



## But God



At times of uncertainty like this it is not uncommon to feel all at sea. With rules, advice and even facts changing on what seems like a daily basis - who or what do we trust?

As you'll read, shortly after lockdown began Heather Williams was particularly struck by two words in a reading from Acts. Those in power were following their own plans, **but God** had other ideas. The following reflections are inspired by those two words.

When all about is change; when uncertainty and fear surround; when hope fades and all seems lost; when all seem against us we have hope because our Father is preparing for us a future. *For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.*

**Jeremiah 29:11**

The way ahead may not be easy, **but God...**



### notes for reflection and prayer

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**+ St. Matthew's +**

*Parish of Edgeley and Cheadle Heath*

<sup>14</sup> But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them:  
<sup>22</sup> *'You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know -*  
<sup>23</sup> *this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law.*  
<sup>24</sup> **But God** raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.

Acts 2 tells us about the Holy Spirit coming to the disciples at Pentecost, giving them the courage to speak about who Jesus was and had said and done, to a huge crowd gathered from all over the known world for the Passover festival in Jerusalem. Many of the crowd would have heard Jesus speak, called for his death and seen him crucified. Peter is preaching, and reminds the crowd that *"Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs"* and that *"you...put him to death by nailing him to the cross."*

Ouch. The guilt! But then - **"But God raised him from the dead"**. It wasn't over. And because it wasn't over, there was hope for them, not just the three thousand that came to faith that day, but everyone who has put their trust in Jesus ever since.

I remember recording these verses for the Sunday service just after lockdown. It felt like the bottom had dropped out of my world, everything had changed, and I felt stuck. Then these two words jumped out: **"But God..."**

Things may look hopeless, lifeless, and helpless. But the same God who raised Jesus from the dead can turn things around for us too. This is not the end. It might not feel like

much of a beginning either, but it is a pause, not a full-stop. God is not done with us yet.

<sup>26</sup> My flesh and my heart may fail, **but God** is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever.

In my mind I can see a child's seesaw. No matter how hard I try, my side will not lift off the ground. Do you remember that feeling, when you were young and you sat on one end of the seesaw and it crashed to the ground while the other end soared into the air?

I imagine that I bring all my baggage with me to my end of the seesaw - my frailties, my prejudices, my rushing after the latest fashion, my envy of the rich and famous, my ageing body, my feebleness, my meanness, my giving up, my tiredness, things I am not proud of.

I stay sunk on the ground until I realise that the Lord is there on the other end. He has everything I need so I can cast off all those things I do not need, and my seesaw can rise and fall again and I have a new freedom.

<sup>1</sup> The LORD said to Samuel, *'How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.'*

<sup>4</sup> Samuel did what the LORD commanded, and came to Bethlehem.

<sup>5</sup> ...And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

<sup>6</sup> When they came, he looked on Eliab

and thought, *'Surely the LORD's anointed is now before the LORD.'*

<sup>7</sup> But the LORD said to Samuel, *'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.'*

<sup>10</sup> Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, *'The LORD has not chosen any of these.'*

<sup>11</sup> Samuel said to Jesse, *'Are all your sons here?'*

And he said, *'There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.'*

And Samuel said to Jesse, *'Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.'*

<sup>12</sup> He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The LORD said, *'Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.'*

I am drawn to the story of King David. Not just because we share a name. I relate to him because when I read his story, which I have done over these last few weeks, I see how flawed he is.

He is not, in many ways, a role model. For modern readers much of his behaviour and many of his actions should rightly be deplored. He would have been long deposed if he'd lived in the twenty-first century with our probing news media and modern norms.

And yet God calls him *'a man after my own heart.'* I wonder why?

Whilst with our modern understanding it might be hard to see, I think it was because his desire was to live in God's will.

Stephen Covey in 'The Speed of Trust' wrote,

*'We judge ourselves by our intentions and others by their behaviour.'* That is, I think, an interesting thought with which to play around.

