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***Dear St John's family***

***Rising out of the flatlands of lockdown***

It's just over twelve years ago that I made my way to Ely to attend a residential retreat for ordination selection. I remember distinctly the first sight of Ely Cathedral rising up out of the Cambridgeshire flatlands.

As I reflect on these last few weeks I'm encouraged that out of the monotonous flatlands of lockdown there are many signs of faith rising up on the horizon.

According to a report out this week a quarter of adults in the UK have watched or listened to a religious service since the lockdown began, and one in 20 have started praying during the crisis. One in five of those who have tuned into services in the past few weeks say they have never gone to church.

These figures chime with our own experience with 274 people watching our 10am service on 19<sup>th</sup> April and 125 virtually attending our 8am BCP service the same day. For many, my own family included, the move to worship on line, has given us the opportunity to invite our family and friends to come and see what we do each Sunday. Who would have thought this lockdown could have given us such a God given opportunity. If you haven't already extended an invitation to your circle of family and friends then it really is as simple as sending them a link to our website [www.stjm.org.uk](http://www.stjm.org.uk) and clicking the 'St John's Live' tab.

Keeping in touch remains our big priority and my thanks to those of you who have dropped me a line to say how much you appreciate these News Bulletins. They wouldn't be possible without the hard work and commitment of Rachael who, operating from her

home, has also provided a phone triage for over 200 people needing help/advice/support. Of this:

- We are supporting 37 people locally with practical help (shopping etc.)
- We have referred 75 people to other organisations or local parish churches
- The remaining people we have found help for directly e.g. contacted the chemist to arrange delivery, put them in touch with companies that are delivering etc.

Of course this pastoral and practical support does not include the many unseen acts of kindness that are going on as members of our church family respond unprompted to the needs of neighbours and friends and extended family. These acts of kindness are more than just practical; they serve to remind others that they are held in mind.

At this time, we especially hold in mind those who have lost love ones recently remembering in our prayers the friends and families of Carole Flight and Jack Beach.

Finally, the 'city on the hill' for me during this lockdown, has been online Morning Prayer using Zoom. Each morning 30 to 45 of the church family along with some new friends from St Michaels and All Angels church gather to reflect on the Lectionary readings for the day and to pray. For me this is the engine room of the church in lockdown as we bring to God the needs of the parish and beyond. If you haven't already, why not join us any morning at 9am using this link:

<https://zoom.us/j/92258072731?pwd=YUdTY3hFbzZnR0R3RWI5OGZSNTVkUT09>

And don't forget, if you do not have access a computer and the internet, we can help. After several weeks of Brenda Prior using a land line and us only able to hear her voice at Morning Prayer there was a communal cheer when her wonderful smile appeared on our screens for the first time this week courtesy of one of the donated smart phones and some patient coaching from Ben on how to use it. If you are at all unsure about the technology, I'm sure Brenda would be the first to say that if she can do it so can you.

Be safe everyone and, like a city on a hill, let the light of Christ within you shine across the flatlands of lockdown.

With my love and prayers

*Giles*

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## RECENT REFLECTIONS FROM MORNING PRAYER

22<sup>ND</sup> APRIL – REV'D BEN SLEEP

### Psalm 30, Exodus 16.11-end, Colossians 2.1-15

When we experience something blissful, or taste something delicious, our response is often to describe those encounters as 'Manna from Heaven.' Manna from heaven has become a term that's associated with luxury, with unbridled pleasure. But I think our definition of manna would somewhat surprise the wandering Israelites from the book of Exodus. In Hebrew, Manna roughly translates as '*what is it?*' The heavenly food that was provided by God wasn't luxurious or indulgent. In fact, the Israelites weren't really sure what it is was. So strange was this food, that Moses and Aaron were commanded by God to collect some and keep it in a jar so that the generations to come could also wonder at the provision of God.

None of this is to say that it wasn't palatable – it's described in our passage as tasting like wafers with honey, which sounds pretty tasty. But the nature of God's gift to the Israelites is not in how it tasted, but in how it was delivered, and the rules governing its use.

