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Cold hands, warm hearts

Alongside my role at the Arthur Rank Centre I have a volunteering role which involves quite a lot of standing around outside, even - particularly! - in the winter! On Sunday, as temperatures in the Midlands stayed resolutely in the low single figures, I donned several layers of clothing and headed out for the kind of quality 'people time' that's literally kept me sane for the past few months.

And, yes, I hold my hands up and readily confess to being a soft Southerner!!

This role - which I've been in for almost eighteen months - has been a brilliant opportunity for me to spend time with people who are, in many cases, very different to me, with very different life experiences, interests and perspectives. This year I challenged myself to try and find ways of enabling the group to engage with Advent, not just through the story of Christmas but by encouraging them to embrace something of the kingdom values of justice, compassion and love that we meet in the person of Jesus.

My challenge to myself became a challenge to them: to buy some Christmas 'treat' groceries for a homeless project here in Leicester. Today I met up with a few of the group and was presented with several bags of shopping.

My hands are cold; my heart is warm!

Many of us have seen God at work in unexpected places this year, and our hearts have been warmed by the experience. But the struggles of this year have been real and just as many of us will have suffered, and continue to suffer, the cold hands - literal and metaphorical - of sacrificial service in our church and communities, even our families. For some of us, the promise of Advent seems far off and intangible.

Whatever your experience of life at this time, we pray you will know the justice, compassion and love that we meet in the person of Jesus at Christmas.

A blessing for Advent

May you hear the gentle voice of the One who speaks to you saying, 'well done, [your name!], good and faithful servant'.

May you feel the loving arms of the One who assures you that 'I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

May you see the light that shines in the darkness, that the darkness cannot overcome.

In this time of uncertainty, confusion, pain and waiting, may you experience the hope that comes from knowing that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.

Amen.

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On wings like eagles

Bible Reading: Isaiah 40:25-31 (The Message)

'So—who is like me?
Who holds a candle to me?' says The Holy.
Look at the night skies:
Who do you think made all this?
Who marches this army of stars out each night,
counts them off, calls each by name
—so magnificent! so powerful!—
and never overlooks a single one?

Why would you ever complain, O Jacob,
or, whine, Israel, saying,
'God has lost track of me. He doesn't care what happens to me?'
Don't you know anything? Haven't you been listening?

God doesn't come and go. God *lasts*.
He's Creator of all you can see or imagine.
He doesn't get tired out, doesn't pause to catch his breath.
And he knows *everything*, inside and out.
He energizes those who get tired,
gives fresh strength to dropouts.
For even young people tire and drop out,
young folk in their prime stumble and fall.

But those who wait upon God get fresh strength.
They spread their wings and soar like eagles,
They run and don't get tired,
they walk and don't lag behind.

Reflection

I'm not sure that I have ever seen an eagle in the wild. We've been to places where this iconic bird can be found, but even with binoculars, it wasn't possible to be certain that the distant speck really was an eagle. However, today's reading prompted me to think about some other birds that I do recognise.

We've recently moved house from a market town in Surrey to a large village in South Oxfordshire (ironically to be nearer the two older grandchildren, but we promptly went into the second lockdown). From a wide range of standard – but very attractive – garden birds, we are now in red kite country. Our regular walks around the village and beyond are accompanied by the high piping notes of this spectacular bird as it soars, swoops and wheels around in the skies above us. Quite a contrast from the noisy chattering and jostling of the rooks that congregate in a tree just down the road.

Rather different from the Westland Petrel that we saw in New Zealand a couple of years ago. We'd been to an International Rural Churches Association conference and followed this with a short holiday in the north end of South Island. The petrel nests in burrows on a short stretch of the Westland coast up in the hills – their only breeding ground in the whole world. The local conservationist took us to a landing site just before dusk and told us about this rare bird and its habits. Fledglings practice flying by jumping off logs: the first time they properly launch into the air, they set off to catch the air currents – and stay out at sea for around 5-10 years before returning to within a couple of yards from where they hatched. Unfortunately, they are built for constant flight rather than landing! As the first arrivals began to return for the nesting session, we watched their elegant flight before a real crash landing with a loud thud, winding themselves. After a stunned silence, there was a lot of muttering while they recovered, and then they waddled off to find a burrow in ungainly contrast to their flight.

Thinking about the beauty, wonder and variety of these birds made me reflect on soaring and landing! As the days shorten and evenings draw in, the natural world around us is closing down and preparing for winter. For many of us, our levels of activity are increasing with the coming of Advent and Christmas, compounded by constantly changing guidelines and regulations when we are already tired after the challenges of this extraordinary year. It is all too easy for me to associate activity and busyness with achievement (like the noisy rooks), especially when there is so much to do and so much need around. But for us as humans, there is also the need for rest and refreshment if we are not to exhaust our reserves of energy and spiritual wellbeing. Soaring is fine, but we don't want to find ourselves crash landing and perhaps causing damage to ourselves and others as we do so.

This reading from Isaiah gives us the wonderful promise of renewal and fresh strength but reminds us that this is dependent on our commitment to waiting on the Lord. The previous verses have spoken about our incomparable God, who created and holds in his hands both the night sky and stars, and who knows them all by name. He never overlooks a single one and never loses track of us whatever we may feel like.

Prayer

Lord, you know my tendency to keep busy and fill my hours with useful work for you.
Help me to recognize when I need time for rest and refreshment
and to follow your example of withdrawing into the presence of my loving Father,
so that I can put the stresses and strains of daily life into a new perspective
And may be renewed and refreshed to serve you and to soar on wings like an eagle.

Response

What does waiting on the Lord look like to you? Find an opportunity each day this week to rest and be renewed in whatever way brings you closer to God in peace. You might be able to:

- Look at the stars – God never overlooks a single one
- Look at the birds in the garden – what do they say to you about God?
- Lift your eyes to the 'quiet hills' – where our help comes from.

Use this time to rest in his love.

Is there a way that you could share a load / responsibility / preparation with someone else in a way that would make life easier for both of you?

And some advice from many years ago from Jane Williams that I have found helpful:

How to survive Christmas

- Sing a lot, especially in Advent (ideally only in the privacy of your own home this year; carol singing is permitted in some areas of the UK but check local restrictions)
- Don't forget that this is a celebration, not a marathon
- It doesn't all depend on us. God did all the work – we've just been invited to the party

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