**SERMON FOR EASTER 5 | 02.05.2021**

**Acts 8: 26-end; 1 John 4: 7-end; St John 15: 1-8**

**It always seems such a terribly long way! Out of London on the A12, joining the A14 near Ipswich and then on via the rather slower A140 until you hit the ring road and finally end up in Norwich itself, you pass wonderful village names all along the way, places like Thretshall St Margaret and Saxlingham Nethergate – names ready to leap out of a Dorothy L Sayers novel! As you may know, Norwich is a delight, full of twisty medieval streets filled with ancient churches all dressed in local clunch limestone. The Cathedral still dominates the skyline with its tall spire and fabulous flying buttresses, every bit as impressive as the ones in Rheims. There are new things to be discovered on every corner and it is well worth the journey.**

**And in one of the side streets still is the Church of St Julian where, in the second half of the 14th century, Mother Julian of Norwich devoted her life to a calling to be an anchoress and religious mystic.**

**We know almost nothing about her except what we find in her ‘Divine Revelations’, but in themselves they are evidence – not just of a profound mystical experience but of a very good theological education, pretty unusual for a woman of that period. So even her more abstract meditations on a hazelnut for example are rooted in the Gospels - which may account for the way they have been so highly regarded for the better part of 600 years. Her feast day falls on Saturday of this coming week.**

**The story of the Ethiopian official in our 1st reading, trying to make sense of a passage from Isaiah as he sat in the back of his chariot on the 2000 mile journey back from Jerusalem to Addis Ababa has always intrigued me. He had come (we don’t know quite why: was he Jewish? I suspect not), to the great festival of Passover and was now trying to get to grips with the writings of one of the greatest of the prophets. But it is not going well! He hasn’t enough background to make sense of the line: *Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, in his humiliation justice was denied him…* Just what did that mean?**

**St Luke’s wonderful story-telling quickly draws us in: we want to know how the poor man is put out of his misery and what we get is a rather peculiar bit of intuition on the part of Philip who is guided by the Spirit to ask the man this fairly obvious question: as if he knew the man from Adam he asks: *do you understand what you are reading?***

**And we can hear the frustration in the voice of the Ethiopian, the same kind of frustration that we all endure when faced with an impenetrable computer manual for example: *how the dickens are we going to understand all this unless someone shows us?***

**As the Church wrestles with falling numbers - and falling incomes as a result – there are any numbers of rescue strategies being put forward. But what I don’t hear is a clear and unambiguous commitment to Christian education, for children and even more urgently it seems to me, for adults. The fact is that we as a generation are shockingly unfamiliar with even the key elements of our faith. We talk a lot about social action, about our moral stance on all kinds of current issues from nuclear weapons to abortion – and of course we talk endlessly about the kind of services that we enjoy most.**

**But how much energy are we putting into responding to the cries of the Ethiopian and indeed every enquirer: *how can I understand unless someone guides me?* And how much commitment are we putting into funding people like Philip so that they have the time to stand alongside those asking the questions; people who are good at setting enquirer’s anxieties into context and making sense of them in today’s world?**

**Amongst her many insights, Julian of Norwich takes on the genuine fear that many enquirers have that God (if there is a God) simply isn’t listening to what they have to say. And this is how she handles it, in a modern paraphrase:  *Don’t* she says, *get discouraged. You may feel that your prayer was just a waste of time, a lot of words that go nowhere. But God doesn’t see it like that. He looks at all the efforts that we make to ask for mercy and grace and, ignoring whether we feel we have said and done the right things or not, reaches down and says: it is in the trying that you will find the doubt and the fears and the weaknesses gradually fading away. The pains and the frustrations are all part of that process.***

**It’s a long way to Norwich; it’s even further from Jerusalem to Addis. It’s much further still from Islington to Matsuyama in Japan from where Fr Sebastian and Yuki Naniwa wrote yesterday as part of our international prayer network. In a highly mobile world we remain branches of the vine which is Christ. And however chance our meetings often are, our job is to be able to answer the questions that people ask – honestly and clearly. It’s the no1 priority for the Church and it has to be the no1 priority for us at St James’ too.**