

Circuit Reflection August 16th 2020

Streams of Living Water!

Is a life of contentment, lived without fear possible? I'm sure if we stop to think about it, that is one of our deepest longings. Certainly, during this time of Covid 19 and social restrictions, it seems as though anxiety levels have gone through the roof for most folk. We continue to be aware of the threat of illness, and for some, death. We are seeing unemployment rates beginning to increase. Many of us are not sure quite what we can do and what we are supposed to not do! And we have no idea what will happen if and when schools return in September.



Amid all that, as well as the usual trials and tribulations of life, what might God have to say to us? Can God bring peace into our lives? We speak of it often enough in church, but can we experience it on a daily basis? I believe we can, even though there may be times when we do not!

So, I want to start this reflection with one of the most familiar passages of Scripture, which speaks to these questions. Psalm 23. As we share these words, invite God to be present with you now, to speak into your concerns and anxieties to bring you reassurance and peace of mind and heart. They will be followed by some words from John's Gospel and some prayers.

Reading: Psalm 23: 1 – 6

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Reading: John 20: 19 – 22

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Prayers:

Living God, when we hear about the gift of the Holy Spirit our thoughts immediately turn to the Day of Pentecost – that amazing day when you turned the life of the Apostles, and the life of this world, upside down. Yet wonderful as that day was, it is only a small part of the story of your interaction

with your people. Over time, many people have received your Spirit in dramatic and remarkable ways, and yet, for many more your Spirit has come in different, less obvious ways. While the gifts of some have caught the eye, those of others have often passed almost unnoticed. Yet each have been different expressions of the same Spirit being present in the lives of your people. Help us to recognise that you do not just work in one way but in many, that you do not just work in some people but in all people, that the gifts you give to us and the ways you work in us are sovereign to your will, that they are given for our good and for the building of your kingdom...

(StF 395) *Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me*
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me
Break me, melt me, mould me, fill me,
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.

Loving God, when we read the stories of Scripture, when we hear others tell of the remarkable things you have done in their lives, when we meet Christians who somehow seem to sparkle, it is hard for us not to feel daunted. Maybe we do not think we are gifted in much. Perhaps we are people who never seem to make the headlines. We might even think that we do not have much of a story to tell. Yet you work to gently remind us that the feet are just as valued in your body as the hands, and the ears are equally important as the eyes. Our modesty and weakness are just as useful or helpful to you as those parts we might want to brag about – maybe even more so! Help us to remember that through the power of your Spirit we can all make a great contribution to the life of your Kingdom.

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me...

Loving God, we thank you for your call that comes to us – your call to discipleship, to service, to be your people, sharing in partnership with you and with one another. We thank you that you call us as we are, with all our faults, weaknesses, and doubts, accepting us not through our own merit, but through your grace, your love, and your mercy. And we thank you for the assurance we can know that through your Holy Spirit, Jesus is living within us, present with us all day, every day, wherever we are, whatever we face. We thank you Jesus, that you are working in our hearts and minds and souls to transform us into your likeness and draw us ever closer to you.

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me...

Gracious God, we thank you for those extraordinary moments when we experience your presence in more vivid ways, those moments which change our lives, which give us new perspective and greater understanding, which warm our hearts and give us such joy and fulfilment. We thank you especially for the great gift of your Spirit – an experience which transformed the lives of the Apostles, which has changed the lives of countless people across the centuries, and which has the power to reshape our lives here and now. Open our hearts, our minds, and our souls to your living presence so that we shall know your life-changing power for ourselves. As we continue in our worship today, fill us more with the love and grace of your Spirit we pray.*

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me...

Reading: John 7: 37 – 38

On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and cried out, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'"

Reflection: *Streams of living water*

Last week, my family and I had the opportunity to get away for a week. Earlier in the year we had booked a fortnight's holiday in France but that got cancelled back in May. So what to do? Well, I have a special place I like to go to escape from it all. *'Home is where the heart is,'* so it is said, and my heart is definitely in this place. It holds many special memories for me, not least because Lyndsey and I had our wedding reception there 24 years ago this week. So when we had the chance to book a last minute break, to replace our planned holiday, we were fortunate enough to find a lovely cottage in my 'home' area, on the edge of Ilam Country Park, near Dovedale, on the border of Derbyshire and Staffordshire.

It is a beautiful, peaceful place. The scenery is dominated by Thorpe Cloud – a hill, not too high, but notable for its flat top, and the steep V-shaped valley down to the River Dove, and its equally notable steppingstones. It is in the middle of beautiful countryside and it immediately conjures up in my mind those fabulous words from Psalm 23 about green pastures, still waters, shepherds and sheep, and even dark, shadowy valleys.

