

Lent Reflections



This set of reflections can be used as sermon notes for volunteer speakers and church leaders. These could also be used by home groups as a starter for discussions throughout the season of Lent and beyond.

The following reflections and prayers are written by people with lived experience of poverty who encountered God in the midst of their struggle and are connected to the Trussell Trust network. Each contribution reflects the individual's own experiences, story and theology. *The Bible Stories are taken from the NRSV version.*

Introduction

Lent is the season of dust, ashes, brokenness, and journeying with Jesus towards the cross. This season of Lent we invite you to share that journey with us, all people for whom the struggle against poverty is etched in our lives on an ongoing basis, but for whom faith in Jesus (and Jesus' faith in us) helps us to keep going.

Each week, one of us will share a passage of Scripture (or sometimes several passages) which is food and drink for our souls even if, at times, we face the injustice of hunger.

A Latin American theologian once described the Bible as being a bit like the engine of a car. For many we only ever know about the engine from sitting in the car, or behind the steering wheel. But for others, we know the engine as mechanics, often lying underneath it getting covered in muck, trying to repair it or see how it works.

Much of the Bible was written in the context of struggle. It is about people whose lives were oppressed by injustice. When it is read by people who today share that experience, fresh insights and renewed wisdom can emerge.

We invite you to hear our sense of how the Bible comes alive to us; to respond to the questions that we offer you; and to share in the prayers that flow out of our ongoing faith journey.

Week One - Jean's Story

God's gifts to us and our gifts for one another

Readings - Psalm 34 1-9

- ¹ I will bless the LORD at all times;
his praise shall continually be in my mouth.
- ² My soul makes its boast in the LORD;
let the humble hear and be glad.
- ³ O magnify the LORD with me,
and let us exalt his name together.
- ⁴ I sought the LORD, and he answered me,
and delivered me from all my fears.
- ⁵ Look to him, and be radiant;
so your faces shall never be ashamed.
- ⁶ This poor soul cried, and was heard by the LORD,
and was saved from every trouble.
- ⁷ The angel of the LORD encamps
around those who fear him, and delivers them.
- ⁸ O taste and see that the LORD is good;
happy are those who take refuge in him.
- ⁹ O fear the LORD, you his holy ones,
for those who fear him have no want.

Matthew 6:26-27

Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?

Reflection

‘When I was thinking about a Bible verse or story that I wanted to share there was one that kept popping into my mind. It is a verse that was very important to me about five years ago. At that point my marriage had ended traumatically and my husband had left me with nothing. I had lost my job, lost friends, and after many struggles and deeply troubling circumstances reached a place where I found myself with just £2 in my pocket.

I couldn't work out what to do. Should I buy bread and potatoes or should I buy milk and tea bags? I felt really depressed and I went out for a long walk. While I was out, I saw a woman outside the local Post Office - she looked very thin and pale. She was stopped, while the people passing by were just walking past and ignoring her.

When I got close to her, she stopped me and said: “Excuse me, lady, I am so hungry. Have you got £1 so I could go and buy some chips.”

Without thinking I said: “I have £2, go and get some chips and some curry sauce or something to go with them.” She was so pleased and grateful I thought she was going to hug me at one point. She ran across the road and into the chip shop to get the food straight away.

I had responded automatically when she said she was hungry and carried on walking thinking ‘What a shame, no one should be that hungry.’

But then I suddenly realised that I now had nothing. I had been holding on to that £2, I was annoyed with myself asking ‘Now what am I supposed to do?’

I cried out to the Lord ‘What have I done? Why did I do that when I’m so hungry myself?’ I prayed as I continued to walk along the street feeling helpless and weak, ‘Please help me Lord.’ A sense of peace and calm flowed through me, the scripture that came into my head was Matthew 6 26-27.

But I was so upset and angry that I challenged God, asking ‘but how does this help me Lord, I’m still hungry and have no money’. Then I found myself humbly asking for forgiveness for not trusting God through the storm, I continued walking and crying and reflecting on the Bible passage that was dominating my thoughts, and then I walked past a tree and spotted something underneath it. I glanced at it as I walked past it but then I stopped as I realised ‘That looks like money’. I walked back and picked it up, it was a £10 note.

It didn’t feel right for me to take it when it didn’t belong to me, I actually looked around me to see if there was anyone close who could have dropped it so I could give it back to them, but there was no one to be seen.

Then it struck me, I had asked God for help, and help came. I saw it was a gift from God and I thanked God for providing me with what I very much needed. I prayed under the tree where I found the money. It bought me enough food for four days.

I learnt then that the more we give the more we receive.

