

God is always with us...

...no matter where we are or how we feel.

A sermon given on the Seventeenth Sunday of Trinity (Harvest Celebration), 4th October 2020, by the Curate, the Revd Tim Kelly, in the Minster.

From Psalms 13 and 23

Tim read from Ps23; Ben read from Ps 13 with verses interspersed.

At a funeral that I led this last week, one of our readings was the well-known passage from the beginning of the third chapter of Ecclesiastes. I'm sure you know it: "For everything, there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven; a time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance." I offered the suggestion that it was a time both to mourn and to dance. Of course, it was a time to mourn the loss of a loved one, but it was also a time to celebrate all of the happy memories shared by the family. And it was also a time to rejoice because as Christians, we know that death is not the end, that God's love has conquered death.

As our new Archbishop Steven reminded us in our current times in one of his first speeches in his current role, the words from 1 Corinthians 15, "Death has been swallowed up in victory; where O death is your victory? where O death is your sting?" And of course, today we are celebrating harvest, a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to celebrate the resources that we have reaped and enjoy. And although some of our harvest offering today of tins and bags of pasta may not look like it's been plucked from the ground, it's still very definitely represents the reaped offerings from the hard labour and well-earned resources of those kindly donated. So a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to plant and a time to harvest and of course, a time to weep and a time to laugh.

I would suggest that one of the characteristics of our Christian life is that we are constantly holding things in tension. There is a sure and certain hope of God's kingdom fully restored, a future time as it says in Revelation, when God will wipe every tear from their eyes; death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more. But there's also sometimes the deafening and near overwhelming awareness of how the Kingdom of God is not yet here. Perhaps this is particularly apparent in the middle of our coronavirus pandemic. We can easily be overwhelmed by the darkness of the news and of how this most certainly isn't how God would want us to be. This tension serves to remind us that we stand in the

middle as Christians; we are aware of light in the midst of darkness. You could even say we are more aware of the light because of the dark, just as when we celebrate harvest, we can't help but be more aware of those in the world who don't have the resources that we have. With the current restrictions, we are perhaps more aware of the need and value of hugs when we cannot hug one another, we can appreciate how important it is to be able to meet together, to worship in church when we suddenly can't. And perhaps we yearn for the closeness of God, particularly at those times when he feels most far away from us.

Now, one of the perils of standing here in the pulpit is that my time may not be your time; my time to laugh may not be your time to laugh; my time to weep, may not be your time to weep. And that's what I love about these two songs we heard this morning - I can let you pick which voice you most closely identified with today [Tim read from Psalm 23; Ben read from Psalm 13]. The Psalms, as in Psalm 23, can capture the heights of praise, the warmest and most comforting words: "I fear no evil for you are with me." But at the same time as in some 13, they can also capture the depths of lament and despair: "How long, our Lord, will you forget me forever?" But of course, they have one author, the same author, David, they represent the views of the same person, but at different times when experiencing different circumstances and emotions. It's just conceivable that as we come together to celebrate harvest this morning, you may not, because of your current circumstances or current outlook on the world, feel in a celebratory mood. If that is you this morning, I want to suggest two things. Firstly, as with the Psalmist, you don't need to hide your frustrations and disappointments from God. God wants to listen to you and is ready to hear you when you feel you're in a dark place just as much as when times are good. Be honest with God. But secondly, remember to trust, to cleave, to grasp and to cling to the hope that we have been given by God. Even in the end, the desperate pleas and petitions of Psalm 13 turn to praise.

How is this? Trust and faith: a remembering and a restatement of covenant promises made even before we can see things getting better; remembering God has promised us that he will never leave us.

So today we can take comfort that God is with us in these difficult times; God is with us as we hold together the tension of how things currently are and how things could and should be. And today, God is with us in the celebration of the harvest, just as God is with those who do not have a harvest to celebrate.

Reading Text

Psalms 13 and 23 with verses interspersed, Ps13 in italics; Ps23 in bold

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want;

How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?

He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; ³ he restores my soul.

How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

He leads me in right paths for his name's sake

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? ³ Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death, ⁴ and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed";

your rod and your staff— they comfort me ⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows

But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.