

Reflections During Lent Week 2

Wednesday February 24 Psalm 23 – comfortable words

1 The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.

2 He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters,

3 he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

4 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.

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

6 Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

In the first week of Lent we were thinking about LAMENT. In this second week, let's move on to another theme: FEAR. There are days during this pandemic when the news seems worse than usual. It might be a day when the number of people who died is particularly shocking; then it's news of another even more contagious form of the virus; then it's TV pictures showing exhausted staff in an overstretched intensive care unit. On days like that the situation seems particularly threatening; feeling fearful is hardly surprising. Your imagination takes over, and you start picturing all sorts of frightful futures. "Fear is sharp-sighted, and can see things underground, and much more in the skies" – that's a writer called Miguel de Cervantes.

People often think the bible is full of 'don'ts', all designed to stop you from having a good time. Well, yes, there *are* some 'don'ts', but not as many as you might think. But there's one command that crops up far more often than all the others – dozens of times, in fact. It's this one: 'don't be afraid'. Easy enough to say, far more easily said than done. But when you read the bible and you come across a "don't be afraid" there will always be a reason why you don't need to be afraid.

One hundred thousand people have died of Covid in the United Kingdom this past year, How many times, I wonder, has the 23rd Psalm been recited in the one hundred thousand funerals that followed? And in the middle of it, these words:

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil ..."

There it is again: 'don't be afraid'. But listen out for what follows: "... I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me." What makes the difference is the Lord's presence. In the opening verses of Psalm 23, he's a shepherd, going in front of you; then he's a companion, walking alongside. And he's armed with a rod and a staff. The rod was a kind of cudgel, worn at the belt, instantly available if needed. The Lord walks with His people *through* the valley of the shadow of death, as an armed guard. Then think back to last year's Christmas carol services, and the story of the angel visiting Joseph to prepare him for the birth of the baby Jesus. "And they will call him Immanuel", the angel said, a name that means 'God with us'. Or, as Captain Sir Tom said: "You'll never walk alone."

So whenever the day seems particularly dark and threatening, one thing you can do is to read the 23rd Psalm. You could print it out, or at least that bit about the valley of the shadow of

Reflections During Lent Week 2

death. Then frame it and put it on a wall somewhere; just make sure it's somewhere you can't fail to see it.

Thursday February 25 Mark 4:35-41 – have you no faith?

35 That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side."

36 Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him.

37 A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped.

38 Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?"

39 He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.

40 He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"

41 They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"

I've been on three scary boat journeys in my time. In 1966 it was days on end in a stormy North Atlantic in a 100-ton Norwegian seal-hunting boat; in 1981 it was a 15-hour crossing of the Irish Sea on a car ferry in a Force 11 (that's Violent Storm Force on the Beaufort wind scale); in 2016 it was a mercifully short but violent ride in a tiny ferry boat from the Lanzarote port of Orzola to the offshore island of La Graciosa. Some people around me were screaming and I felt like joining them! So in Mark's Gospel chapter 4 I understand a little of how the fishermen-disciples of Jesus were feeling, in a storm-tossed fishing boat far smaller than that.

Living through this pandemic feels a bit like being in a storm; but this one doesn't blow itself out after a few hours or even days. This storm has been buffeting us for nearly a year now, and we aren't through it yet. I hope you found some comfort in the 23rd Psalm that we looked at yesterday, where the divine companion in the valley of the shadow of death was wide awake and armed. The trouble here is that Jesus is not only unarmed, but he's asleep! Listen to the fear in their voices: "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?"

Then he gets up, tells the storm to go – and it does. End of story? Well, no. You might expect Jesus to say, "There, there, chaps, everything's OK now. I'm going back to sleep!" Instead, he dresses them down: "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" And the disciples realize they've seen something awesome: "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"

Go back to the Old Testament and you find that stilling storms is something only God could do. And now they've seen Jesus do it. Awesome indeed!

It's one thing to sit and read about this in the comfort of your armchair. It's another thing to see how true it is when you're in the middle of a storm like this one. Sometimes people think that if you're afraid it means you're a coward. Not so. Fear is something everyone suffers from, and

Reflections During Lent Week 2

it's a matter of learning to face it. So when Jesus says to his disciples "Why are you so afraid?", we need to let Him ask us the same question, as we're opened up to the fact that faith in Him is *not* going to mean peace and quiet all our days. Christian discipleship is always going to mean more than that.

Reflections During Lent Week 2

Friday February 26

1 Kings 19:1-18 – food for the journey

1 Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword.

2 So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, “May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them.”

3 Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there,

4 while he himself went a day’s journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. “I have had enough, LORD,” he said. “Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.”

5 Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, “Get up and eat.”

6 He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again.

7 The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, “Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.”

8 So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God.

9 There he went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the LORD came to him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

10 He replied, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

11 The LORD said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake.

12 After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.

13 When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

14 He replied, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

15 The LORD said to him, “Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram.

16 Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet.