Time and again, throughout Exodus, we see God's people turning away from Him despite His provision and promises - moaning that their life in Egypt was better than their lot now; longing for the days of slavery, because at least then they had meat on the table. And their inability to trust God shines through once again when God provides manna for them to eat. *Only gather what you need*, God commands, but immediately, His people begin storing up this food from heaven, either through greed or through a lack of trust that there will be sufficient tomorrow. But God is not to be mocked. Extra supplies become infested with maggots; those that gather more than they need find that when it comes to eating it, they only have as much as their neighbour.

God's provision of food is physical, but His teaching through it is spiritual. 'When are you going to learn to trust me?!' God's saying. 'What more do I have to do for you to recognise that I'm in control?'

It's an interesting question, and one as pertinent today as it was six thousand years ago. Matthew 6:34 says "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

It's a verse that's reassuring, but how often do we actually live by it? God's provision of manna teaches His people two things. Firstly, it teaches them to trust God that He has tomorrow in hand. There is no point in worrying about the future, about what's in store for us over the coming days, weeks or months. Not worrying is not the same as not planning – God wants us to be sensible in how we approach our future, but worry does not come into it. Worry is *absolutely not* part of God's plan. The story of manna in the desert shows us that to take the future out of God's hands, to try and circumvent Him or outwit Him is pointless -depending purely on ourselves leads to rot and decay.

Secondly, God teaches His people to rest. They are no longer slaves in Egypt, they may be wandering in the desert, but they are His people and the sabbath will be kept. They will learn a pattern of rest, just as God rested. In Mark 2: 27 Jesus tells us that "The

Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” The sabbath is a gift from God to His people.

God’s people in Exodus are told by God not to worry about tomorrow and to rest. When you put it like that, it doesn’t sound too bad, does it?

But God’s command for His people six thousand years ago is no different today. We are not to worry about tomorrow either, we are to trust Him that He is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. However bleak the future may appear to us, we do not have the perspective of our heavenly Father, and He has not only told us that He is sovereign over our futures, but the He has plans to prosper us and not to harm us, plans to give us hope and a future.

At the moment, the world can seem a pretty bleak place. But God’s message to His people has not changed – we are not to worry about tomorrow, and we are to rest. In our current circumstances, let’s embrace that challenge.

## 24<sup>TH</sup> APRIL – DEREK KEMP

### **Psalm 61/ Exodus 18:1-12 and Colossians 3:12-ch 4:1**

It is believed that David wrote this Psalm during the rebellion of Absalom his favourite son. David was in a great dilemma, his love for his son was evident to all even though his son was leading a rebellion against him and forced him to flee for his life. In his despair he remembers that God has never failed him in the past and had always been his strong refuge. So he remembers where he had previously found peace and his prayer is to be lead to that place again, the rock “that is higher than I”, the place where he had always been able to find safety and security along with those who shared the same heritage of fearing the name of the Lord. There he could open his heart to fulfill his vow, to praise the name of the Lord every day, no matter what the circumstances.

In our reading in Exodus, Moses was joined again by his wife and his two sons when they came with Jethro, his father-in-law to the camp of Israel. While Jethro had heard reports of the way God had taken care of his people, there is nothing like a first hand account of momentous events from eye witnesses. So Moses shared what had happened. How they left Egypt on the night of the Passover, sheltering beneath the blood of the Passover lamb, taking with them large amounts of gold and jewelry from the Egyptians, their back pay after being in slavery there for 430 years! They left as slaves, but after God had miraculously parted the Red Sea, crossed over as free men, leaving their oppressors behind forever. (A little picture of what we were before being re-born into the kingdom of God.) Moses shared how food was being provided for them in the desert, manna in the morning and quails in the evening, water from the rock and victory over the Amalakites who had attacked them, (their name in Hebrew means anxiety or worry), who God helped them to overcome miraculously by keeping Moses’ arms raised high. Despite the grumbings of the people, God had provided for them everything they had needed. As a result **they gave thanks**, honouring the Lord with sacrificial offerings and it was said “ate bread in the presence of God”.

In times of crisis it is good to look back, just to see how the Lord has worked things out in our lives **and to give thanks**. I love that old hymn;

Great is your faithfulness O Lord my Father,  
there is no shadow of turning with thee.  
All I have needed your hand has provided,

Great is your faithfulness Lord unto me.