I am in a better position now but I will never forget how tough it was and the help that came my way. My benefits were eventually sorted out and I began to receive the help and support I needed to find my feet again, and adapt to doing life on my own but with the Love of Jesus.

It has been through the experience of my own trials that I have learned the biggest lessons, I live comfortably now, and I am able to reach out and help other people based on the experiences I’ve had myself and the understanding of what it’s really like. I make sure I listen to people and ask how they are and if I can help I will. I meet with people from time to time who are in need of a hot meal and I offer to take them out. I can give to charities and put food in the trolley at the supermarket for the food bank.

I enjoy giving back what I can. Picasso said: “The meaning of life is to find your gift. The purpose of life is to give it away.” That quote reminds me how much I have been given and now I can pass those gifts on to other people.

My gift is listening to God and knowing that the Holy Spirit will guide me. It helps me understand what I need to let go of and what I need to do that will make a difference. I pray the Serenity prayer often which is a powerful prayer and one I like to encourage others to pray also:

*God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference Amen.*

Questions

What are your gifts and how do you pass these on to other people?

Are there things God is calling you to let go of?

Are there things that you are called to step into?

How do you discern these things?

Prayer

Based on Psalm 34

Abba Father,

You gave us promises in your Bible and in our lives we see you answer our prayers

Today I remember

‘I sought the LORD, and he answered me;
he delivered me from all my fears.’

Abba Father,

You know that sometimes we feel we have failed but you never turn us away

Today I remember

‘Those who look to him are radiant;
their faces are never covered with shame.’

Abba Father

You understand our needs before we even ask you and you hear our prayers

Today I remember

‘This poor person called, and the LORD heard him;
he saved them out of all their troubles.’

Abba Father

You see the concerns of our heart and the worries that threaten to overwhelm us

Today I remember

‘Taste and see that the LORD is good;
blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.’

Abba Father

You are with us and bring us what we need whatever our circumstances
Today I remember
'Fear the LORD, you his holy people,
for those who fear him lack nothing.'

Abba Father

Help us by the power of your Holy Spirit and with your amazing grace
To walk lovingly forward with you in friendship and fellowship
Knowing the freedom Jesus brings us through his death on the cross.
Guide and strengthen us as we grow to be more like you, reflecting your light
In all we think, do and say.
We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen

Week Two - Laura's Story

Jesus heals the woman who touched his hem

Reading - Luke 8

As he went, the crowds pressed in on him. ⁴³Now there was a woman who had been suffering from a flow of blood for twelve years, and though she had spent all she had on physicians, no one could cure her. ⁴⁴She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, and immediately her flow of blood stopped. ⁴⁵Then Jesus asked, "Who touched me?" When they all denied it, Peter said, "Master, the crowds are hemming you in and pressing against you." ⁴⁶But Jesus said, "Someone touched me, for I noticed that power had gone out from me." ⁴⁷When the woman realized that she could not remain hidden, she came trembling, and falling down before him, she declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him and how she had been immediately healed. ⁴⁸He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace."

Reflection

My favourite story is the one where the woman goes through the crowd and touches the hem of Jesus's cloak.

You can imagine the people in the crowd seeing her and saying: "Don't touch him, don't touch him," but she did.

That woman had been shunned. I have been through a lot and I know how that feels. But it still amazes me that whatever you have done Jesus is always there. He treats you just the same as the person with the cleanest sheet, the person who has been a Christian all their life.

People can be so horrible in the outside world - but no matter what is happening to you, a physical thing, mental health or you have done something horrific, but Jesus is not bothered. He recognises that you had the audacity to go and touch him. He just turns round and says you have come to me and you are healed.

The woman in that story, it didn't matter who she was, she was someone who needed Jesus. I wouldn't be here without Jesus.

People are shunned so easily today but to God none of it matters. Or you could say it mattered so much to him he sent his Son to die for us on the cross making our sins void. He doesn't care what you have done previously.

Some people don't know that.

I didn't know that.

No matter what you have done - God just says: "What can I do for you?"

Sometimes I thought that Jesus was so perfect that I couldn't go to him with the stuff that had happened to me. But when you do you find yourself literally set free.

Questions

Have you had a time when you needed a lot of courage to approach Jesus?

What does the freedom Jesus gives mean to you?