17 Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu.

18 Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him.”

Reflections During Lent Week 2

Last December we celebrated our golden wedding anniversary. We had great plans for it. We were looking forward to being with our family in Yorkshire, going out for a celebration meal together in a nice restaurant somewhere: there's a rather good one near the Humber Bridge that we've been to several times.

Alas, the plans came to nothing. We wracked our brains: how *are* we going to celebrate our golden wedding anniversary, just the two of us in splendid isolation? We hunted on line and found a local restaurant doing takeaways; we phoned up to order the food, collected it, drove it home, made sure the oven got the food really hot again, dished it out onto our plates, sat down together at the dining room table and, I'm happy to say, enjoyed it all. Special occasions often involve good food and good company; it might be a birthday, an anniversary, Christmas, or a summer holiday.

And sometimes you need some good food to revive you. That's what happened with Elijah. The First Book of Kings 19 in the Old Testament tells the story of him fleeing for his life from the pagan queen Jezebel. Crossing swords with her has been too much for him; he's exhausted, he's fearful, he's all alone and he thinks that nothing he's done for his God has achieved anything. "I have had enough, LORD," he says. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors."

But at least he can still be honest with God about how he's feeling: no pretence, no forced cheerfulness. What does God do: give him a good telling off? No. Elijah falls asleep in the desert where he has fled, and when he wakes up, there's food for him to eat. Where did it come from? We aren't told and we'll not try guessing. He eats, more sleep, then more food waiting for him. "Get up and eat," God says, "for the journey is too much for you." Elijah has to go on a long journey to meet with God and get his instructions about taking up his ministry again.

It was food that made all the difference for Elijah when things were at their worst. So if today – or some other day – is the day when it all gets too much for you, do what he did and talk to God about it. But even if, in the words of a former Downing Street spin doctor, you don't 'do God', don't forget the food. It would be so easy to say to yourself that you really can't be bothered to fix yourself anything. But that's just the day when it's important to get something you really enjoy, sit down and get it inside you. This could be the first step on your road back.

Reflections During Lent Week 2

Saturday February 27 Psalm 91 – in the shadow of the Almighty

1 He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.

2 I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."

3 Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence.

4 He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.

5 You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day,

6 nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday.

7 A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.

8 You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked.

9 If you make the Most High your dwelling— even the LORD, who is my refuge—

10 then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent.

11 For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways;

12 they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.

13 You will tread upon the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent.

14 "Because he loves me," says the LORD, "I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name.

15 He will call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him.

16 With long life will I satisfy him and show him my salvation."

Reflections During Lent Week 2

In 2003 we had a holiday in the south of France. While we were there we learned a new French word: *canicule*. It means 'heat wave'. The *canicule* struck large parts of Europe that summer; where we were staying the temperature every day for nearly a fortnight was 100 degrees, and the humidity was sky high. It was difficult to sleep at night, and during the day we had to think carefully about what to do: where can we go where there's some shade and the temperature might be a little lower? The local supermarket had air conditioning, but we couldn't stay in there all day! We heard about a local lake, Lac Salagou, and when we got there for the first time I found that I could have a swim, and there was plenty of shade to relax, read, and enjoy the scenery. We went there often, and to a local beach some 20 miles away, where there was a slight onshore breeze and we could sit in the shade underneath a parasol.

This makes a personal connection for me with one of my favourite psalms. It's Psalm 91 and it talks about "the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday." What an apt description of Covid-19. But I'm also struck by how the psalm begins by talking about the shade that protects: "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. "

That all sounds simple, but what about all the people – thousands upon thousands of them – who have died of this awful disease? Surely some of them were Christians who knew the words of this psalm? Well yes, I'm sure that's right. Does it mean they were wrong to put their trust in a God who is supposed to protect us? But there are other psalms that are very realistic about the tragedies that can befall God's people as much as anyone else. And yet they could still sing Psalm 91.

Two pointers: the first is the way the psalms – and so much else in the bible that points us on towards Easter! – trust that the 'shadow of the Almighty' is not just about this life. It's about all that lies beyond as well. Psalm 23, for example, talks about dwelling in the house of the Lord *forever*. The second pointer is that there are countless testimonies of Christian people who've been through awful things and are still happy to talk about how God walked with them and sustained them through it all; I recall former parishioners who have told me such stories. Sitting in the shade of a tree on the shore of Lac Salagou didn't make the heat wave go away. But I do remember that it made the *canicule* much more bearable.

Reflections During Lent Week 2

Monday March 1 Psalm 37 – how not to fret

- 1 Do not fret because of evil men or be envious of those who do wrong;
- 2 for like the grass they will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away.
- 3 Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.
- 4 Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart.
- 5 Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this:
- 6 He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun.
- 7 Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; do not fret when men succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes.
- 8 Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil.
- 9 For evil men will be cut off, but those who hope in the LORD will inherit the land.
- 10 A little while, and the wicked will be no more; though you look for them, they will not be found.
- 11 But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace.