Paul writing from prison to the church at Colosse echoes this theme. No matter what is happening around us we can still experience the supernatural peace of God in our hearts by allowing the Holy Spirit to clothe us with the love of Christ, which covers all the other virtues which we would otherwise find impossible to display in times of stress particularly; compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience and forgiveness “as the Lord has forgiven you”. He encourages them to dig deep into the Word of God, remembering what Jesus taught encouraging one another with Psalms, spiritual songs and hymns with gratitude in their hearts, doing everything no matter what the task, as unto the Lord, **always giving thanks.**

We are living in unprecedented times, there has never in living memory been anything like this before. It would be easy to become depressed, to give up or to erect a wall around us, to become self obsessed, an island, but in the midst of this turmoil, Our Father offers us His supernatural peace to enable us to turn outwards in order to carry out the work he has prepared for us to do, clothed with the love of Christ, to show compassion, being kind to one another, in humility serving one another, being gentle and patient, forgiving and encouraging one another: digging deep in the Word for encouragement and intimacy with our Lord Jesus, overflowing with worship in the singing Psalms and spiritual songs (in my case) making melody in my heart!

Having set out the theory, Paul then encourages the church at Colosse to put these principles into action, giving practical advice for wives, husbands, children, fathers and rather surprisingly to slaves and their masters. Without knowing the context he may be criticized for perpetuating the use of slaves. However, when you look a little more deeply we find that this letter to the church at Colosse was one of two written at the same time from prison in Rome which were being delivered by Tychicus and Onesimus, the latter a slave who had run away from his master, something punishable by death in those days, but who had subsequently come to faith in Christ. The second letter is a very personal plea to Philemon, a letter of only one chapter recorded for us in our Bibles immediately before the book of Hebrews. He was the former slave master of Onesimus (meaning useful), and a member of the church at Colosse. However, Onesimus is returning to his former master after becoming a Christian and putting himself at his mercy with the blessing of the Apostle Paul, who uses a pun on his name, (formerly useless now useful). A way of putting into practice what he was encouraging the church at Colosse to be.

And so as we look back, we can share our testimonies of the way we have been blessed in the past, as we share our experiences of the way our Father has looked after us and our discovery of the strong tower of refuge which David mentions in the Psalm, no matter what happens; as we come alongside our non-Christian friends and neighbours, let us pray for opportunities to show them in practical ways what it means to have new life in Christ and to demonstrate what it means to be able to experience the supernatural peace of God in our lives even in these testing times. The TV and newspapers are full of negativity, just like the grumblings of the Children of Israel travelling through the wilderness 3,500 years ago. Let us look upwards just as Paul wrote to the Ephesians in the passage which George led us in yesterday and put on the full armour of God to be able to stand firm in these evil days, so now he encourages us to put on love in order to be able to put into practice the qualities which he now advocates and above all to **give thanks to God our Father in the name of the Lord Jesus** in all circumstances.

## SATURDAY 25<sup>TH</sup> APRIL – MARY THURSTON

Firstly thank you to Giles for inviting me to speak. For those who don't know me I worship at St Michael and All Angels my local parish church and also the parish church for the EDGH of which I am one of the assistant Chaplains. I am currently working from home which is quite an odd concept as we are often thought of as the hands and feet of the Lord as we visit and minister to patients and staff alike. On the Wednesday before lockdown began Fr Tristan and I consumed the reserved sacrament and turned off the tabernacle lights it was an early beginning to Good Friday. Sadly the light remains off and I look forward to the day when the lights goes back on, the tabernacles are full again of the reserved sacrament and the Lords presence.....a late Easter Day.