Prayer

No matter what
You offer healing to us
You see our pain and disease
You make the impossible, possible
Thank you, Jesus

No matter what
You offer forgiveness to us
You free us from our wounds and scars
You make the impossible, possible
Thank you, Jesus

No matter what
You let us come close to you
You never shun but always accept
You make the impossible, possible
Thank you, Jesus

No matter what
You look at us with love and kindness
You see the worth in each of us
You make the impossible, possible
Thank you, Jesus

No matter what
When we come to you,
However we come,
Hurting, ill, shamed, despised,
We hear you say
Go in peace
And we go, we go on
Because you make the impossible, possible
Thank you Jesus.
Amen 🙏

Week Three - John's Story

Prayer and Kindness

Readings - The Book of Ruth, Matthew 6 and Matthew 25
You might like to read the whole book of Ruth like John did.

Matthew 6

And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁷When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name

¹⁰Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹Give us this day our daily bread.

¹²And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

¹⁴For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you;

¹⁵but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Matthew 25

³¹‘When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ ⁴¹Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ ⁴⁵Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’”

Reflection

For John prayer and kindness are at the heart of Christianity and his choice of Bible readings reflects that.

John chose the book of Ruth from the Old Testament - a book he has come across recently as his church are reading through the Old Testament. He read it straight through in 20 minutes. He said: “I was really drawn to this book. I liked the way Ruth looked after her mother-in-law, Naomi. If someone hadn’t helped me I wouldn’t be here today. This is a story about kindness, compassion and empathy. Naomi wasn’t the easiest but Ruth was determined to look after her. That kindness is what we need today. People say these stories from thousands of years ago are not relevant, but they are.”

“The people listening to Jesus in Matthew 25 didn’t know when they had fed or clothed Jesus, Jesus had to tell them, it was when you care for people in need. If Jesus was about now, I think he would be serving in a food bank, maybe washing someone’s feet in a corner. It all goes back to compassion.”

“I also really like that Jesus taught his disciples to pray. I don’t think we say the Lord’s Prayer enough. After our food bank we have a time of prayer giving thanks and praying for the people we have met. Some of the older people often suggest that we pray the Lord’s Prayer and I think it’s a really good thing. I learnt it at school but I have rediscovered it. It says it all - give us our food for the day, forgive us and keep us safe - that’s it. That’s what we need right now - food, safety and forgiveness. And it doesn’t go on too long - that’s good!

“God has always been here for me. I used to turn to God in the bad times. I always had a sense of the presence of God but I only used to ask for help in times of trouble. I pray more often now and its conversational. Sometimes I still have to pray ‘God help me...God help me to love this annoying person!’ But now prayer is a proper conversation, often I am just saying to God how great it is to be somewhere.”

Questions

Think about a time when you were shown kindness and how it impacted you?

How could you take that experience of kindness and share kindness with others?

How has prayer changed for you over time?

Prayer

Our Father in heaven,
But close to us in our life day by day, hearing our prayers and answering with kindness.

hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.

Help us to make earth more like heaven by being kind to one another, helping each other out and showing compassion whenever we can.

Give us today our daily bread.

Please make sure we all have enough to eat today and when we have more than enough, help us to share with those around us.

Forgive us our sins

We all do things wrong, please forgive us when we make mistakes

as we forgive those who sin against us.

Help us to keep caring for people around us even when they are difficult, because we know you love us even when we are difficult.

Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.

Week Four - Brian's Story

The Story of the Lost Son

Reading Luke 15

¹¹Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

¹³“Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ ²⁰So he got up and went to his father.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

²²“But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

²⁵“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

²⁸“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

³¹“‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

Reflection

When I first encountered Urban Expression, the church I am a part of, I was an atheist - a follower of Dawkins.

I knew bits of the Bible and I always associated with the story of the Lost Son. I thought of myself as the lost son, but I wasn't. I thought that I wasn't worthy of love. A lot of people in poverty think that they are not worthy, not worthy of being loved. I was like the lost son who took his inheritance and went away. But his father gave him it back.

I've always been driven by anger. Anger against injustice. It's why I appreciate that part of my church's commitment is to making sure everyone is heard. It's also why when I was getting treated for cancer recently, I was so scared about losing my voice.

But my days of ranting are over. Now it's about building relationships with people, including people in power. It's about sitting down and listening, persuading. Listening, I've learnt about the experience of others, including asylum seekers. 'New Scots' as we call them here.

I wasn't angry at God. I wasn't angry with Jesus. I was angry with their supporters and their failure to behave properly, justly. Reading the Bible, I came to realise that that is the way that we all are. It isn't God's fault.

I came to faith at a time when I was angry with the Church. But in the Church, I found people who didn't preach at me, who just loved me.

And when I read the story of the Lost Son, I recognised myself moving from orphan to son. People don't think that they are worth something, worth anything. You can encounter poverty in so many places. I was an E Grade nurse.

It's time to get rid of the 'them' and 'us' labels. There is only an 'us'. Just as God has seen the good in us, so we should see the worth of others. The worth of those who have struggled.

