 1-8; St John 1: 1-14

1. **Cut each cherry into quarters, rinse and drain well. Drain and roughly chop the pineapple, then dry both the cherries and pineapple very thoroughly on absorbent kitchen paper.**
2. **Snip the apricots into raisin-sized pieces. Place the prepared fruits and nuts in a large mixing bowl with the grated lemon rind and sultanas and gently mix. Add the remaining ingredients and beat well for 1 minute until smooth. Turn the mixture into the prepared cake tin. Level the surface and decorate the top with blanched whole almonds and halved glacé cherries.**
3. **Bake in the preheated oven for about 2¼ hours until golden brown. Insert a skewer to test – if it comes out clean, the cake is cooked. It may be necessary after 1 hour to cover it loosely in foil to prevent it getting too brown.**

**Whose recipe is that? Mary Berry of course – her recipe for an American Light Christmas cake.**

**Most of us remember cooking cakes when we were little – and a few of you are still doing it, with or without the encouragement of Bake-Off. For me, licking the bowl afterwards was the best bit, but even though my mother never weighed any of the ingredients in her life, her ‘cut and come again’ cake was one of the highlights of my childhood.**

**This year, Gabriella Zaghari Radcliffe has just made a video of her cooking making cakes. She is as you know, the daughter of Nazanin Zaghari Radcliffe, still incarcerated in Iran as a political bargaining chip. And the person who has been making cakes with her is Elika, daughter of Anoosh Ashoori. Her faither is serving ten years in Iran for a similar trumped up charge and the video has been made by Amnesty International.**

**While the two daughters are 28years apart in age, they both face this Christmas with the same sense of loss. Elika says she misses her faither particularly at birthdays and Christmas while Gabriella, who visited her mother weekly for almost five years before she returned home to Hampstead, says she cries herself to sleep most nights. She has almost never had the experience of baking a cake with her mum whose 42nd birthday is on Boxing Day**

**For lots of people 2020 has been a whole catalogue of losses. A friend wrote to say that he felt that this had been a wasted year as all his usual travel plans had been shelved, one by one. Celebrations of all sorts have had to be cancelled and even our more ordinary friendships have been put on hold - or have been kept alive via zoom. Empty streets seem to make a mockery of the Christmas lights and the adverts encouraging us to splash out on presents. How can we wish people a happy Christmas if they have been isolating since March and can barely cope with meeting other people again – even when they are a patient at a routine hospital appointment.**

**How can Gabriella and Elika bear to make cake?**

**Because the human Spirit, the gift of God, has an extraordinary resilience about it that will not ‘give up’. While Gabriella’s dad talks in the Amnesty film about her wariness in trusting grown-ups and her increasing determination to speak out about injustice, he also talks about the moments of grace, those times when she has made links with people and found ways to bond with them as a sign of her determination not to be beaten by the intransigence of those holding her mother hostage.**

**We might, especially tonight, point to all the signs of light and new life that have somehow managed to emerge from the greyness of the year. Very locally Damien the manager of the ARC Food Bank writes tonight of the astonishing generosity of so many in providing food and toys for the poor in our area; for the efforts being made to ensure that people are not on their own tomorrow and of the number of people coming forward to volunteer.**

**All of us have had to cope, sometimes daily, with quite severe disappointment: things don’t work out, we’ve been locked in at home. The temptation to feel sorry for ourselves is all too real – and none of us should feel in the least bit bad if that is how it feels.**

**But if that is the case, the light of Christ that is the central focus for this Midnight Mass may well be found, as for Gabriella and Elika, in our genuine care for one another and our ability to share in something as ordinary as making cake – doing things together.**

**As I look back on 2020 and the things that have had to be abandoned because of the Covid restrictions, it will be the small acts of generosity and sacrifice that will stay with me. And as I reflect on them I need to keep saying to myself: this isn’t just chance or the fact that someone is nice: this is a manifestation of our God who is alive – and sharing these difficulties alongside us.**

**When Gabriella and Elika are cooking they are laying claim to the day when they will be making cake with their loved ones, Nazanin and Annoosheh. They are saying ‘hope will not die’. The light cannot and will not be snuffed out by a load of old mullahs who have lost their hold on reality. As Isaiah said after years and years of exile, *how beautiful are the feet of those who can finally bring news of peace, who can say to the people: Your God reigns*.**

**As we search for the distinctive role of the Church in today’s society, surely this is it: we will not be overwhelmed, whatever the evidence to the contrary. God has kept the light alive through much worse than this - and he will not fail us. The power of love and the example of Jesus cannot be extinguished.**

**So when the gloom seems particularly overwhelming and hope is thin on the ground, light the candles - and make cake. And let it stand for the promise that the best is yet to come as the prophet said.**

**Let the gift of the Christ child, born in a battered and borrowed stable, stir us into a new confidence. And let the light shine out - not just for us and for our needs of course but also for Nazanin and Anoosheh for whose release we never cease to pray.**

**And let’s take encouragement wherever we can. We might start by remembering that we prayed not just for Nazanin but also for Dr Kylie Moore-Gilbert who is now free and back home in Australia.**

**The light will always win out – eventually – so that we can, with hand on heart, say with absolute conviction: Happy Christmas!**