So today, I want to just share with you a few, brief observations inspired by my holiday in such an idyllic, countryside setting, observations which I think link well with our three short Bible readings.

First, I have observed in myself, and in many others in our society, the desperate need for some sort of holiday, even just a change of scenery. It is now nigh-on impossible to find any holiday cottage available before the end of August in this country because there are so many people needing a break but who have little confidence in going abroad. If you own one, and it is free, let me know as I still have a fortnight's holiday to take!

I guess I am not the only person whose psyche works in such a way that I need something to look forward to. Whilst I enjoy my calling to ministry – at least most of it – I find I need to have my next break planned almost as soon as I have finished my last one. Maybe, just maybe, that is because I, and so many other people in our society, work on the basis of needing to be productive, of always giving out to others. I find that I need to know there is some 'me time' somewhere on the horizon when I know I will have the opportunity to be refreshed, physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually. The desire for taking a holiday – recognizing the need to do something different, somewhere different, to see a different view, climb a different hill, walk alongside a different river, escape the routine and mundane, put our fears to one side, find some peace, recalibrate our souls, regain our energy is, I think, part of who we are. *'Variety is the spice of life,'* is another of our cultural proverbs. Perhaps it is that variety in daily life that is what has been missing for many of us for so long now?

The very word 'holiday,' comes from the idea of 'Holy Days', days which are set apart simply to be with God and rejoice in God's presence. But actually, the whole thrust of Scripture is that while God has ordained a sabbath day each week for us to be refreshed, we should not live our lives in such a way and at such a pace that we are reliant upon an occasional holiday to restore our batteries. The picture that David gives us in our Psalm is one of daily nurturing and nourishment provided to us by our divine Shepherd. And the two readings from John's Gospel speak of the source of renewal that is constantly available to us through the gift and ministry of the Holy Spirit, if only we will take time to make ourselves available to God.

I wonder, how often do you take time to make yourself available to God?

That is why I think we have seen the stories of overcrowded beaches and jammed roads leading to tourist areas. We long for something different to the routine, we need a sense of beauty, peace, relaxation, fun to actually be the people God has designed us to be. Sadly for my family and I, it seemed like half the country was in Dovedale last weekend. It is usually such a peaceful place but it was busier than I have ever seen it, partly because of the magnificent weather and partly because it coincided with the Muslim celebration of Eid al Adha, or the Festival of the Sacrifice – a time when our Muslim friends gather with family for food and fun – albeit socially distanced this year – to remember their account of God testing the Prophet Abraham's faith by asking him to sacrifice his son Ishmael. And how when God saw Abraham's faith and obedience, he provided a lamb for the sacrifice instead of Ishmael.

So it is a celebration of faith and this year it seems many members of the Muslim communities of the East Midlands decided to make the most of the weather and the beauty of the countryside and descend upon Dovedale. As we walked the footpath and crossed the steppingstones our noses were overwhelmed with the amazing smells of countless types of curries and other spices. It only added to my appreciation of the good things that God has filled this world with! It only exaggerated the sense of hunger and thirst with which we returned to our cottage.

And speaking of thirst, the second of my observations links in with our passage from John 7 where Jesus speaks about how those who thirst, should turn to him and be filled with streams, or rivers of living water.

The cottage we stayed in was called River Lodge. It is right on the bank of the Manifold River that runs down through Ilam Park and then eventually joins the River Dove. However, it is an unusual river because, for much of the year, stretches of it, like the one by River Lodge, run underground rather than over ground. It is due to the rafts of carboniferous limestone which form much of the riverbed. So outside our cottage there was just a small pool of water, yet a couple of hundred metres further downstream, the water literally bubbles up to form a current. A little further still and it disappears again and about a mile from the cottage it resurfaces to form a constant over ground flow all year round.

Streams of living water welling up from within, Jesus said. David talked of how his cup overflowed! Both give us images of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Sometimes, the Spirit works in quiet, gentle ways, transforming our hearts and our characters from within. Other times the Spirit bursts out in amazing ways that catch everyone's attention, just like the water bubbling up from underground. But the point is, the Spirit, like the water in the river, is a constant presence. Just because you cannot always see the effects it does not mean it is not present. Elsewhere Jesus talked of the Spirit being like the wind blowing in the trees, you can see that something is going on but you cannot easily tell where it is coming from.

The Spirit has always been present with and in God's church, but we have not always been aware of that. I believe that God is using this season to enable the Spirit to burst out from inside our church walls, and hopefully, to take us with Her on the mission of bringing living waters to our communities in new ways.

I wonder, how might you allow the Spirit of God that is within you to become more visible to the world around you?