Although we haven't read the Gospel for today can we remember that today is St Mark's day? Mark is remembered for being the disciple that showed Jesus's humanity in contrast to St Johns account which show Jesus divinity. At the end of St Mark's gospel chapter 16 Jesus appeared to the eleven and firstly told them off for lack of faith and then commissioned them to go out in to all the world and preach the good news. It is because of this that we are here today worshiping the Lord together. Someone took hold of that message and preach the good news to us. Now I am not an evangelist. Part of the protocol of Chaplaincy is that we are not to proselytize Some volunteers come back from ward visits full of enthusiasm of the conversations about Jesus that they have had and that is there calling as it was Marks. In Acts 13 we read that the Holy Spirit set Barnabas and Saul apart for the job which they had been called to and anointed them and sent them off. Now, I could feel a bit downhearted because I don't often have those conversations and sometimes question why am I doing this job others seem far better at it than me. But the Lord has called me to do other things to be His hands and feet, I feel at home sitting by the side of someone dying holding their hand, placing their hand in His hand or gently talking to them, offering prayers for them and encouraging the relatives to reminisce over there loved one. I can offer guidance on the practical things and a shoulder to cry on when needed. Now in contrast the one thing that we are all called to as the psalmist says in Psalm 148 is to praise the Lord.....and that is something that I can do. All of creation is to praise the Lord from the highest heavens to the smallest of creatures and everything in between.

One of my passions is to sing, and tomorrow Sunday 26 th I should have been singing Hayden's creations and I think John was to be playing in the orchestra. One of the chorus's is "The heavens are telling the glory of God" it's one of those rousing, amazing pieces of works for me that makes the hairs on your neck stand on end, joining in with this choir of angels and praising and giving thanks to the Lord for his amazing creation. How can we relate this to today's crisis? To move away from the sadness for so many families just for while we have seen how the Earth has been giving time to breathe again. Dolphins and fish can be seen in the lagoon around Venice. The air pollution has reduced and in certain cities clear blue air can be seen for the first time in many years. I only have a small garden but I am seeing birds nesting and the most enormous healthy bees flying around. Nature, which is God's creation is once again praising Him. Let them praise the name of Lord for His name only is to be exalted; His splendour is above the Earth and the heavens, for His people are close to His heart.

So in this time can we be challenged to look beyond the sadness and take hold that the Lord knows what he is doing and as we continue to worship Him and give Him praise and we will once again see His glory.

Thank you.

## MONDAY 27<sup>TH</sup> APRIL – REV'D JILL PREECE

### Luke 1.1-25

#### **A Reflection by Rosalind Brown (from Reflections for Daily Prayer, copyright Church House Publishing)**

*'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard' (v.13)*

Sons were a sign of God's favour, so a childless priest had his piety called into doubt. Infertility was assumed to be the woman's fault, so barren Elizabeth was known as the one who shamed Zechariah. Her words about enduring years of disgrace are poignant. Their lives were a perpetual paradox: righteous and blameless people whom God had not blessed as any faithful Jew expected.

A priest only offered incense in the sanctuary once in his lifetime. When chosen by lot for this privilege, Zechariah got more than he bargained for. An angel appeared! Zechariah's name meant 'God remembers', and he was about to experience that God remembers prayers, because the angel assured him that his prayer had been heard. Yet Zechariah had probably not prayed that particular prayer since Elizabeth began her menopause. God seems to have a different concept of time to us.

Luke doesn't indicate why God was silent for so long; why they had to face years of shame and disgrace; why good people are disappointed. These are often our questions, so we should notice what we are told: that they had been faithful, they did not lose faith, they discovered that God does not always live by our rules, and God does hear our prayer even if there is no immediate answer. Elizabeth and Zechariah encourage us to hope tenaciously in God in the face of whatever tests our faith.

In our current situation it can seem that God has not heard our prayer or has forgotten a prayer that we have prayed for many years and have maybe given up on, perhaps for family members who have not found faith. This passage reminds us that God is faithful, that he hears and remembers our prayers, that he answers in his way and in his time. I love the reminder that 'God does not live by our rules'!

God remembers, he is faithful: so let us 'hope tenaciously in God in the face of whatever tests our faith'. Amen

## TUESDAY 28<sup>TH</sup> APRIL – REV'D GEORGE FISHER

Start with an old joke which I still love. Moses – wig – sometimes seen with Aaron and sometimes without Aaron. Why do clergy tell jokes – to get people's attention or that things can only improve after that. Whichever, in our old and new testament readings today God certainly get people's attention. In Exodus we have thunder and lightning, trumpet and smoke. It was a momentous occasion, the giving of the 10 commandments and start of a new covenant agreement between God and his people – I will be your God and you will be my people if you obey my commandments.