When we do things wrong, we know what intentions lay behind our actions. When we do things wrong, the only thing that others have to judge us by is what we did.

When people do things that hurt or offend us, should we assume that they had malicious intentions? Or should we give them the benefit of the doubt and treat them as we would hope they would treat us if the circumstances were reversed?

Only God fully knows a person's heart. As we move into this next phase, let be generous.



Week 2: Mon **2 Corinthians 7** Heather A

<sup>5</sup> For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted in every way - disputes without and fears within.

<sup>6</sup> **But God**, who consoles the downcast, consoled us by the arrival of Titus,

<sup>7</sup> and not only by his coming, but also by the consolation with which he was consoled about you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more.

The whole book of 2 Corinthians could be called *"The God of all consolation"*. Paul has written to the Corinthians before and has had to raise difficult matters with them. He doesn't know how the Corinthians will have responded. Paul has been in Ephesus (in modern Turkey) where he has suffered for his faith. Although that bad experience has passed, and Paul has been able to travel northwards into Macedonia, he and his companions are still pressed by difficulties.

Paul is badly down in his spirits.

Paul is met by Titus, who travels up from Corinth in Greece to meet Paul with news from the church. Both Titus himself and the good news he brings are a great comfort to Paul from *“God, who consoles the downcast”*. The good news is the response of repentance and love that the church in Corinth is making in response to Paul’s writing.

We too have faced a major crisis, but we are not out of the woods yet. Alongside the physical and practical problems posed by the ongoing pandemic, we are aware that there will be ongoing mental effects from this experience and for some a significant trauma. We need the God of all consolation as we travel forward into the coming weeks. A superficial soothing message won’t get us very far. The deep and challenging consolation of God is what we need.



Week 2:Wed

## Psalm 49

Mike

- <sup>12</sup> Mortals cannot abide in their pomp;  
they are like the animals that perish
- <sup>13</sup> Such is the fate of the foolhardy, the end of  
those who are pleased with their lot.
- <sup>14</sup> Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol;  
Death shall be their shepherd;  
straight to the grave they descend,  
and their form shall waste away;  
Sheol shall be their home.
- <sup>15</sup> **But God** will ransom my soul from the  
power of Sheol, for he will receive me.
- <sup>16</sup> Do not be afraid when some become rich,  
when the wealth of their houses increases.
- <sup>17</sup> For when they die  
they will carry nothing away;  
their wealth will not go down after them.
- <sup>18</sup> Though in their lifetime  
they count themselves happy - for you  
are praised when you do well for yourself -
- <sup>19</sup> they will go to the company of their  
ancestors, who will never again see the light.
- <sup>20</sup> Mortals cannot abide in their pomp;  
they are like the animals that perish.

This psalm might suit you perfectly if you are feeling in a stoic, philosophical mood. The psalmist tells us that all life comes to nothing in the end. We shouldn’t be distressed if some people are unjustly rich and others are unjustly poor; they will all die. Some people are nasty, some are arrogant, some seem to get away with everything, but they all come to the same end. He tells us this in a voice of calm acceptance. It matches what we all know: however vigorous and active we might be throughout our life we will eventually fizzle out.

Is the psalm entirely gloomy? Almost, but not quite, because there is one glimpse of light, one candle in the gloom. In verse 15 the psalmist says, *‘But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me.’* There is not much idea of an afterlife in the Old Testament, just a few glimpses, and this must surely count as one of them. Almost certainly he didn’t have any clear idea of how his hope would be fulfilled; he just had the conviction that God would keep him, beyond anything he properly understood. So for us: we don’t know much with any certainty, but often our convictions are more important than our knowledge.



Week 2:Fri

## Isaiah 40

Heather A

- <sup>28</sup> Have you not known? Have you not heard?  
The Lord is the everlasting God,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth.  
He does not faint or grow weary;  
his understanding is unsearchable.
- <sup>29</sup> He gives power to the faint,  
and strengthens the powerless.
- <sup>30</sup> Even youths will faint and be weary,  
and the young will fall exhausted;

<sup>31</sup> but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

I read something recently that said, *“If you hate everyone, you’re probably hungry. If you think everyone hates you, you’re probably tired.”*

We all get tired, and fed up and grouchy. Some more than others, admittedly, but it’s a pretty universal experience. I’m probably at the grouchier end of the spectrum.

