

Lent 4, 2020 - Reflection

Since we heard the sad and unthinkable news from the Bishop that services would be suspended until further notice, I have been receiving many emails and phone calls as surely has been the case for you. One from the diocese began this way: "May you live in interesting times is an old expression and usually used ironically. But here we are". Indeed, here we are -- in a situation we've read in books, seen in the movies and watched on TV. As I said in the welcome at the recorded service of Matins for the fourth Sunday in Lent:

"It is an understatement to say that we are in anxious and troubling times, that fear and uncertainty abound. Like no other time in the living memory of most and perhaps all of us, we must pull together, we must seek the good in each other, and seek the comfort and care of each other. Above all this is the time to know that we are always in the presence of our loving and merciful God who walks with us at all times, and holds us in the palm of his hand".

We are so grateful to the many in our parish who are making an effort to keep in touch, to pray, to encourage and to support. Please be assured our clergy and lay leadership are in constant contact - together we are keeping things going and yes, we long for the day when this long Lent will pass, when we will come from the darkness of the tomb into the light of a new day.

Walking in the darkness now, we must, like never before, turn to the one who is the eternal light. The readings appointed for today all speak of people in some way moving from darkness to light. Samuel, trying to discern the will of God when looking for a new king over Israel is suddenly brought to a new awareness, a new light, when he is shown young David as the one he should choose – he is the one thought at first most unlikely.

The epistle reading (Ephesians 5.8-14 - which we did not use at Matins but you can read at home) has Paul suggesting that the Christians of Ephesus have in Christ a light to show them a new way to live.

And in the long passage from St John's Gospel, Jesus' healing of a young man allows the evangelist to reflect on the mental and spiritual blindness of the authorities, and the light which is Christ himself - healing and wholeness come from the most unexpected places.

In this time the theme of light is one we need to surely hold before us at all times. But it is also the psalm passage appointed for today that is a huge source of strength. Psalm 23 is probably the best known and most loved psalm, prayed so often at the bedside of the sick and dying, heard at funerals and recited during times of trial. We are reminded today that Jesus is our Shepherd.

Anyone who has visited Israel will know that the pasture land is of an uneven quality. Much of it consists of dry hillsides. Here and there are springs and streams where water is available. The good shepherd knows where these streams are and that also is the place where there is green grass.

The land is also a dangerous place, with narrow steep valleys and many clefts so narrow the sun is shut out of them much of the time. In those places are dangerous animals and thieves waiting for ambush. The shepherd must travel through these places and so the shepherd carries a staff to assist with walking and for the protection of the flock. It has a crook to bring the wayward sheep back.

In the second part of Psalm 23 we have the image of a kind host welcoming a guest, perhaps that guest is a tired worn shepherd who needs rest, healing and refreshment. The host's tent is a place of refuge, of a place of hospitality, where a meal is set out, where oil is offered to heal wounds, and where the cup of overflows abundantly – all of this a sign of the loving-kindness and generosity of God.

In St John's Gospel, Jesus speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd, the one who in fact lays down his life for the sheep. Jesus is our welcoming host. Jesus tends our wounds and satisfies our hunger and thirst with an abundance of grace.

At this time as always, Jesus Christ is shepherding us. We are seeing his love work through so many people in so many ways, in some ways that we have until now taken for granted much of the time. In these days let us put our faith and trust in the Good Shepherd and let us ask his grace to strengthen all who are working hard to get us through often in situations that puts them in harms way, and let us rest in him, trusting that he lead us through the valley of the shadow of death and into the green pastures of abundant new life.

Fr Geoffrey+