

Link to a simple act of worship: <https://youtu.be/4jrsOLlcPUE>

Over these past few weeks, among the passages set to be read in our worship have been passages from Paul's Letter to the Philippians. This is one of Paul's later letters, written while he was in captivity in Rome, not long before his death.

It is written in very affectionate terms. The passage today is full of expressions of warm encouragement.

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. *Phil 4:4-6*

Could I ask you a very honest question? Are there times when words like this are hard to hear; times when rejoicing, thankfulness seem very empty, almost offensive?

For those of us living in the Republic, this has been a very difficult week, beginning with the suggestion that the whole country be moved to level 5. As it is, the whole country is on level 3, delivered with a warning to us all of further restrictions to come if they are required. There is a real anxiety in the air as to the effect that continued restrictions, let alone increased restrictions will have on our society.

There are businesses, both large and small, who have real anxieties about the days that lie ahead. There are individuals who have serious worries about their future employment.

And Paul says:

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. *Phil 4:4-6*

I'm sure that I'm not the only one who can look back to times when God seemed very far away, didn't even seem to be noticing my anguish.

As I thought on that I returned to a book I have in my study on prayer in times of darkness, 'Out of the Deep', that I would pick up from time to time. In the introduction, the author speaks of his own experience of losing his father towards the end of his time at school. He speaks of a numbness. Then, one afternoon, a year and a half later, when studying music in Rome, he recalls a visit to St John Lateran, a magnificent basilica. He recalls:

'When I went there teenagers were playing football in the park and hurtling around the piazza on motor scooters. I was suddenly gripped by a terrible loneliness; and when I entered the vast and dimly lit basilica with its eighty marble columns and gorgeous mosaics I was overwhelmed, not just with awe but with anger, at the God who had taken away my father and yet seemed to enjoy dwelling in buildings of such icy magnificence; anger too at a world which could go happily about its business as heedless of my loss as God was. I gave vent to my feelings in tears of fury and self pity; and neither the laughing footballers nor the God of the great basilica took any notice. Yet I was left with a strangely clear awareness that it was all right to be angry and lonely and to say so – and that, in some inexplicable sense, what I had said had been heard.' *Out of the Deep – page 2*

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This chimes with a blessing that I would often use at the end of a service:

Go, and know that the Lord goes with you:
let him lead you each day into the quiet place
of your heart, where he will speak with you;
know that he watches over you –
that he listens to you in gentle understanding,
that he is with you always,
wherever you are and however you may feel:

We are heard. As that young man discovered in that basilica in Rome that wet and windy afternoon, there is something profoundly healing in that realisation. We are heard, we are not alone. It may not take away our troubles, but we realise that we are not alone in our troubles. As I've been thinking through all this, I thought of the father bringing his child first to the disciples and then to Jesus for healing. When challenged to believe, he cried out 'Lord I believe, help my unbelief!'. Sometimes, like that father, we too are hanging on by our spiritual fingertips. The God who meets us in Christ hears our cry. The God who meets us in Christ, who knows, really knows, what it is to be human, what it is to laugh, to cry, to be afraid, to feel abandoned; this same God walks this road with us. Then we can hear, really hear those lovely words in our Lesson as Paul says:

⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Maybe this day, you are in a good place. Maybe you are struggling. Struggling with worries and anxieties, struggling with simply making sense of life at the minute. Wherever you are on your journey of faith, may you know

that God is walking this journey with you, that he hears you, that he understands you – and in that knowledge may know his peace.