These words from Isaiah, addressed to the people of God in exile, say that all people get tired **but God** does not. Moreover this never ending energy of God is available to those who wait for him, to those who are willing to trust him.

The wicked person, however strong, will eventually lose their power, but as the song says *“Those who put their hope in the Lord, will renew their strength.”*

What image shall we use for this energy from God? I’d suggest a humming power station, but that would be far too industrial for Isaiah’s nature filled poetry. Perhaps the wind, or better still the tides, endlessly churning away. Rest in God, or go for a walk and breathe in the air and take strength from God. He never gets tired.

Week 3:Mon **Hebrews 3** Heather W

<sup>4</sup> ...every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.

During lockdown I have been catching up on DIY. Painting has been done, shelves have been put up, and my garden has never looked lovelier. In a small way, I have been building. But I wouldn’t know where to start

in building a house, never mind a city, never mind anything bigger than that.

Sometimes we can easily look at the big problems in our world, and the smallness of what we do day-to-day, and wonder if it makes any difference. Does what we are building, making, nurturing in our brief days on this earth really matter? Does it change anything? Does the house that I build, the life I live, the people I care for and look after, really count for anything in the grand scheme of things?

One of the most hopeful things about being a Christian is the knowledge that there is a grand scheme of things. That God is the builder of everything, and the lives we build, one tiny act of love and faith and perseverance at a time, are part of that everything. I can’t see how my life fits in with his bigger project, but that’s because he is the master architect of the universe, who can see the whole landscape from beginning to end, and I’m just working away on the task he has given me, now, just where I am. It may not be big, or impressive, but it’s part of what God is about in the world, and that makes it precious, and full of purpose.

Week 3:Wed **1 Corinthians 3** Mike

<sup>1</sup> And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.  
<sup>2</sup> I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready,  
<sup>3</sup> for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations?  
<sup>4</sup> For when one says, *‘I belong to Paul’*, and another, *‘I belong to Apollos’*, are you not merely human?

<sup>5</sup> What then is Apollos? What is Paul?  
 Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each.

<sup>6</sup> I planted, Apollos watered,  
**but God** gave the growth.

<sup>7</sup> So neither the one who plants  
 nor the one who waters is anything,  
 but only God who gives the growth.

<sup>8</sup> The one who plants and the one who  
 waters have a common purpose,  
 and each will receive wages  
 according to the labour of each.

<sup>9</sup> For we are God's servants,  
 working together; you are God's field,  
 God's building.

It has been great to see how nature has flourished during the lockdown. It seems that vigorous growth is the natural way of things if humans don't get in the way. In this the creativity of the natural world reflects the character of its creator.

There is a limit to the extent to which this image applies to the growth of the church, which is the subject of this passage. In the spread of God's kingdom human involvement is very definitely needed. The Corinthians had been getting in the way of growth by dividing into factions, supporting different church leaders. Paul makes clear that we are all necessary to the work, we each have a role to play. It's not difficult to see what the images of planting and watering refer to in the life of the church. However it is God who provides the growth. We can get too worried about how growth will come; it can happen in ways we don't expect at all. Our business is to be wholehearted and faithful, supporting others in their efforts, and trusting God to give the growth.



...that is my gospel,

<sup>9</sup> for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained.

<sup>10</sup> Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, so that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.

Paul's second letter to Timothy presents a series of examples that he wants Timothy to consider on his path to becoming a minister.

Among these are references to soldiers, athletes, farmers, Jesus Christ and of course Paul himself, encouraging him to consider how each of these applies to his own life.

The context for all of this is 'suffering', meaning the hardships endured for the sake of Christ. Those who endure do so by the power of God, not their own efforts. During the ongoing hardship of being isolated we have all learnt much about suffering and confinement, much as Paul did during his periods of imprisonment.