And God got Mary's attention in the Luke reading, with an angel appearing. This, of course, was the beginning of a new covenant agreement between God and mankind through Jesus who was to come into the world, but God needed the agreement of Mary which we read in those amazing words, 'I am the Lord's servant, let it be to me as you have said.'

How does God get our attention today? Just very occasionally people have visions or visitations - a friend of mine, who was a hardened career criminal, had a visit from God in his prison cell - but that type of visitation is the exception, not the rule. God speaks to us in all sorts of different ways. Some claim that God is speaking to mankind through the Covid 19 crisis. Certainly many are asking deep questions at this time. But that is a huge subject for full treatment elsewhere, so let's think about our God getting our attention. It's rarely the appearance of an angel, but if we are listening, He does reveal himself. It may be a gentle inner nudge about someone or something. It may be what someone else says. It may be a bible passage or a prayer, or even a dream or vision. In this time of Lockdown, many people are finding that they have more time on their hands. What an opportunity to give time to God to listen. And when we do sense him leading us, let's be discerning and prayerful about that guidance but in our response also let's be like Mary, the Lord's servants, willing to be obedient to Him.

## 29TH APRIL – RE'D GILES CARPENTER

### **Psalm 34, Exodus 24 & Luke 1:39-56**

I have to confess that occasionally I'm accused of what Rachel calls 'Man Looking'. This usually happens when, having conducted a thorough but unsuccessful search of the fridge for the mayonnaise Rachel is miraculously able to spot it within seconds hiding behind the Raspberry jam.

It doesn't appear that Luke suffered from 'man looking'. As he reminds us at the opening of his gospel, what he records is a result of genuinely thorough observation and research.

And he does this, as he tells his friend Theophilus, in order that the carefully observed and recorded accounts of eye witnesses will deepen the certainty of our faith.

So when he alone chooses to record what has come to be known as 'the visitation', the visit of Mary to her cousin Elizabeth before their babies are born, we can be sure that this is much more than an account of two cousins meeting up to compare bumps.

In truth, despite what some renaissance paintings might have us believe it's unlikely that Mary, in her first trimester, would have had much of a bump to compare.

Which is why Elizabeth doesn't so much see what is happening to her cousin with her own eyes but through we are told the work of the Holy Spirit.

This is the Spirit that Jesus says to his disciples in John 16 will guide you and reveal to you what is yet to come.

And what's even more astonishing is that we see the Holy Spirit at work in Elizabeth's unborn child.

As Mary enters, the baby jumps in the womb, reminding his mum Elizabeth, that, just as Zechariah had been told, this child, that they are to call John, would be filled with the Spirit even from birth and would be the herald preparing people for the coming of the messiah.

What Luke wants us to observe and discover, right at the very beginning of his carefully researched account, is the evidence accumulating that Jesus really is that Messiah, and his cousin, Pre natal, is already heralding his imminent arrival.

But, like the boys they are carrying, both Mary and Elizabeth also see with eyes of faith something of what is yet to come.

Both have become pivotal player in God's story of salvation. A promise that had begun to unfold through the history of Israel, as Mary records in her song, and that's now being fulfilled within them.

As with writers like Luke, one of the most important skills of an artist, is observation.

For an artist portraying what is at the same time a tender embrace between two cousins and a pivotal event in world history, that skill of observation is perhaps even more critical.

I love this work by Della Robbia. You'll have to travel to Pistoia, just outside Florence to see the original but there's a very decent copy in the V&A.

At its most basic level Della Robbia's sculpture reflects a tender moment of two cousins being reunited with one another.

But Della Robbia's work also observes how these two women are not only reunited; they are united by circumstances that must have seemed to both of them at once, totally improbable.

To accentuate this improbability Della Robbia makes his Mary younger and Elizabeth much older than the two woman had conventionally been portrayed in other artistic impressions.

We are meant to make the connection that God can do the improbable. And, like Mary and Elizabeth, as instruments in God's hand, He can do the improbable in and through us too.

Of course the improbable gift of children that united Mary and Elizabeth could at the same time appear to represent contrasting fortunes.

