

Lent 2

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 13 March 2022

Readings: Philippians 3 v 17 – 4 v 1 and Luke 13 vv 31-end

These days, there is no shortage of material when it comes to difficult news. News of an ongoing pandemic. News of unimaginable violence in Ukraine. The manipulation of an entire nation, as Russian people are denied access to honest reporting about what is happening in a country which was to all intents and purposes the birthplace of Russia's religious identity and spirituality. News of death and loss, destruction and fear – not to mention the difficult moments in our personal lives. This week is the second anniversary of our realisation of the reality of the Covid-19 pandemic and the disruption to our lives. After two years, we are weary.

The words in Psalm 27 are comforting. They say, 'The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear?' and 'though war should rise up against me, yet will I put my trust in him.' These words are about trusting God and not being afraid. The irony is that among all the difficult news with which we have been bombarded, it has been really easy to be afraid. Is it that we lack faith if we are afraid? Is fear a sign that we are not trusting God enough? Elsewhere in the Bible, God commands us, many times, not to be afraid. Perhaps these reminders, 'Do not be afraid', are not to shame us when we are, but to recognise that, just like us, people *in* the Bible had moments when they were afraid. They longed to be comforted too. God is with us not just in our grand declarations of faith, but also when we are afraid. This psalm, for good reason, is a favourite because it is one to which we can turn when fear rears its ugly head. It is a psalm that longs for the days of '[dwelling] in the house of the Lord,' 'sounds of great gladness,' and '[seeing] the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.' It is a psalm of comfort. It is a psalm of reassurance in the big picture which may be beyond our comprehension at the moment.

This Lenten season is a perfect time to be seeking 'the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living'. In the last few years, we have been surrounded by death in very acute ways. The priest says to us, 'Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return' while placing ashes in the shape of a cross on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday. Lent does not shy away from the harder things of this life; when we are reminded of our own mortality. We are also reminded of the life we have yet to live. No matter how much time we have left, at least for today, we are alive and we are breathing. The breath in our lungs is a gift.

The society that we live in does not like to be reminded of death. Talk about death is often hushed. People who are dying are often in nursing homes or hospitals, detached from day-to-day life. We use euphemisms. But death is part of life.

The goodness of the Lord is still present, even in times of great trouble. Perhaps especially in times of great trouble. The psalmist asks, 'What if I had not believed that I should see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living?' That goodness is not just at the end of days when God makes all things right, but in the present moment, too. It's all around us if we only slow down and pay attention.

An image that the Gospel lesson gives us today is that of God as a mother hen. There is nothing weak about the mother hen; she demonstrates boldness, compassion, and the

willingness to do whatever it takes to protect those whom she loves. Not much can get in the way of a powerful and determined mother hen.

The invitation this Lent is to carry the image of God as a mother hen with us as we travel through this season. This does not ignore the realities of the dangers up ahead, but it does give us something to hold onto when we are afraid. How we long to be gathered under those wings! Much like those comforting words from Psalm 27, knowing that God is with us at every twist and turn can make a world of a difference — even and especially in these difficult times.

The words of Isaiah, God's reassurance to the exiles, remain true today; for us, and for the refugees from Ukraine and those left behind, fearful of what may happen.

'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.'

May it be so. Amen.