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Looking back, looking forward

Is it just me, or is there a general sense in which we seem to be hitting COVID-19 first anniversaries? At the end of February 2020, I went away for a few days' holiday to Buxton in Derbyshire. It was my first 'proper' holiday for fifteen years and I spent all of it reading, curled up on the sofa of my tiny cottage. It was lovely!

I generally avoided watching the telly, but I did try and put the news on most evenings and - having become aware of 'coronavirus' before I went away - I recall the local BBC news reporting that there'd been an outbreak in Buxton itself.

Interestingly, however, despite being a relatively committed journal-keeper, there's no mention of either the global or local outbreak at all in my journal entries for that week. In fact the first time it gets a mention at all is on 13 March, just four days before the Arthur Rank Centre team started working from home. For me, that's a stark reminder of the extent to which many of us were caught off guard by the implications of what was happening in China and - by that point - continental Europe.

But the other thing I've been reminded of this week is just how fortunate we were here in the UK that the early days of our first lockdown coincided with the the start of spring. I continue to be enormously grateful for the role my tiny urban garden played - and continues to play - in enabling me to maintain relatively good mental health during the toughest periods of this last year.

Two weeks ago, on Shrove Tuesday, I mentioned that I wasn't sure what a 'good Lent' would look like for me. In the intervening fortnight, however, I've started working through Jane Mossendew's *Thorn, Fire and Lily*, a journey through Lent which reflects each day on a different plant. Over this year I've been looking for ways in which to engage more intentionally with the 'spiritual' dynamics of gardening and Lent seems like a great opportunity to do this!

However, Lent is unfolding for you, don't forget to keep paying attention to your own oxygen mask and be aware that anniversaries have a habit of impacting us emotionally in ways we don't expect.

Go well...

Louise, on behalf of the Arthur Rank Centre team

Are we nearly there yet...?

Bible Reading: Psalm 105:1-11, 37-45

Give thanks to the Lord,
proclaim his greatness;
tell the nations what he has done.
Sing praise to the Lord;
tell the wonderful things he has done.
Be glad that we belong to him;
let all who worship him rejoice.
Go to the Lord for help;
and worship him continually.
You descendants of Abraham, his servant;
you descendants of Jacob, the man he chose:
remember the miracles that God performed
and the judgments that he gave.

The Lord is our God;
his commands are for all the world.
He will keep his covenant forever,
his promises for a thousand generations.

He led the Israelites out;
they carried silver and gold,
and all of them were healthy and strong.
The Egyptians were afraid of them
and were glad when they left.
God put a cloud over his people
and a fire at night to give them light.
They] asked, and he sent quails;
he gave them food from heaven to satisfy them.
He opened a rock, and water gushed out,
flowing through the desert like a river.
He remembered his sacred promise
to Abraham his servant.

So he led his chosen people out,
and they sang and shouted for joy.
He gave them the lands of other peoples
and let them take over their fields,
so that his people would obey his laws
and keep all his commands.

Praise the Lord!

Reflection

The Bible is full of calls to remember.

- Remember your Creator and the goodness of the Lord.
- Remember your mortality (Ash Wednesday's 'Remember you are dust').
- Remember the story of God's dealings with your ancestors and his covenants with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.
- Remember Egypt, the burdens of slavery, the wonder of his actions in the exodus.
- Remember his provision in the wilderness – especially when settled into life in a new land.
- Remember the failures to live as his people and the consequences.
- Remember the cost of our salvation ('eat and drink in remembrance that Christ died for you').

Today's Psalm is worth reading in full as it goes through the story of God's wonderful deeds and calls on us to be glad that we belong to him, to go to him for help, and to sing praises to him. The first part of the psalm also appears in 1 Chronicles 16, when David is bringing the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem accompanied by processions, singing, dancing and great joy. Interestingly, Chronicles also records that this was the first time when King David gave Asaph and his fellow Levites 'the responsibility for singing praises to the Lord'.

The whole psalm is a reminder of God's faithfulness and his dealings with his people. The middle verses (left out in the selection included in the lectionary) speak of God's provision through Joseph in a time of famine in Egypt, the history of their life in Egypt, God's deliverance and the way that he provided for their needs in the desert. They left Egypt with shouts of joy but then had to cope with forty years of travelling through the wilderness before reaching the promised land. There were many times when they must have asked 'Are we nearly there yet?' Throughout the uncertainties of the journey, there were the reminders of God's care and provision, with the visible signs of the pillars of cloud and fire, food sent from heaven and water gushing out and flowing like a river through the desert.

As we travel through Lent after this very challenging year, it does begin to feel as though we are nearly there, but sometimes the final stretch is the hardest of a long slog. My walks in my village and surrounding countryside reveal more signs of the coming spring each day, and the promise of a better future just ahead comes in the form of increasing bird song, new buds appearing and the mud from the last storms receding.

Neighbours met out walking are looking forward to the first stages of lifting restrictions after what seem like endless restrictions, rejoicing in both increasing number of vaccinations and a reduction in the number of those getting ill and dying.

The way ahead is still uncertain despite these fragile shoots of hope and it has certainly felt like a desert experience. But as we move into the new future, we need to remember what we have experienced and learned of God and ourselves through the months of the pandemic. And perhaps we are the people who have been given the responsibility to sing praises to the Lord for his constant, loving presence.

Prayer

Loving and ever-faithful God,
as the seasons change, the days lengthen, and storms and sunshine alternate,
help us to face the uncertainties of life and capriciousness of the weather,
rejoicing in the light of your presence,
knowing the warmth of your constant love,
and walking with you through the challenges and delights that each day brings.

Amen

Response

We are still under various levels of limitations depending on where we are in the UK. As we go through Lent's 40 days, still waiting but with new hope:

- Reflect on what you need to remember and take into the future from the last year.
- Remember that God loves you and knows your need to look after yourself; how about using some of the ideas from 'Messy Church' each day this week?
- Find a way to sing God's praises, even if you're on your own!
- And an idea from a friend... Put some bare twigs in a vase and cut out some small images of a cross with a heart in the centre. Each day, take one of these images, write the name of a particular person on it, pray for this individual and then hang their name on the twig 'tree'.

Ann Wright, Secretary of the Churches Together in England Churches Rural Group