Elizabeth, in her pregnancy, has been given what she had always wanted, a son, and through this gift she had been freed from the awful stigma that came with the inability to conceive.

Mary, by contrast, has been given a child she didn't ask for.

She faces a future of speculation and even disgrace.

As I talk to people about this current crisis I find a similar dynamic at work. People can experience the same event but do so quite differently.

For some there's a tangible sense of appreciation. They feel the lockdown has enabled them to step off the merry go round, to remove themselves from the daily grind and rest and recharge in a way that might have seemed totally improbable just a few weeks earlier.

For others, by contrast, this period of lockdown has only served to accentuate their feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Paul writing to the church in Rome says that as Christians we ought to see things with a fresh perspective.... he says.... for we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

The point of Luke asking us to observe what God is doing in Mary and Elizabeth is this.

However our circumstance appear, however improbable they might seem, even if we find our lives turned up side down, when we look with eyes of faith, when we carefully observe, we will see the new thing that God is wanting to bring to birth in us.

A change of heart, a realignment of priorities, a new direction, a deepening of the certainty of our faith?!

Of course, new birth is not easy; God's plans often bring both joy and heartache mingled together.

But when they are God's plans, when we see his purposes at work, He will begin to put an new song in our mouths...for He has always been mindful of you and of me... He has always had a plan for our lives...

...and in the knowledge of this our spirits should rightly rejoice!

Amen

## 30<sup>TH</sup> APRIL 2020 – REV'D JILL PREECE

### **Psalm 136; Exodus 25.1-22; Luke 1.57-end**

If we haven't got the message by the end of today's psalm I wonder whether we ever will:  
**His love endures for ever.**

We said it 26 times as we joined in the psalm: His love endures for ever.

Zechariah would have known this psalm of praise. I'm sure the words would have come readily to his lips – when he was able to speak! And they form the theme of his first prophetic speech when his tongue is set free following John's birth.

His love endures for ever: this is who God has been in the past; this is what God has done.

The psalm gives us a brief summary. God created the heavens and the earth. God brought the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. God led the people through the wilderness and overcame kings to bring them into the Promised Land.

And now God has sent his messenger to prepare the way for the fulfilment of his promise: the promise of salvation.

His love endures for ever.

What a huge responsibility to lay on a new-born baby: a weight of expectation on his shoulders that he will be the prophet of the most high, preparing the way for the Lord. And it could have been quite a burden too for Elizabeth and Zechariah, to raise this child for a powerful God-given role.

Of course, I can only speculate here, but I like to think that they focused on helping the young John to love God, and to be himself, so that he could become what he was called to be under God.

And that is a good life focus for each of us to hold: to love God and be ourselves so that we become all that God has called us to be.

Unlike John, we don't always know the call we live under, but what we can do, in any circumstance is to join Zechariah and the thousands and thousands who have said or sung the psalm and declare:

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His love endures for ever. Amen.

## FRIDAY 1<sup>ST</sup> MAY – GILLI HOWARTH

"Consider yourselves fortunate when trials come your way.." or in other translations:  
"Consider it pure joy when you are facing trials..."

Well we are certainly facing trials at the moment with Covid 19...with some facing many more trials than others. But how about finding the "pure joy" bit in these trials....?

Well in both the Proverbs and James passages today we find quite a bit of **advice** on how to live out our Christian faith in difficult times:

- remember all the wisdom we've been taught
- don't waiver in our faith
- make sure our endurance carries us all the way without failing
- don't have any doubts at all when we pray

with promises of wonderful things when we succeed in enduring our trials:

- achieving perfection,
- maturing in our faith and
- reaping rewards from God.

I don't know about you but I find that these verses can be really quite daunting....They can seem rather like impossible to live up to commands.

And how does this advice marry up with our actual experience of coping through our current trials...? Some of us might have thought about using this extra time we find ourselves with to challenge ourselves to better live out our faith in our trials? How might we be getting on?

Hidden from others, but with the our normal busyness and escape routes that we would usually have access to (work, entertainment, travel, shopping, socialising...), mostly gone, we find ourselves in the spotlight.

