

Lean on me

Matthew 11: 16-19; 25-30

'Are you tired? Worn out? ... Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me – watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.'

I wonder if these are words that you need to hear today? Words that come from the last two verses of today's gospel passage, but from the Message translation. In the NIV version, Jesus says, *'Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest,'* but the Message translation gives you a flavour of what that rest might look like, might *feel* like. Living freely. Living lightly. Free of anything heavy or ill-fitting.

A few days ago I came across an image in a book by Joyce Rupp called *'May I have this Dance?'* It's a book of meditations intended to help the reader to draw close to God; it's a really good book for a Quiet Day or a retreat. And, in one of the chapters, she writes about 'lean-tos' that you sometimes see if you go hiking up mountains. You may have seen one yourself – often no more than a few pieces of wood nailed together, but a structure that can give shelter to people or animals looking for comfort from harsh storms that can quickly come on in high places.

This image of lean-tos, together with Jesus' words, reminded me of how we all need lean-tos in the storms of life which come upon us, those times when we feel completely spent of energy, when all we want to do is curl up and hide away for a few days until the storm passes over, or we've regained sufficient energy to cope once again. I wonder if you've ever felt like that? At these times, we need our lean-tos. And these can be anyone or anything that brings us a sense of hope, a pause from the pain, a bit of strength to sustain us, a little vision for guidance, a touch of happiness.

This passage from Matthew's gospel tells us that we have a wonderful lean-to in God, whose heart continually welcomes us and provides refuge for us. And we know this because Jesus knew it. In the first chapter from Mark's gospel, we see Jesus completely besieged by those seeking healing. Mark tells us *'the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town*

gathered at the door.' They were lining up to see him as word spread about what he could do. Jesus was at the home of James and John where he'd healed Simon's mother-in-law, and it's to the door of that house that the crowds come. Jesus is surrounded by the painful cries, the ugly smell of leprosy and other diseased wounds, the fears and the distressed sounds of those who were ill or in torture. And then there were the others, those who had come out for a look at what was going on, intrigued by what they'd heard about this Jesus. This man who spoke with authority, who even gave orders to evil spirits who obeyed him. This Jesus, there in the middle of it all, hemmed in on all sides, with huge expectation on him.

In the verse following this description, we learn about one of his lean-tos: *'Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.'* Here, Jesus regained his peaceful centre. He leans on the one who can restore his inner strength. Weary and worn out in body and spirit, he seeks solitude and silence, pouring his heart out to someone he trusted, in prayer. Jesus learned to entrust his entire person to the compassionate presence of his Father.

Jesus also leaned on his friends. When he received the news of the death of his cousin John the Baptist, we read that he and the disciples *'withdrew by boat to a lonely place where they could be by themselves'*. What kind of shelter and comfort did Jesus need, and what did he seek from those who were with him? Surely his heart was full of grief and sadness. He undoubtedly sought the comfort of being alone with those who had also known John and who understood how much he hurt.

Jesus also sought the lean-to of friends as he travelled during his ministry. In Luke 10 we read of Jesus stopping off in Bethany, at the home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary. This sounds like a welcome haven for him, the sort of place where he could feel at home, where he could kick off his shoes and put his feet up on the sofa. What a wonderful, comforting shelter Bethany must have been for Jesus as the tensions and rejections of his work and teachings increased. Scripture doesn't give us details but it's not unreasonable of us to imagine that Jesus needed time with good friends to talk about just how difficult things were getting. Perhaps that's why Jesus commends Mary's listening presence over Martha's busyness. Who knows?

There are times in all our lives where we are forced to lean. Jesus needed his lean-tos, and so do we. For some of us, myself included, leaning on God is not

always an easy thing. Our western culture, and particularly the British stiff upper lip, strongly urges us to be independent and self-sufficient. We're supposed to have things under control, to cope with anything life throws at us, to pull ourselves up by our own proverbial boot-straps when we feel ourselves falling. And it's often men in particular who find it most difficult to lean on others, to admit weakness or a need for help. And the sadness of this – for both men and women who find it difficult to ask for help - is that suffering is often endured alone and for a much longer time than is necessary.

Another reason we might not lean very well is that we may not know and trust God enough. We may dread the thought of being vulnerable – even to God. We read about needing to 'surrender ourselves to God' but hate the idea of doing so. There was once a cartoon which read '*God, would you help me with this, but make it look like I did it all by myself.*' The Psalms are full of images of God as a shield, a strong shelter, a rock, a fortress in whom we take refuge. God is a comfort in illness and a light in the darkness when things look bleak or we don't know the way to go. We forget that we simply have to place ourselves in his presence and ask.

Maybe, this morning, you're in that place of feeling tired and worn out. Lockdown has gone on for months now and you might be at home, watching (or reading) this, feeling utterly fed up, dreadfully missing family and friends, living each day the same as the last, but nervous about what the easing of lockdown will bring. Can I ask you to do two things? Firstly, to rediscover the 'lean to' that is your Heavenly Father. Claim your inheritance as a beloved child of God and read some of the Psalms that remind you of the shelter and refuge that he provides. Psalms 57, 59, 61, 62 and 63 are but a few.

And secondly, lean on your brothers and sisters in Christ – your Church family. When someone rings to ask you how you are, tell them truthfully how you're feeling and allow them to come alongside you, to pray for you, to support you. And, if no-one rings for a few days and you're feeling low, *you* make the call to someone you know and trust and share what's on your mind.

And if you're not in that place of need today, then can I urge you to be a lean-to for someone who is? If you're unsure who that might be, then can I encourage you to pray that prayer each morning that I mentioned a few weeks ago in a pastoral letter: '*God, is there someone I'm being nudged to connect with – to reach out to – today?*' And if there is, then respond and make the call.

A poem to end:

Some people lean against fence posts
when their bodies ache from toil.
Some people lean on oak trees,
seeking cool shade on hot, humid days.

Some people lean on crutches
when their limbs don't work for them;
and some people lean on each other
when their hearts can't stand alone.

How long it takes to lean upon you,
God of shelter and strength;
how long it takes to recognise the truth
of where my inner power has its source.

All my independence, with its arrogance,
stands up and stretches within me,
trying to convince my trembling soul
that I can conquer troubles on my own.

But the day of truth always comes
when I finally yield to you,
knowing you are a steady stronghold,
a refuge when times are tough.

Thank you for offering me strength,
for being the oak tree of comfort;
thank you for being the sturdy support
when the limbs of my life are weak.

Praise to you, Eternal Lean-to,
for always being there for me.
Continue to transform me
with the power of your love.

(Joyce Rupp)