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Summertime

Depending on your age and musical tastes, that word may summon up the timeless melodies and jazz-tinged harmonies of George Gershwin, or memories of driving down open roads, windows wide open, enjoying the company of Jazzie Jeff and the Fresh Prince. If you're really lucky, you'll now have both ear worms alternating on a loop all evening.

You're welcome!

Today is, of course, the start of meteorological summer, and I for one am glad it's been heralded by beautiful sunshine and warmth. In fact, at 8am this morning I was out in the garden with my laptop working through my Arthur Rank Centre emails!

Whatever your week holds, whether life is bathed in sunlight and warmth or feels cold, grey and gloomy, know that God walks with each of us through whatever we're facing.

Go well!

Louise, on behalf of the Arthur Rank Centre team

Trust, courage & Blessing

Bible readings

Psalm 20

Prayer for Victory

The Lord answer you in the day of trouble!

The name of the God of Jacob protect you!

May he send you help from the sanctuary,
and give you support from Zion.

May he remember all your offerings,
and regard with favour your burnt sacrifices. *Selah*

May he grant you your heart's desire,
and fulfil all your plans.

May we shout for joy over your victory,
and in the name of our God set up our banners.

May the Lord fulfil all your petitions.

Now I know that the Lord will help his anointed;
he will answer him from his holy heaven

with mighty victories by his right hand.
Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses,
but our pride is in the name of the Lord our God.
They will collapse and fall,
but we shall rise and stand upright.

Give victory to the king, O Lord;
answer us when we call.

Mark 4:21-25

Numbers 6:22-27

Reflection

In preparing today's reflection I found myself looking for connections between the readings. What could I learn by reading them together? As I thought about changing seasons and the mixed blessings of relaxing COVID-19 restrictions I was reminded about the need to stop and look back, as well as looking forward. For many people the past months have been full of anxiety and pain. Announcements about relaxing restrictions and enabling renewed contact were greeted with euphoria tinged with scepticism, particularly in rural areas.

So, what now?

Trust

Psalm 20 opens with a prayer and benediction: 'May the LORD answer you in the day of trouble!'

At each step the psalm reinforces the truth that God is the One who is worthy of our trust. In the face of uncertainty about COVID-19 restrictions and anxiety about new variants people in the Highlands are concerned about city people carelessly putting vulnerable communities at risk of transmission in their desire to escape for a holiday. They have little trust in governments which have routinely failed to consider rural concerns.

Verse 7 declares that God's anointed people trust in God rather than 'chariots' or 'horses,' symbols of human strength and power. As a result, they are able to stand in confidence when others fall to pieces.

The psalm concludes with a prayer for the 'king' or leader. So, while we trust in God, we should also pray for our leaders to have wisdom, compassion and a listening ear.

Courage

As we look forward, now that the first flush of excitement over hugs is behind us, we recognise a need for courage and perseverance. Many rural churches were forced to be creative in their responses to COVID-19, leading the way as innovators and taking mission to their communities. Psalm 20 reminds us to trust in God and stand upright. Mark 4:21-25 serves as a reminder to be courageous.

I believe rural churches have the potential to change the trajectory of mission and ministry in the UK if they are faithful to their calling and let their light shine. The way we 'do church' has forever changed. Alongside celebrating a return to meeting together for corporate worship, we are aware of the risks and the reality that many of our members will continue to attend via video for their own safety or the safety of others. How might we share the lessons we've learned with each other and our denominations as we continue to be creative innovators in mission?

Blessing

Rural churches in the UK are entering a new season. Being able to reflect on the words of Aaron's blessing in Numbers 6:22-27 reminds me that we, as rural churches, share in the blessing of the covenant, regardless of denomination. As you read or listen to these words in your own churches, remember that they indicate our shared heritage and trust in the One who is worthy of our trust. As we are blessed, we are called to BE a blessing.

Prayer

Holy God, remind us today of the truth.
May we have the confidence to echo the words of the psalmist.
May we declare our trust in you.
May we unite in prayer for our leaders.
May we have the courage to take a stand for you.
May we be a blessing to our churches and communities.
Lord of all, who is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow,
bless us and keep us as we trust in you.
Make your face shine upon us.
Be gracious to us in the midst of our circumstances.
Lift up your face to see us and give us peace in our uncertainty.
May we carry your name and glorify you in our homes and churches.
Let it be so according to your will.
In Jesus' name, amen.

Response

As you reflect on these readings, consider what the benedictions of Psalm 20 would look like in your local community. How could you and your churches demonstrate your trust in God and respond to the needs of others by living as Jesus' hands and feet?

What are the practical challenges facing your communities as travel restrictions lift and people travel for holidays?

As you pray for local and national leaders, consider the needs of your area and how you can act as an advocate.

Are there specific issues that you can raise with your local and national representatives?

What lessons have you learned during this season that you can share with others?

Consider contributing to the resources the Arthur Rank Centre and others have created to support rural churches through COVID-19, or sharing them within your denominational structures.

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