So what about those moments behind closed doors when actually:

- our **fear** takes over;
- our **hope** wavers as we become overwhelmed by all the sadnesses in the world;
- rather than patient, **we feel resentful and frustrated** that our plans have been thwarted;
- we **snap or lose our patience** with our loved ones;
- we find we **do** have doubts when we pray;
- frankly we simply feel far from our "best Christian selves"....?

Is this our truth in testing times? We can easily become discouraged. And can we consider these difficult times as "pure joy" ...? Of course we know that sometimes difficult times **can** shape us positively and help us grow.. and maybe this is fine advice for

minor trials... and we may be managing ok... How, though, could we convey this message of finding joy in trials to people in Eastbourne who are really desperate at the moment, who are literally on their knees - struggling with life threatening illness, bereavement or serious economic difficulties..?

We have our answer in this wonderful psalm - the answer is **not advice** - it's to be found **in a relationship - in our relationship with our loving Heavenly Father:**

- although David knows God is an awesome God - omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent - **he still invites God into his heart to find out the truth in him - he seeks real intimacy with God**
- he has an **honest and constant relationship** with him
- He knows that **God sees all of him and knows everything about him - even his thoughts** - that there is nothing hidden from God and still **he invites Him in to his human messiness** - warts and all
- David **praises God** throughout both trials and joys.

David models the only way for us to be able to live out the advice we find in James and Proverbs.

He reminds us that we can't, and don't need to, tackle the trials of our life in our own strength.

God is never standing at a distance waiting to see how well we do.

We are not called to rely solely on our own discipline and will, but to invite God in - really in - to surrender our whole selves to Him, let go of our pride, dare to express our weakness, and ask for His help!

Even for those of us who have been Christians for years, perhaps we sometimes need to check, are we really inviting God in? Into the deepest messiest bits of us? Do we have an honest constant dialogue with Him or do we tend to fall into talking to Him at certain times? Are the things we are doing to try to be "a good Christian" actually meaning that we are effectively keeping Him at a distance by relying on our own strength..?

And what is our message for those feeling that they just can't go on, that the trials of their life are too great to bear...? We point them to Jesus - He who died in agony on a cross for us because he loves us so much. He is waiting to hold us, to carry us - and in the mystery of His grace, all perfect comfort, peace, love, **and yes, joy**, are to be found in Him, even in the midst of the darkest times.

In fact, in the strength and love of our Heavenly Father, the exhortations of James and Proverbs turn out not to be commands after all, but rather God's wonderful promises.

## SATURDAY 2<sup>ND</sup> MAY – RACHAEL BISHOP

Psalm 42

In the beginning of the psalm there is a wonderful picture, and one of the reasons I love the Psalms – the use of nature.

Isn't it wonderful that during this difficult time of lock-down we've been able to hear the birds.

Like a deer, so thirsty, running through the woods, looking for the slightest drop of water. It is believed that David wrote this psalm, at a time when he felt lonely, in a hard place and distant from God.

If you have ever felt like this, unsure of the next steps or even if it's possible to lift your foot to step, when life feels too much of a challenge YET you have faith and confidence that God is good, then this is a great psalm for you to revisit from time to time.

In verse 6 'O my God, my soul is cast down within me' here we see a real shift in the psalm, before this I think it was much more of an internal battle, now he's addressing God.

Verse 6 continues 'THEREFORE' – that's him making a decision, a changing point. 'Therefore I will remember you from the land of Jordon' Here he is recalling a specific memory and how a memory can bring us closer to God, a memory of where God's hand was so apparent on our lives – maybe the memory of holding your new born child, a certain time or place, or simply listening to the birds singing - a memory that can bring you into a place of peace & joy.

What memory brings you closer to God?

Bringing back memories of what God has done for you is like the rain beginning to fall and that thirsty deer starting to drink a few drops at a time.

The memories of the land of Jordon fill David's soul – in verse 7 ' Deep by deep' we're now in a place where there is more than a few drops of water, there is enough water for the deer, and in-fact for all of us. God's love is pouring all over us, his presence is flowing through us.

So like in verse 3 'while people say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"' just remember all the things he HAS done for us, all the times he's been helping and guiding us through life. It might not change our present difficulties right away but it will bring you closer into his presence in such a powerful way.