Paul reminds Timothy of how his family brought him up in the faith, and then how Timothy served faithfully with Paul in the past.

Paul also speaks to us now when he reminds Timothy that his background in the faith will give him the courage to stand fast against hard times and that we should use that courage to defend the truth of the gospel message.

Paul was imprisoned and not expecting to live for much longer, but would willingly suffer until the end for Christ. He found solace and rejoices in knowing that the truth of the gospel will not be restrained.

Through the times we feel imprisoned in our homes or minds, God is our freedom, in God we can overcome all earthly restraints by faith.

<sup>19</sup> "...And I will say to my soul,  
Soul, you have ample goods laid up for  
many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry."

<sup>20</sup> **But God** said to him,  
"You fool! This very night your life  
is being demanded of you. And the things  
you have prepared, whose will they be?"

On the surface it would appear that the rich man in this parable is wise and acting in a responsible way, planning for the future. He is a thriving farmer that doesn't have enough storage space in his barns. His plan is to build bigger barns to store more produce so that he can then relax and enjoy the fruits of his labours; which seems reasonable enough.

But the rich man is called out as a fool; not because he is wealthy or saves for the future, but because he appears to live only for himself. I guess many people felt and planned like this during 2019.

The rich man has been truly blessed, but yet expresses no sense of gratitude to God or the workers who helped him plant and harvest his bumper crop. He is blind to the fact that his life is not his own to secure, that his life belongs to God, and that God can demand it back at any time.

We can't take earthly wealth with us when we pass from this world.



<sup>16</sup> Then *Jesus* told them a parable: "*The land of a rich man produced abundantly.*

<sup>17</sup> *And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?'*

<sup>18</sup> *Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.*

<sup>19</sup> *And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'*

<sup>20</sup> **But God** said to him,  
*'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'*

<sup>21</sup> *So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.'*

It is during this time of lockdown that we have had chance to rediscover what true riches are. What are the things that we are missing and what have we gained during this time of pandemic?

We have craved to see, meet and hug people that we know and love. We miss the relationship that we have when we are in the presence of someone we really care about. We miss their smile, their silly jokes and in the case of my Mum I miss her sneaking into our house while we are all at work and leaving us some cake!

We hopefully have had a chance during lockdown to go at a slower pace, to be still. For many of us there has been an absence of battling with the traffic or the commuter train to work. There has been time to bake, garden or go for walks that enable us to appreciate and notice the things in our neighbourhood.

We have started to value the work of those that do not earn the biggest salary but have huge responsibility to keep us all going - our key workers.

True riches cannot be stored up and kept to ourselves, true riches cannot be bought, in fact most of the time they are not even tangible. What are your true riches?



<sup>1</sup> Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God say, "You shall not

*eat from any tree in the garden”?’*

- <sup>2</sup> The woman said to the serpent, *‘We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden;*
- <sup>3</sup> **but God** said, *“You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.”*
- <sup>4</sup> But the serpent said to the woman, *‘You will not die;*
- <sup>5</sup> *for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’*
- <sup>6</sup> So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.

In the baptism service we ask the parents, *‘Do you reject evil? And all its many forms? And all its empty promises?’* There we are recognising that temptation always promises more that it can deliver.

You’ll all know the thrill of expectation when contemplating an illicit pleasure, the fleeting gratification having given someone a piece of your mind, or the warm feelings you get from whatever temptations are your Achilles heel. We each hear the voice that proclaims, *‘Go on, what harm can it do?’* And we know as we succumb that we are falling for a lie.

In these verses from Genesis, the serpent portrays God as a mean host. Someone who invites us to a party only to withhold the choicest fare. A cosmic killjoy, determined to spoil our fun.

But is that how we see God?

We will have a very different response to following Jesus’ commandments if we see God as supremely generous - longing for us to know what it is to share his life and experience his presence; providing all we need, and wanting the best for us in every way.