I keep coming back to the lost son. It's so full of meaning. We might not have used our inheritance the way that we should have but that doesn't matter to God. God loves us just the way we are.

It's a theme that runs all the way through the Bible, There's never a 'them' and 'us'. It's just an 'us'. The Beatitudes - a beautiful piece of writing. I love the Beatitudes. They are written for the poor. To tell us that we matter. And the Good Samaritan. And the Book of Acts. There is never a 'them' and 'us'. There is just an 'us'.

That's why I love the story of the Lost Son.

Questions

What struck you as you read how the story of the Lost Son has impacted Brian?

What was new there? Or reassuring?

How is our understanding of God as Father changed by the story of the Lost Son?

Prayer

God,
Father,
Dad,
we are never lost to you,
even though we feel lost.

You give us freedom,
like a loving parent,
to make choices,
even when they are bad choices.

But the door is never shut;
the coat remains in the wardrobe;
the ring remains in the drawer;
waiting for us to return,
to you.

God,
Father,
Dad,
take away our anger of 'them',
of those that infuriate,
and fill us,
instead,
with the Father's love;
the gift to see others,
as you see us.

Amen.

Week Five - Ena's Story

Faith Without Works

Reading James 2

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Surely that faith cannot save, can it? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food ¹⁶and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Reflection

Ena had a happy childhood, worked as a civil servant, was married and had a little boy. She had no idea where her life would take her. But in a few short years she faced grief, divorce, debt and bankruptcy, and unable to buy food she visited a food bank. She says; "I came to the food bank, I still had my car and I was well dressed. As I entered the building I overheard people say - "what is she doing here". That's why it is so important to me that people don't judge a book by their cover. We never know what is going on in someone's life, behind closed doors."

A few years later Ena volunteered at a food bank near her home town in Scotland. The same principles were really important to her. "People need to know that there is a place to go where they can talk. A place where they won't be judged and people won't cast aspersions."

For Ena that is what Christianity is all about.

"We need to approach people with humbleness and really honour every person", she says.

"What we do as Christians is more important than what we believe or say."

And because what we do is important, for Ena, that makes it key to work with people from different faiths and beliefs.

"It is important that people can be themselves, whatever they believe and whatever they are going through," she says. "For me though, when I felt most alone, it was the church I could go to and feel at home."

Questions

Have you ever been judged on your appearance? How did it make you feel?

Does your church feel like home for people? Are there things that you could do to ensure all people could feel at home in your church?

Prayer

God of welcome

We thank you for the people who serve others,
seeing them with eyes of love,
Offering shelter, food and a cup of tea.

God of dignity

We thank you for the people who love the neighbour as themselves,
seeing them with eyes that do not judge
Offering kindness, compassion and words that soothe.

God who shapes us

Help us to see your image in every person we meet.

Give us the patience to pay attention to stories that are not often told.

Give us the discernment to see behind forced smiles, smart clothes and brave faces
And give us more love to share with everyone who crosses our path.

Amen.

Week 6 - Shirley's Story

The Lord's my Shepherd

Reading - Psalm 23

¹ The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;

³ he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I 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 mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.

Reflection

Favourite Bible passage? The Lord's my Shepherd. And The Good Samaritan. Helping others; that's how I have always tried to live my life.

The Lord's my Shepherd. I like a version we do with the band - I'm a singer - with lots of harmonies in it. It gives you a nice feeling.

I wish I could say that it was a reminder that all is well with my soul, but right now it isn't really. At the moment I don't know whether I feel abandoned by God, or I have removed myself from God. There's a 98-year-old woman at work (I work in a care home). We pray together. She's good for me.

One of the things of the Psalms is that they deal with reality. And there is a lot of reality going on at the moment. For me and for others.

People often say that God never gives us more than we can deal with. But I sometimes think, "Is it not someone else's turn?"

"Lying down in green pastures." It's a comfort thing, just very comforting. But it doesn't sugar coat what's real. "Walking through the valley of death." Life can be tough.

There's bad stuff going on. Going on everywhere. Nationally and internationally. But also in my own back yard.

And sometimes trusting is hard. Sometimes I just want to scream out: "God, where are you?" And I wonder if maybe I'm not asking the right things.

Asking can be difficult for me. When life is difficult for a lot of people, it is difficult to ask for help. I find it hard to ask for help, and when you are in a dark place it is even harder. It is really scary to fear rejection. What if people don't say "Yes." What if God doesn't say "Yes."

Green pastures. Dark valleys. The Lord's my Shepherd. Life can be tough.

