

Second Sunday of Lent, 17 March 2019
Sermon by Sarah Paxton, Trainee Reader at St Peter's Limpsfield
Psalm 27; Luke 13 31 – end and Philippians 3 :17- 4:1

I don't know about you, but I enjoy crime dramas. Something good about the forensics. And the uncanny way those detectives and investigators have of working out the criminals or the murderer.

Currently I have been watching Shetland; I like Vera too. It must be something about the northern air and having a son who is half Scottish. Anyone watch Shetland?

It has been all been a bit hair raising, hasn't it, with all the human trafficking.

Far from being fictional it all feels a bit too real. For those of you who don't know there's a young African girl trapped and locked up in Shetland in a remote farmhouse. Her fear of what is going to happen to her is palpable. Her mother who is looking for her is also anxious beyond words. The girl manages to escape only to be found and taken back to be locked up. Isn't that our worst nightmare- that happens in dreams sometimes doesn't it. We are fighting to get out of somewhere and find ourselves back right in the midst of the trouble.

So when we are watching all this, we get caught up in the fear ourselves. Pulses racing, jumping at those heart stopping moments, only then to realise we are sitting in our warm sitting rooms and it is only a story.

For us listening to this psalm this morning, we can also take an armchair approach. It is a story of fear and someone being chased. That person is thought to be David – David once a shepherd boy, who defeated the Philistine called Goliath with a sling and a stone. Now a great leader of whom King Saul was very jealous, who is being chased by King Saul and in fear of his life. The full story is found in the first book of Samuel and feels just like the chase in the Shetland story.

What does he say about his fear- he talks about an army besieging him, his foes attacking him, of evil men and oppressors, of false witnesses breathing out violence. He is in despair and in his desperation, he cries out to the Lord.

Verse 7 Hear my voice Lord when I call.

Verse 9 Do not hide your face from me

Do not reject me or forsake me

Verse 12 Don't hand me over to the other side.

And when he calls this young man has the satisfaction of knowing and feeling that God hasn't left him. He knows that God will keep him safe and set him on a rock – in other words out of danger.

He knows that God will shelter him – will shelter him in his temple. Just like Jesus talks about Jerusalem in the gospel. He wanted to cradle the City in his arms and shelter it from its own destruction by hiding it like a bird hides its young under its wings when there is danger, when they are afraid, when there are strong winds buffeting the small creatures. What a lovely picture that is when we are in trouble.

We can see Jesus wrapping his arms around us, enfolding us in his protective love, stopping the cold strong winds from setting us off course. Stopping us losing our balance, falling out of the nest, preventing us being driven out into the storm.

And now returning to this psalm, what images does the psalm give us of our God when we need him and are frightened or feeling we are going off course.

The three images there are in the psalm are strong pictures – similes of our God.

They are of

LIGHT

Of SALVATION

And of STRONGHOLD.

We talk so often about **light** – and the light of Christ being our guide.

It is useful to notice that sometimes the light we follow is a flickering torch where we can only just see the path beneath us and nothing much else is revealed for now. And at other times it is a huge spotlight or searchlight, where everything around us becomes visible in that light. The whole path and road ahead is lit up. We can see not only the path but the destination. So the Lord is my light, my light and salvation of whom shall I fear.

The second word is **salvation**. Is the Lord my salvation? Is it him to whom I turn to save me in the storms of life or to hear my cries.

Do we battle in our own strength and wonder where God is? Perhaps we need to let go sometimes. When we acknowledge we need Jesus, Jesus comes to us. We just need to ask and seek him – usually in quietness. We need to ask, to seek his love and forgiveness. He who longs us to ask and to have a relationship with Him is such a willing participant in our life. And he transforms us. He saves us. He is our Salvation. When he is our Salvation and we know it, we often want to praise him and to stay with him – as the psalmist puts it:

“One thing have I asked of the Lord- this is what I ask – that I may dwell in the House of the lord all the days of my life. To Gaze on the beauty of the lord and seek him in his temple.”

What a lovely image. Many of us feel that here in this place. It is a sanctuary – it is peaceful - but it is also a power house. It is here that we turn for our strength and it is here we recharge our batteries to go out into the world again. The flickering light of our faith is strengthened by being part of a greater flame, a greater fire, where all of us together support each other to burn bright again. We see that don't we when we pass candles round the church – when one light ignites another and the two flames are stronger together, producing an effervescent light.

The third image we can take away from this psalm is that of **a stronghold**.

A safe place where we are completely safe – where we are not going to be attacked and where there is nothing to fear. That may be at the top of a mountain where we can see our enemy from afar but are safe away from him, or it might be hidden away in a cave or sheltering with God cradled in his arms – safe from the buffeting of the world.

For me that stronghold is in prayer. When I am afraid, I don't have to worry, but to trust. To seek his presence- or as the psalmist puts it – to seek God's face. To ask him to teach me his Way of dealing with the situation, imparting his Wisdom. And that might be through any one of us fellow Christians or it might be a quiet nudge from God himself through his Holy Spirit reaching out to us. It can be a nudge, an insistent thought. But first we need to seek Him out. We need to spend time – quietly seeking Him. Doing less talking than trying to listen, to still our racing minds and be attentive. We might need some quiet music or a

candle to focus on. But even ten minutes of stillness and reflection will help us when we are in need of a stronghold.

Wait for the Lord, the Psalmist says – be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.

Paul in his letter in the epistle this morning advises that Jesus has the power to bring everything under his control.

He has. Do we believe that? Or do we like to feel in control?

Sometimes we are so stressed we cannot pray. Or prayer feels alien. And it is in those times that we need to seek others' help; to ask them to pray or for help. We are together the Body of Christ, we are all different. But we are all joined together purposely to be of mutual support for one another. Is one in need. Let us help him. Is one bereaved, let us cry with her.

The disciples in the week before the Crucifixion said to Jesus when he was telling a story about the last days –

“Lord, when did we see you hungry or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison and did not help you?

And he said “whatever you did for any of these you did it for me.”

Jesus expects it of us – we are here to help each other out. So, as we ponder our psalm this morning may I encourage you to cut it out of the service sheet when you get home, pin it up on your wall this lent and look at it when we are in need of comfort and encouragement. And when we are feeling strong may we share the Light of God's love with others.

The Lord is my Light, my Light and Salvation - of whom shall I fear?

Let us pray

Dear Lord, there are so many things we are afraid of, so many things that paralyse us.

Let us look beyond ourselves to see you

To seek your face

To rest in your presence

Help us believe and trust that you are our Light and our Salvation, our help in times of joy and in trouble, our refuge and our stronghold.

Help to take away our fear Lord and live freely

Without anxiety or worry

Help us to increase our faith and to help others around us who are facing anxious or sad times.

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayer.