

More useful resources from <https://arthurrankcentre.org.uk/>

This is the first note since lockdown restrictions in England were both lifted and - in the case of Leicester - tightened, and we know that for many people things actually feel less clear and more chaotic than ever. We're now in a situation in which life looks very different depending on where you live in the UK (and, indeed, the world) and what decisions your national and local churches have made with regard to reopening their buildings.

While we're being encouraged to eat out, shop in person rather than online, and return to work in offices, the news tells us of coronavirus spikes and reminds us of the very real possibility of a second wave of the outbreak come the winter. But as life resolutely refuses to return to 'normal' - in any familiar sense - the Bible reminds us not only that 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever' (Hebrews 13:8) but that he will be with us through all that this COVID-19 pandemic can throw at us (Matt. 28:20).

Go well!

Louise, on behalf of all at the Arthur Rank Centre

Lamenting in Hope

Bible reading: Psalm 142

With my voice, I cried out to the Lord. With my voice, I made supplication to the Lord.
In his sight, I pour out my prayer, and before him, I declare my tribulation.
Though my spirit may become faint within me, even then, you have known my paths.

Along this way, which I have been walking, they have hidden a snare for me.
I considered toward the right, and I looked, but there was no one who would know me.
Flight has perished before me, and there is no one who has concern for my soul.
I cried out to you, O Lord.

I said: You are my hope, my portion in the land of the living.
Attend to my supplication. For I have been humbled exceedingly.
Free me from my persecutors, for they have been fortified against me.

Lead my soul out of confinement in order to confess your name.
The just are waiting for me, until you repay me.

You may also find it helpful to read Obadiah 15-21 and Matthew 13:10-17.

Reflection

Today's psalm, number 142 in Hebrew numbering and 141 in Greek, is a psalm of lament. Over fifty of the 150 psalms in the psalter include prayer of lament, either offered by individuals or by the whole assembly. Lament has been part of the daily prayer of God's chosen people through the ages. Today many lament that Covid-19 separates our community through quarantine and isolation, shielding and social distancing; that so many have been ill and have died; that businesses are going bankrupt and many become unemployed. For many rural church communities there may be lament that Rural Mission Sunday may engage with fewer people this year, or a recognition that our church life lacks the deep incarnation of us coming together 'in the flesh'.

Obadiah picks up on this theme of lament, but is also able to look forward with hope and joy to the time when once again 'the kingdom will be for the Lord'. When we have been wronged or aggrieved it is good to pray in a way which leaves retribution not to human beings but to our divine Lord. Our hearts have more space for hope when we are able to relinquish grievances and resentments to God. They injure us partly by disabling our capacity for hope and so diminishing our potential to live in Christ. Nelson Mandela once said that having resentment is like drinking poison then hoping that it will kill your enemies. The same holds true for grievances in general.

Even for the Christian community, centred on the power of Christ's death and resurrection which brings such freedom, delight, fulfilment and promise regardless of current circumstances, the burden of sadness is also present and may cast shadows on our lives as individuals and as the community of God's people.

One blessing of parables is that they use the reality of our own world to invite us into the mystery of God, not limited by creedal or doctrinal definitions, but open to evoking memories, personal reflections and allegories from our own lives. Jesus shares stories recognised by all; interestingly he never tells a parable about carpentry!

After months of lockdown when I have been medically shielding with restrictive advice from government, NHS and local shielding teams, my personal frustrations grow. Last week, perhaps influenced by the Parable of the Sower, which I'd been praying with, I realised hadn't seen the crops grow for four months, nor smelled the aromas of silage, or manure, nor seen livestock grow. Out I went in the car to local fields to sit and look. Winter barley is almost ready, spring barley doing well. Winter wheat is turning from blue-green to golden as the heads swell. Grass fields are well-grazed, but cattle look healthy.

Something in all this helps my hope in a way that words, even the best sermons, can't manage. Why not try a similar exercise yourself? Take a Bible or write / print out the Parable of the Sower, and go on a walk or drive to a location which includes fields of crops. Read through the passage (Matthew 13:1-9), asking God to use your physical environment to show you new things about this familiar story.

Fr Rob Taylerson, Priest in the Catholic Archdiocese of Birmingham and Arthur Rank Centre trustee