My third and final observation for now: you cannot visit Ilam or Dovedale without encountering sheep, often at close quarters. The green pastures and slow-flowing rivers provide ample safe, good grazing. We could not escape the gentle bleats of lambs to ewe's and vice-versa that so speak of contentment and ease and often playfulness. They would even find their way through the broken-

down fences along the river to wander in the dry riverbed. Occasionally the farmer would appear, and the sheep, would all, in sequence, trot across the field to where they could get additional food. It seemed to me that these sheep had a sense of well-being, of contentment, of lacking for nothing, of knowing they were safe because they were never too far from where the farmer was.

It was Psalm 23 being acted out before my eyes. You see, a life of contentment, lived without fear or anxiety is possible. Indeed, it is what we are called to. But it is only possible when you know just who your shepherd is and just what the Shepherd's intentions towards you are – that they are to guide you, to provide all that you need – need, not want! And to protect you by being your constant companion through all the changing scenes of life. To find you when you are lost, to carry you when you are wounded or tired, to feed you when you are hungry, to give you living water to drink when you are thirsty, to bring you peace when you are fearful.

In John chapter 10 when Jesus talks about himself as being the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep – our own sacrificial lamb – he tells us the purpose of it all – that we may have life, life in all its fullness – the great gift of God's Holy Spirit dwelling within us, if we will just come to our Shepherd and drink. I wonder, how thirsty are you? Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Holy Spirit, coming as wind and fire, free and irrepressible, we pray today for all who long for change and for all who fear it.

We think of the poor and the hungry, the homeless and the refugee, the sick and the unemployed, the downtrodden and the oppressed – these, and so many others, who yearn for a new beginning, an opportunity to start afresh.

May their prayers be answered, and their dreams realised.

*Spirit of the Living God,
Fall afresh on us.*

We pray for those who see change as a threat – a sweeping-away of everything that is tried and trusted, and the imposition of unknown challenges and an uncertain future.

We pray especially for those who are bereaved or bereft for whom change is the last thing they wanted.

May they rest secure in the knowledge that, whatever else may change, your love will remain constant.

*Spirit of the Living God,
Fall afresh on us.*

Holy Spirit, coming gently as a dove, we pray for all who long for peace, and all who have lost sight of what peace really means.

We think of those in homes racked by tensions, families split by petty disputes, communities scarred by prejudice and intolerance, and countries torn apart by war, tragedy, or political discontent.

We pray especially for the people of Lebanon and Belarus and for every country trying to limit the impact of Coronavirus, many without the resources at our disposal.

May dialogue triumph over confrontation and unity replace division. May wisdom's voice be heard, and justice and mercy unseat oppression and greed.

*Spirit of the Living God,
Fall afresh on us.*

We pray for those who fill their lives with noise or activity, afraid of facing themselves in a time of quiet reflection, attempting somehow to mask their sense of emptiness; and we pray, too, for those who seek fulfilment in that which can never finally satisfy – wealth, possessions, power, success.

May they discover the secret of true contentment, the peace that passes understanding which only you can give.

*Spirit of the Living God,
Fall afresh on us.*

Holy Spirit, you changed the lives of the Apostles and of countless people through history, just as you are changing our lives in turn, each renewed through your sovereign power.

Come now and change our world in all its need, so that it may enjoy hope and peace, healing, and harmony, and so that all may come to know Jesus Christ as Lord.*

*Spirit of the Living God,
Fall afresh on us.*

The Lord's Prayer

SoF 334 - *Let your living water, flow over my soul*

Let your living water flow over my soul.
Let your Holy Spirit come and take control
Of every situation that has troubled my mind.
All my cares and burdens on to you I roll.

*Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.
Father, Father, Father.
Spirit, Spirit, Spirit.*

Come now, Holy Spirit, and take control.
Hold me in your loving arms and make me whole.
Wipe away all doubt and fear and take my pride,
Draw me to your love and keep me by your side.

Give your life to Jesus, let him fill your soul.
Let him take you in his arms and make you whole.
As you give your life to him he'll set you free.
You will live and reign with him eternally.

The Blessing

God of power, may the boldness of your Spirit transform us, may the gentleness of your Spirit lead us, and may the gifts of your Spirit equip us to serve and worship you.

And the blessing of God, Spirit, Son and Father, remain with you always. Amen.*

**Prayers adapted from Fawcett N, 'No Ordinary Man' Kevin Mayhew Ltd, 1997, P404 – 408*

**Prayers adapted from Fawcett N, 'A Common Worship Year A Miscellany,' Kevin Mayhew Ltd, 2004, P. 411 – 412.*

**The Methodist Worship Book, Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, 1999, P. 183 – 184*

'Spirit of the living God,' Daniel Iverson.

'Let your living water,' John Watson, Ampelos Music, 1986.