

## **All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well**

“Hetty left school at 14 and, with typical courage, replied to a job advertisement in the South Wales Echo to look after the child of a Welsh family in the East End of London. She was met at Paddington Station by her new employers, who had told her to tie a white gentleman’s handkerchief to the handle of her ‘portmanteau’.

The family had a grocery shop where Hetty went on to work, patting up butter and making ice cream. These were happy times despite the hardships she saw around the docks. She remembers being taken ‘up West’ by her employer to buy new clothes at C&A with the money she had saved.”

So writes Henrietta Hurt’s daughter, and in just a few short lines a world is glimpsed, unimaginable to many in today’s comfortable Britain. But hold on, let’s acknowledge the far too many 14 years olds, the children, who are carers in our city today. The more things change, the more ... !

Nevertheless the story of Henrietta Hurt, born Williams (She was proud of her Welsh roots) lends a healthy and timely perspective. At her funeral today we said farewell to a member of St John’s who from the most humble origins carved out a career as a much loved and respected nurse, but not before she had worked as a barmaid and a dinner lady.

I find her story every bit as wonderful and awesome as the story we tell at Christmas of a young Mum and her husband, surviving in lean times. I wonder how often Hetty looked up into the heavens and hoped for a star that would guide her, would shine a light over a resting place, a real and lasting home? She accomplished these things with Arthur, her dashing, by all accounts, husband ... as well as being a Mum.

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In recent months I have found myself quoting these words, attributed to Mother Julian of Norwich (1342 – 1430). She lived in dark times of plague and war. In her solitude she recorded her Revelations of Divine Love, thoughts and insights that are eternally optimistic. I’m not sure how these words have crept into my thinking and speaking, though I suspect they are a prayer that chimes with what we are all seeing, experiencing, pondering and above all hoping.

**2020 has been something of a curate's egg; pretty well off, all of it!**



Right Reverend Host *"I'm afraid you've got a bad egg, Mr Jones"*

The Curate *"Oh no my Lord, I assure you! Parts of it are excellent!"*

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I think most of us have given up any pretence as to how we feel about 2020, even those of us who have emerged for the most part unscathed. But all of us have been affected and I believe the emotional scars will take time both to acknowledge and in turn heal. Clearly it's no longer about how we return to normal, but what are we moving on towards. We cannot put the clock back and why would we?

Often enough I tell the stories of people like Hetty. I doubt very much they'd thank you for putting back the clock, any more than would Mother Julian of Norwich. The star in the sky leads on, not back. And the wise find a different way home, warned off simple thinking or short cuts.

I have no more faith in the much-hyped golden era being touted by some than my ability to fly in the air unless aided by Boeing. It feels naïve, dishonest and it speaks not of faith but wishful thinking, and on the most part of the already privileged and secure. (Discuss or dispute over a good wine!)

### **Time like an ever-flowing stream ... (or river)**

At this time of year I catch up with the same friends of many years standing. It's an annual appointment and we all somehow just know it will happen. Nearly 30 years ago I stood on the north bank of the Clyde at Erskine, with a mother and various friends from York Hill Hospital. We planted a tree at the spot where her son had waded into the river because life had become unbearable. He couldn't see the future and the past had been a torment.

Hazel and I spoke yesterday and she assured me the tree is still well, albeit on an exposed part of the shoreline. It feels like yesterday and it is good to go back and stand there, even 400 miles apart, together. I am determined to keep this appointment as long as I have breath. It is important. It is an article of faith and love. But I do not wish to put the clock back. I can't answer for Hazel, but this year she shared that she has taken up a street Ministry in Glasgow. There is no golden future, but there is hope, and decency, and kindness, and reaching out, and seeds and growing and trusting and love. Hearing the call. The shadow of the past need not eclipse our futures.

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### **The Kirk**

A place of stone, impermeable, secure, for ever. Which isn't quite true. Far too many of them are constructed of remarkably permeable sandstone and brick. And there are far too many of them.

I do not know what tomorrow will bring but I have my suspicions; no great renaissance. Our world has tumbled to a truth far greater than any one institution can contain or express, and that's called progress. The Church has no monopoly on truth any more than any other religious structure or tradition. One way, one truth ... nonsense. We've grown up.

But here perhaps we can turn the clock back, or at least acknowledge our heritage as Presbyterians and Congregationalists. We are children of the enlightenment. Faith and reason are co-workers. Intellect and soul coexist in a creative tension. We do not believe in magic, but we do believe in the providential love of God; a God who never turns back the clock, isn't even tempted, but who hangs in, hangs on, hangs out and was hung up for hope's sake ...

So to those who say Christmas was cancelled this year, all I can say is did you open your eyes. Where on earth were you looking for it? The past?

### **St John's**

#### **Our journey statement isn't history ...**

but it deserves revisiting. Creeds that are recited without examination and reflection are potential millstones round our necks. People compose creeds, not God.

Here's my hunch: it reads now just a wee bit too much about us, about our action plan, our survival, us, us, us. I think that view surely needs to be examined in the light of a new day and a new year. Heavens, if we thought the Millennium was big news, what about 2021 for an absolute show stopper! Things have changed, but we still have influence on events.

St John's is a place of tradition, due regard for history and heritage and considerable diligence in all things, including tea towels! Caution is our watch word. I can't really argue with that, but I do want to suggest that we need to consider the place of risk and imagination, wonder and shaking things up. Remember the kaleidoscope I spoke of earlier this month?

St John's is, among other valuable functions, a church, part of the great family of faith, finding its way and with other faith families too.

In 2021 let's by all means explore what are our defining attributes, but let's be courageous and ask if there are not yet new ways to enhance and nourish our sense of who and what we are. And this conversation needs to be an outward facing one, involving others.

St John's, a place of worship or: St John's, a place of healing? (or both)

In recent months I have occasionally stepped into the sanctuary and wandered round the halls and garden. I have asked myself what the place means to me; what has changed in the better part of a decade, what matters and what does not. I keep returning to my affection for the sanctuary and I still see all sorts of possibilities, if anything these things I see even more clearly. But will they constitute a new golden era?

But what about you ... what do you see as you take that imaginary trip around and through the stones of an old friend?

Talking of which: This year closed with the deaths of old friends who were a huge part of the St John's story. 2020 has been a year of considerable loss on that front, but also an opportunity to look back, tell parts of the human story that are either neglected or simply not known. The St John's disposition to modesty and "nae fuss" often forbids their telling, but it is a huge honour that I have that role to play ... but not too often, I hope! The stories of our own local saints, like Hetty, all bear the hallmark of determination, and looking forward. They are formidable stories and wonderful examples of what faith can look like. They deserve to be polished and shown off. (Aye, but not too much!)

So enough ...

We are almost there, together but apart, yet a part of something significant, beautiful and even yet, full of promise. I wish you well in the New Year which beckons. Don't forget to look into the heavens and marvel that these ancient stars set in the firmament forever illumine new possibilities, a new Heaven and a New Earth. They are of course one and the same.

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*James*