Today we continue with the theme of FEAR as we journey through Lent 2021. Another psalm, this time Psalm 37, which starts with the words: 'Do not fret'. You could also translate the ancient Hebrew on which our English-language bibles are based with the phrase 'don't get steamed up'. And the psalm keeps saying it – 'don't get steamed up'.

Let's face it, there's plenty to 'get steamed up' about during a pandemic, even when there's good news beginning to seep through, as vaccines developed in record time are seen to work, and people are getting their first jabs in large numbers.

But it's easy to say 'don't get steamed up': much more difficult to do it – or, not do it, if you see what I mean. Some people go for techniques like yoga to help them; here in the rest of Psalm 37, you'll find that we're presented with a strategy, a 3-point plan: LOOK UP, LOOK AHEAD and BE CONSTRUCTIVE.

- LOOK UP – I'll come back to this tomorrow. In the meantime, let's take a quick look at the other two points in the Psalm 37 strategy:
- LOOK AHEAD – It was the late Captain Sir Tom Moore who said many months ago, "The sun will shine again; the clouds will go away." He was well aware that there'd be bad times to go through first, but he did us all a service by looking further ahead, You might find yourself thinking about the vaccination you're still waiting for, the holiday you would love to go on, gathering again with other worshippers in the church you haven't seen the inside of for months, or having a big hug with the family and friends you've not been with for ages. We haven't seen our family, including our little granddaughter, for well over a year now.
- BE CONSTRUCTIVE – here Psalm 37 tells us what to do and what *not* to do to be constructive:

Reflections During Lent Week 2

First, don't get angry – that does more harm than good and it won't make you feel any better. Perhaps someone has let you down; perhaps you think the politicians made wrong decisions at the wrong times. But don't be angry with them – it's a waste of time.

Second, 'do good'. One of the things that make my heart glad when I watch the TV news is when it features someone, some organisation, some community, some neighbourhood, where they've found a new way of supporting each other or reaching out to people who are finding the going especially tough. Could more of us be involved in this sort of thing? And if you can't get out because of age or medical issues, you can still pray that others will do these things that you wish you could be doing, and you can rejoice that others already are.

Reflections During Lent Week 2

Tuesday March 2

Luke 21:9-28 – look UP

9 When you hear of wars and revolutions, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away.”

10 Then he said to them: “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.

11 There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven.

12 “But before all this, they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name.

13 This will result in your being witnesses to them.

14 But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves.

15 For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict.

16 You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death.

17 All men will hate you because of me.

18 But not a hair of your head will perish.

19 By standing firm you will gain life.

20 “When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near.

21 Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city.

22 For this is the time of punishment in fulfillment of all that has been written.

23 How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people.

24 They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

25 “There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea.

26 Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken.

27 At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.

28 When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Reflections During Lent Week 2

The weather in these first few weeks of 2021 has been as cold and wet as usual for this time of year. At least we haven't seen much snow. But if it does snow, I'll be able to sit at my study window and watch the cars going up and down the hill, perhaps a little more slowly than they sometimes do, although the speed bumps that were applied to our road in 2013 have done little to slow some people down. But what about the cyclists, I wonder? How would they cope with the white stuff?

I remember cycling to work when I was younger and I was teaching in one of the universities in Dublin. There were occasional winters when it snowed a bit, but there was one winter when a short period of really heavy snow brought the city to a standstill for days. The university was closed for a whole week, although some staff succeeded in struggling in. In those days I didn't drive a car; I cycled the 2 miles to work in the morning, and the 2 miles home again in the evening. It really was cold that week, so the snow didn't melt for several days. Instead, cars and bikes created deep ruts in the snow, and the ruts froze hard. That made it difficult to cycle with any confidence; like others on their bikes, I tried to avoid skidding and falling off by looking down as I went, careful to make sure I stayed in the same rut all the time. My progress was slow and wobbly! Slow and wobbly, that is, until I discovered there was a better way. Instead of looking *down*, and concentrating on my chosen rut, I looked *up* and *ahead*. Strange as it may seem, I made faster progress, and I didn't fall off.

Yesterday we looked at Psalm 37 with its advice on how not to 'get steamed up' at times like this: LOOK AHEAD, BE CONSTRUCTIVE, which we've already thought about, and LOOK UP – which is what we're thinking about now. And today's reading from Luke's Gospel chapter 21, where Jesus warns his disciples that there would be times of great stress throughout history, he says, "When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Note the command 'lift up your heads': yes, a bit like cycling in the snow!

When we say the Lord's Prayer, asking God 'Your kingdom come', we're doing the same thing – we're looking up, because the one who taught us to say those words, and to 'look up' has died and been raised. Because of that, we can know that the kingdom really is on its way.

Reflections During Lent Week 2