Oh, and the Good Samaritan. I like the fact that there is a good person in the story. I've tried to be that person. I try to share just so I can help folks.

Questions

What struck you about Shirley's reflection on The Lord's My Shepherd?

How honest are we with ourselves and others that life can be more of a 'deep valley' than a 'green pasture'?

Prayer

At times God,
life is more of a deep valley
than a green pasture.

At times God,
you feel more absent
than present.

At times God,
when I say that you never give me more than I can bear,
it doesn't feel that way.

God,
in the darkness,
help us still to glimpse hope,
and to be sustained by it.

God,
help us not just to say that you are always there,
but to know it,
and feel it.

God,
help me to be the person you know I can be,
and to forgive myself,
as you have forgiven me,
when,
some days,
I manage better than others.

Amen.

Week 7 - Jay's Story

God is our refuge and provider, and we are part of the body.

Readings

Psalm 91

You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
² will say to the Lord, 'My refuge and my fortress;
my God, in whom I trust.'
³ For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
and from the deadly pestilence;
⁴ he will cover you with his pinions,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.
⁵ You will not fear the terror of the night,
or the arrow that flies by day,
⁶ or the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
or the destruction that wastes at noonday.

1 Corinthians 12

¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit...

... ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.

Reflection

One of my favourite Bible passages has become Psalm 91.

Once, not that long ago, when I was staying with a friend, we had a habit of praying and of letting the Bible fall open. It fell open at Psalm 91: "You are my protector and defender. You are my God; in you I trust." And I felt, "Wow."

God, the Church, is my safety. I know that having God in my life I am never alone. He provides for me. During Lent I fasted although I didn't really know what that was all about. I had done the 12-Step programme (through Alcoholics Anonymous) but I didn't really know what that "higher power" was.

Just after Easter, I realised that I needed to go to a foodbank. I didn't want to but had to. While I was there, I was given a voucher to come to the café that's attached to the Church. I didn't come with any intention of joining the Church. When I was having my meal, I asked the person who was there what sort of church it was. I told him I have beliefs but wasn't sure in what. He said that, as Christians, we believe in Jesus. Something just clicked. I could relate it to the 12-Step programme and to that sense of being protected by the wings of God. I came to Church with an open mind; and found myself putting my hand up at the end of the service.

I got baptised two weeks later. Folks said that was OK. I didn't need to learn lots of stuff before being accepted. It was about your old life ending and your new life beginning. About dying to old life and rising to new life.

Things started to change for me. I'd always been brought up not to show your dirty washing in public. I had felt so very ashamed. That it was all my fault and I had to sort it out myself.

But something started changing. I felt protected, loved. I allowed people to love me. I still struggle with that one. But I feel I have been given a family I never had.

I have refuge in God. He has provided for me.

I remember about a month ago I got a call - out of the blue - about my ESA (Employment Support Allowance) saying that I was entitled to an additional allowance - I had been receiving half the amount I was due. I heard God say to me: "It's time to live now. The drought is over."

And that sense of belonging. A sense of being loved and protected. A sense of being part of a family.

Over recent months the passage in 1st Corinthians 12 has become more and more special. It's the bit that talks about us being part of a body. I've found myself being part of something; a needed, necessary part. And how each part of the body cares and rejoices in the successes of others. It's really special to feel a part of something. That I am valuable. That I am not this worthless, defective piece of rubbish that I always felt I was.

I remember the first time I wrote a poem and Gaz got me to come out the front and read it out. And people were really moved by it. And people came up to me later and said what a gift I had.

And I didn't feel nervous about it. People were not going to laugh at me. I am part of the body. And if I don't make it one week, people will message me to check that I'm OK.

In August, when I got COVID, people were messaging me and asking me if I was OK. And asking me if I was OK. Could they get me anything. And even people saying that I was missed.

Having spent so much of my life not thinking that I mattered. And suddenly I do, a precious part of the body.

Questions

What struck you about Jay's reflections on Psalm 91 and 1 Corinthians 12?

Can you think of a time when you have felt so deeply appreciated; or been part of such a welcoming and inclusive community?

Prayer

God,

I am grateful to have a loving heavenly father, who will never leave or forsake me, my rock, refuge and strength.

With your Angels wings wrapped round me I am safe and will come to no harm when the enemy attacks and tries to destroy me.

You have provided an earthly family who support and guide me, who show me I'm worthy of love that I am important and belong.

You have placed people in my path who showed me a way out of my financial strife and hardship and told me "The drought is over it's time to live."

I am a new creation in you, the misdeeds of my past no longer restrict and define me.

I am a part of your family and have value in society.

Thank you.

Amen.