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## **Counting your blessings**

Lent feels like an apposite time to reflect on spiritual disciplines, but I'm not sure that a year ago any of us would have given a great deal of time to the suggestion that walking might fit into that category! Pilgrimage - something we've been thinking a lot about here at the Arthur Rank Centre, for reasons which will become apparent next week - possibly, but a bit of a leg stretch? A walk round the block? A turn in the park?

And yet I do think something of the language of discipline, even of spiritual discipline, has crept into our shared COVID-19 vocabulary around walking. I know that when I go for my 'regular' walk - several circuits of my local park, lasting about 45 minutes - my instinct most days is to spend the first few minutes systematically listing (silently!) things I'm grateful for that have happened so far that day. Even - particularly? - on bad days I find a) that just reminding myself that I have 'achieved' something or recognising the simple pleasure of having a park to walk in and then b) turning that over to God in gratitude, has helped me keep a sense of perspective over the last year.

As we continue to travel together towards Easter we continue to hold in tension the in between time of the days from Palm Sunday through Maundy Thursday and Good Friday to Easter Sunday. As the days get longer and the evenings are lighter, as the sun shines a little more warmly - at least briefly! - and as we take those first tentative steps towards time spent together, we acknowledge the small achievements - both individual and collective - recognise life's simple pleasures and turn them over to God in gratitude.

However, you're marking Easter and whoever you're hoping to mark it with, may you know the presence of God through all that this week holds.

Go well, and happy Easter!

*Louise, on behalf of the whole Arthur Rank Centre team*

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## **Hope springs forth**

**Bible reading: John 12:24-26**

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.

## Reflection

The first weeks of spring and the last weeks of Lent are such a powerful combination. All the budding promise of new life along the way of the cross, the way of self-denial and death.

This reminds me of the ancient folksong 'John Barleycorn', which tells the story of a grain of wheat, personified as 'little Sir John'. Little Sir John suffers a series of hardships and indignities as he is buried in the earth, cut down in his prime, bound and ground and condemned to die, but ultimately triumphs and is resurrected in the form of bread and beer, upon which those who have stricken him are dependent. It's a favourite of mine and one of the oldest folksongs in English. And while it has other interpretations, John Barleycorn may be seen as a Christ-figure, who allows the brutality of the world to overwhelm him in order that he may defeat it, breaking through death into transformed new life.

In these days before Easter, the drama around Jesus, the Son of Man, intensifies and his words become charged with heightened meaning. After the mixed emotions of his entry into Jerusalem, Jesus is approached (John writes) by some Greeks who wish to see Jesus. When his disciples relay the message, the Lord appears preoccupied in the prospect before him, likening himself to a grain of wheat that must die and be buried before bearing fruit.

Given the choice, most of us would choose an alternative route to the new life of Easter, one that bypasses the impossible crossroads of Good Friday. But Christ offers no other route, and if we want to serve him must follow him there. Christians can be true to life, only, I think, because we are first true to death. The cross enables us to face the ends of things, because we know that in Christ this appalling dead end becomes the place where hope springs forth, like green shoots from the winter earth. This is our story and our song.

Consistently arising from our village churches during the pandemic has been the new level of unity that online worship has necessitated. Most of our communities are arranged into multi-church groups which cannot always sustain weekly services in every place. Many who would formerly have attended once a month in their own church have been able to worship weekly online and while this isn't a replacement for services in their own church, for many it has brought a greater sense of being one body.

Might this become fertile soil for the future of small congregations? Local answers to the question 'what must be allowed to die in order for new life to grow?' will be different in each place, but always accompanied by the truth of God's coming kingdom, among us as a seed growing quietly.

## Prayer

Gracious God,  
You call us to follow you on the way of the cross.  
Help us to trust all things to you  
and give us, we pray, the wisdom to know  
what we must leave behind.  
Through Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

## Response

Few – if any – of us would have predicted celebrating two consecutive Easters in the shadow of COVID-19. As we continue to move through Holy Week, consider how you might draw on both the pain, sorrow and grief of Good Friday and the joy and celebration of Easter Sunday to enable those in your church family and wider community to engage with the complex emotions that many of us are trying to hold in tension at present.

As restrictions begin to lift, our gardens are once again becoming a focus of attention, both for the tangible signs of spring in evidence – warm sunshine, new growth, the vibrant colours of daffodils and early tulips – and as places where the vast majority of UK residents (except those in Northern Ireland) can meet with others. If you have a garden, how might you use it this week, particularly for the benefit of those who don't have family or friends that they can meet up with over the coming days?

*Rt Revd Andrew Rumsey, Bishop of Ramsbury, Diocese of Salisbury*