Verse 11 finishes off the psalm – Put your hope in God and I will praise him. Amen!

## 5TH MAY – REV'D GILES CARPENTER

### **Psalm 139 Exodus 32:15-34 & Luke 3: 1-14**

In the fourth year of the reign of Donald Trump—when Boris Johnson was Prime Minister, Bill Gates King of Silicon Valley, his tech brother Zuckerberg master of Facebook, and Jeff Bezos tetrarch of Amazon— during the pontificate of Francis, once more the word of God came in the wilderness.

Luke's first century equivalent of the Forbes list of the great and good may fit with his eye for historic detail and his desire to be thorough in his account but we might wonder what it has to do with John?

After all, alongside this august company, John seems nothing, the son of a small town priest. What's more, he doesn't occupy a position of power or even prominence, he's out in the wilderness; literally.

But therein lies the point. Like Moses, like the prophetic voice in Isaiah 40, John challenges God's people to see the wilderness as a place not of desolation, but a place from which our hope springs.

The question is where do we find that hope in the wilderness?

Well one answer of course is to pressurise our leaders to give it to us. Surely they can build us some symbol of hope. It might even be a very worthy symbol of hope, a contact-tracing app maybe, a flag in a certain hue of blue perhaps?

Now, please don't misunderstand me, our welfare system was forged from pure gold, it has gospel values running right through it. We thank God for it, it's to be cherished and those who work within it rightly lauded but to make it our symbol of hope and salvation?! That's simply too great a burden to place upon it and those who work within it.

What we see in our Exodus reading, is that even capable leaders of integrity like Aaron can succumb to this kind of public pressure. After all none of us want to deny others hope. But false hope, unrealistic hope is not what any of us need.

John, like Moses before him, is not a leader who easily succumbs to the pressure or bends to the will of the crowd. They come with God's words for the people.

With all the directness of an Old Testament prophet John tells us what the first steps should be. If we want to journey out of the wilderness the first step is repentance.

Repentance (Greek *metanoia*) is not, as I'm sure we know, mere regret for past misdeeds. It means a change of mind and of heart and of attitude. In a collective sense it's the realisation that we have been wandering endlessly and aimlessly in a wilderness of our own making and coming to a point where we are desperate for a complete change of direction. Stop the world as we've known it we want to get off.

The reality is that often it takes an experience of wilderness to reveal the inadequacy of the false idols we build for ourselves or pressurise our leaders to build for us.

And so preparing a way out of lockdown requires nothing short of a 180 degree turn both in our own lives and attitudes but maybe also for the world as we have come to know it.

John quotes the prophet Isaiah to describe the earth-shaking transformation that is required. And though his words can certainly be taken as mere pictures of road construction, in the context of Luke's writings they evoke richer associations: valleys filled full, mountains and hills humbled, everything crooked made straight and true.

Mary sings of the God who has looked on her humble state. She praises the One who saves by dethroning the powerful and exalting the humble, sending the rich away empty-handed and filling up the hungry.

Jesus blesses the poor and the hungry and the weeping but announces woe for the rich and well-fed (Luke 6:20–26). On the Day of Pentecost Peter warns the people, "Be saved

from this crooked generation” (Acts 2:40). ‘Crooked,’ is the same word that Isaiah uses for the things that must be straightened out.

Preparing for God’s arrival means rethinking systems and structures that we see as normal but that God condemns as oppressive and crooked.

It means letting God humble everything that is proud and self-satisfied in us, and in our leaders, and letting God heal and lift up what is broken and beaten down.

The claims that the world’s authorities make often conflict with God’s claims. Paths that seem satisfactory to us are not good enough for God. John calls us to let God’s bulldozers reshape the world’s social systems and the landscape of our own minds and hearts. God’s ways are not our ways.

But God’s ways lead to salvation. God’s glory will be revealed in Jesus, the judge who comes to save us. This is the good news that John proclaims, and it is good news not just for us, but for the world in lockdown, for all flesh will see God’s salvation. This is God’s promise, and our hope. Bring on the bulldozers. Let’s prepare the way. Amen