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Do not fear: you are mine

Welcome to our penultimate Together Apart email! It's been the most enormous privilege to walk with you, and with rural churches across the UK and further afield over the last eighteen months of COVID-19.

It's been a significant period on a number of levels, not just for our churches but as a nation and nations. We've served our communities and clapped for carers. We've gained new appreciation of the unsung heroes in our midst: supermarket staff and posties, bus drivers and refuse collectors, teachers and police officers.

But we've also become aware - or been reminded - in new ways of the dark underbelly of our national life with the murder of George Floyd thousands of miles away prompting soul-searching on this side of the Atlantic.

Whoever you supported in the Euros - or whether you chose to ignore them completely - it's difficult not to be struck by the mirror that the journey of the England men's football team before and during that tournament has held up to us as a nation. Gareth Southgate, the England head coach, is widely acknowledged as having modelled an approach to leadership that has been lacking in other areas of public life this year. The squad itself includes young men who, both before and during the tournament, have stood up to racism and homophobia and, in the case of Marcus Rashford, successfully spearheaded a campaign which transformed UK government's policy on providing support during the holidays for those eligible for free school meals.

And yet, on Monday morning, as England began to come to terms with their defeat to Italy, the three young black men - including Rashford - who had failed to score in the penalty shootout which concluded that final match received an appalling barrage of racist abuse on social media.

This year we've seen something of the best and the worst of who we can be.

We know that this pandemic is not over. We know that the challenges we face as a nation and as communities will continue for some time to come. We know that individually and collectively we all too often fail to be the people God has created and called us to be. There is still work to be done, on ourselves and in our nation.

And yet.

As Isaiah 43, our passage for today, reminds us:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.

However we're feeling this week, as we look back over the last eighteen months or look forward to the next week, remember that God has called you by name and you are his.

We at the Arthur Rank Centre - and all our Together Apart partners - will continue to support, encourage, equip and resource rural Christians through the pandemic and beyond. We are currently exploring how the Together Apart partners might continue to work together in ways which spiritually bless and practically support those living, working and worshipping in rural communities, and we - and many of those partners - will continue to be in touch via our existing e-mailings.

Go well!

Louise, on behalf of the Arthur Rank Centre team

Bible reading: Isaiah 43:1-4a, 18-19

But now thus says the Lord,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.
I give Egypt as your ransom,
Ethiopia^[a] and Seba in exchange for you.
Because you are precious in my sight,
and honoured, and I love you.

Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

Reflection

It is not often that a Bible passage can change your life, but these verses changed mine. The first four verses were given to me at a time of great personal difficulty. They quickly became part of my call to train as a Methodist Local Preacher, the beginning of a journey into Methodist Ministry. The passage spoke to me because it is so grounded in reality: not 'if you walk through fire and water', but *when*. It is also very personal: 'I have called you by name, you are mine'.

God reminds us that when bad things happen, God walks with us because we are loved and precious. These words came back to me at various points when life was tough. A reminder to hang on because I am not alone. As we have travelled through COVID-19, so many of us have needed this reminder that we are known and loved by God.

We are called to share such knowledge with others and rural churches have found all kinds of ways to do that in the last year. Practical help, staying in touch, prayer with and for our communities have helped others to see that they are not alone.

The next challenge we face is to work out how we *continue* to be church. What are we called to take with us from the past and what should we leave behind? What lessons have we learned? These questions bring us to the last two verses of this reading. They came to me alongside the first section at a retreat in 2014, a reassurance that applying for my present post as National Rural Officer for the Methodist and United Reformed Churches was the right thing to do. Seven years later, as I prepare to retire this summer, they cropped up again in a sermon.

I may be heading in a new direction, but God is still there, helping me to consider the new things, readying to serve him in new ways. I pray that as rural churches we may be able to consider the new things that God is doing and join in, learning from our past but not be tied to it, remembering that best of all, God is with us.

Prayer

Holy One,

thank you that you have called us each by name,

that you know us and love us, that we are precious in your sight.

Incarnate One,

thank you that you walk with us,

through the rivers and flames of COVID.

You help us to grow even through the difficult times.

Sending One,

help us to see the new things you are doing and join in.

Give the strength to take your message of love to those around us.

God, Three in One and One in Three,

bless us and keep us now and forever.

Amen

Response

Spend some time thinking of the people and practices that have brought you this far. Give thanks to God for them.

Look at the new things you have begun or been part of during the pandemic. Where do you see God in them? What new thing may God be calling you to?

Revd Elizabeth Clark, National Rural Officer for the Methodist and United Reformed Churches