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Leading in interesting times!

I hope that you're managing to re-establish something vaguely resembling 'normality' as you navigate your way through these early days of 2021. While the reality of the ongoing - and currently worsening - COVID-19 crisis means that none of us really believed that 1 January would really mark some magical fresh start, I'm not sure anyone really imagined the challenges that our nation and our world have experienced over this last week.

I'm writing this introduction in a break in play during this week's online Germinate Leadership residential. When I'm immersed in thinking intentionally about leadership theology, theory and practice I find it impossible to separate what I'm learning and enabling others to learn on the programme from the models and exercise of leadership that we see all around us all the time.

Whether we've led - a church, organisation, family, business... - through the pandemic or followed, we'll all have been reminded, I'm sure, of just how powerful effective and compassionate leadership can be. Let's commit ourselves again to praying for our leaders over these next few weeks.

Go well!

Louise, on behalf of the Arthur Rank Centre team

Longing for Justice

Bible Reading: Psalm 69:1-4, 33-36

Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.

I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold.

I have come into the deep waters; the floods engulf me.

I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched.

My eyes fail, looking for my God.

Those who hate me without reason outnumber the hairs of my head;

many are my enemies without cause, those who seek to destroy me.

I am forced to restore what I did not steal.

You, God, know my folly; my guilt is not hidden from you.

The Lord hears the needy and does not despise his captive people.

Let heaven and earth praise him, the seas and all that move in them, for God will save Zion and rebuild the cities of Judah.

Then people will settle there and possess it; the children of his servants will inherit it, and those who love his name will dwell there

Reflection

The cry of desperation is not uncommon among the psalms. But as the Psalm ends, its tone changes into confidence in a God who sees and understands and will bring deliverance and prosperity. It is almost as if God was hidden from view, leaving the psalmist to focus only on the problems. But then the psalmist sees his deliverer and bursts into praise.

The sense of despair in the opening verses of the Psalm may well find an echo in the lives of many rural people. Those living in more isolated homes will be even more isolated because of the lockdown. This is especially a concern for more elderly people on their own. The closure of village pubs and community halls, and the regulations affecting churches exacerbate the isolation and loneliness issues, and potentially affect mental health and wellbeing. In many areas, poor internet connection will make working and studying from home more difficult. While reductions in an already limited public transport system makes access to essential services an issue and, I suspect, waiting times for emergency services will be extended.

Reading this Psalm reminded me of an experience when I was falsely accused and threatened with undeserved consequences as a teenager. I had obtained a temporary clerical post in a small Inland Revenue valuation Office while undertaking initial training as an evangelist in my spare time. During my second year there I had taken two week's leave in order to take part in an outreach programme for a village church.

I had returned, still excited by the experience, only to find that a furious Senior Valuer was waiting for me. As I stood nervously in front of his desk, I learned that during my absence an important document could not be found and the whole of the office had joined the hunt, largely focused on the filing room. This was my domain, pre-computerisation, and where there were several overflowing piles of forms that had accumulated during my absence. In the search they had come across a note I had written to remind me of two papers I had to write as part of my evangelism training.

I was falsely accused of using the time for which I was paid in order to engage in journalism. I was further warned that one person in the office had to lose their job and as I was only temporary, I should expect it to be me. The Area Staff Officer would be visiting that afternoon.

Terror and the feeling of injustice gripped me. I was unable to speak, but as I left his room to return to the General Office, I felt urged to look up the text printed in the Daily Telegraph personal

advertisements. Colleagues anxiously asked if I was alright as I entered the room, so I assured them I would be once I had read the scripture. A colleague slid his copy of the paper across his desk. After reading it I laughed and read aloud the verse which was from Jeremiah chapter one: "They will fight against you, But they shall not prevail against you. For I am with you," says the Lord, "to deliver you."

That afternoon the Chief Clerk entered the filing room, and I was introduced to the Area Staff Officer. To my surprise he shook my hand as he told me he had heard about me. I waited for the news of dismissal, but instead was offered a permanent position as a Civil Servant and, if I wanted it, the opportunity to be trained as a Valuer. Instead of being dismissed I was offered a promotion!

If you are currently feeling like the psalmist, overwhelmed by problems, remember that the Psalm does not end there. God will never abandon you.

Prayer

Lord, you know us well and the struggle we sometimes feel when faced with seemingly insurmountable problems, and even injustice. Grant us a steady confidence in your promises. Cause your Word to come alive in our hearts, bringing light that dispels darkness.

Hear our cry for your aid and come swiftly to deliver us in our time of need. Turn despair into delight. Lift us above the things that seem to overwhelm us. Grant us the peace that comes from knowing that you never abandon those who trust in you.

Amen.

Response

As the COVID-19 crisis continues, it is hoped that Christians living in rural communities will be watchful for those who need support or care, and stand ready to demonstrate God's love through acts of service.

There is little that is worse than feeling isolated and abandoned, with little hope as we face the challenges of these days. A simple word from you over the phone might radically change someone's circumstances.

Take a moment to prayerfully reflect on any who might need that word from you today, then reach for your phone.