**Psalm 27**

**Finding God when life is tough**

Where is God when life gets tough?

 It’s a question that we have all asked at one time or another, isn’t it? When life throws us a real curve ball, it can feel like God is nowhere to be found and we are just left to struggle on our own…Where is God when life gets tough?

The Psalm that we heard read just now – Psalm 27 – speaks into that feeling because it is primarily a reflection on the nearness of God to us as we journey through life. It’s a reflection on how God protects us and guards us even in the most difficult times of life, and how we can practically seek God out when life is tough for us.

And that’s what I want to spend a few minutes thinking about today.

As you may know, the Church in England was formed out of two different traditions. The first of these was the Roman Catholic tradition, which has informed much of what we do as a church today. But the other tradition is known as the Celtic tradition. It’s not quite so prominent at St. Andrew’s, although our Thursday Eucharist uses Celtic liturgy.

And the Celtic tradition is beautiful in that it engages all of our senses and speaks to our emotions and how we can find God in the tangible things of life: creation, people, art and so on…

In the Celtic tradition, there is something called ‘thin places’. ‘Thin places’ are geographical locations where people may go to be closer to God. Ancient monasteries, maybe the islands of Lindisfarne or Iona or maybe an ancient church like ours, places where there are holy trees or holy mountains or holy wells or maybe somewhere like Lourdes or Walsingham to make a pilgrimage.

‘Thin places’ are so important for us to find because they suggest that, in reality, the veil between the physical world and the spiritual world is very thin indeed.

Perhaps you have your own ‘thin places’: a beach somewhere, or a hill, or a cemetery, or somewhere in the countryside where you can go and immediately feel connected to God.

And, of course, it’s not the place itself that is sacred so much as the emotions that the place stirs up in us and we realize that God is closer to us than we may think…

Some passages from the Bible act as reminders, almost as a literary ‘thin place’ to remind us of just how close God is to us, if we would open our eyes to see…I think Psalm 27 is one of those passages: a ‘thin place’ that reminds us of how close we are to God in the present moment:

"The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?

Come, my heart says, 'seek God's face.' Your face O Lord do I seek.

Do not hide your face from me.

I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living."

This passage reminds us of the intimacy that we share with God.

But that may seem all well and good when life is going well. But what about when we are struggling in life? What about when we are experiencing turmoil and chaos in our lives? It’s all very well speaking about being intimate with God when things are fine but what about when life is just very tough?

Well, this Psalm was written by King David when he was experiencing just that. From other verses in this Psalm, we get the sense that life was a real struggle for him. Listen to some of these verses:

“Evildoers assail me to devour my flesh”

“An army encamp about me”

“War rises up against me”

“Do not cast me off, do not forsake me”

“Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries”

“False witnesses have risen against me and they are breathing out violence”

When David wrote this Psalm, he was going through a really tough time in life. It seems as if everything around him was chaotic and he was being threatened physically, emotionally, and spiritually. But even in the midst of his struggles, David knew that God was with him and would protect him. This is a Psalm of confidence, written even in the midst of life’s bitter struggles.

So how do we find God when life is tough? What do we need to do in order to rediscover our intimacy with him? I think this Psalm gives us 2 pointers to think about through phrases that David uses in verse 4 .

**1. We need to focus on what we *know* about God, not how we *feel* about God**

In verse 4, David writes this: “One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life.”

There have been times in my life when I have felt really close to God. A few times in big worship events, I have found real intimacy with God. Standing on a beach in South India, I was overwhelmed with the power of God. When I was ordained, I felt the hand of God on my life in a very emotional way. But the reality, for me at least, is that I have lived with a sense of the absence of God far more than I have lived with a sense of the presence of God. When people I loved have died. When I have been ill, or have watched others become ill. Through the sheer routine of everyday life; day in and day out – much of the same. When the plans I have made for my life have not come to fruition…These sorts of events, the difficult moments and the routine of life have been far more constant a companion than the spiritual highs of deep intimacy with my Creator.

So, 95% of the time, I have to remind myself what I *know* about God rather than how I *feel* about God. If my faith relied on my feelings, then my faith would never really grow at all.

Instead, I have a history, a personal history, in which I have seen the footprints of God in my life, sometimes in quite random ways and so I *know* that he has been with me. I have surrounded myself with people of faith and listened to their life-stories and so I *know* that God has been active in their lives. I have tried to soak myself in the Bible stories and learnt from them and so I *know* that God has been active throughout history.

And when times get tough for me, or even when I am consumed with boredom and routine, I can go back to what I *know* rather than rely on how I *feel*.

It is such a crucial spiritual discipline for us all to develop. We need to have the discipline of looking back over our lives to discern God. We need to hear the stories of other people’s encounters with God. We need to soak ourselves in the Scriptures to learn about the God of history. And then, when our feelings are either negative or just numb, we will be able to go back to what we *know is true* and lean on that knowledge to get us through.

But there’s one more thing to say about this if we read verse 4 again: “One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life…and to inquire in his temple.” For David, as he wrote this Psalm, there was a direct link between holding firm with God in the midst of life’s trials and regularly attending worship.

I’ve said this many times before and I’m sure that I will say it many times again, that when life is tough or seems chaotic we must absolutely resist the temptation to stop coming to church. It’s so easy to fall into that trap, isn’t it? When we feel far away from God, we give church a miss one Sunday, and then we give it a miss a second Sunday, and then the pattern starts to emerge and we find it very easy indeed to cease coming to church altogether. But such a decision is absolutely fatal for us because we cannot stay strong in faith if we cease meeting with our church family to worship together. We need to stay plugged into the church family – even when we may not feel like it - otherwise our faith will just wither and die.

So, when life is tough and all around us seems chaotic, the first lesson that we learn from this Psalm is that we must rely on what we *know* about God rather than how we *feel* about God and that we absolutely must stay connected to worship with our church family otherwise we will spiritually die.

But as true as all that is, we remember that God has made us with emotions as well as rationality and if we are to get through difficult times in life and stay connected to God then we must engage our emotions as well as our mind. And that’s the second point from verse 4 of this Psalm.

**2. Pursue beauty in life and find God in that**

In verse 4, David writes this: “…to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord”.

Beauty is such an important thing for us. Beauty feeds our souls, beauty enlivens our imaginations. Beauty makes us feel whole as it engages our creativity. As emotional human beings, we find God through beauty.

Now, beauty looks different for each one of us, I guess. For me, I listen to a searing Pink Floyd track or an emotionally dark Marillion song, and I find exquisite beauty that can reduce me to tears. But the angst of Roger Waters or Fish may not do it for you. Instead, you may read a Wordsworth poem, or look at a Rembrandt painting and it may stir your soul. You may listen to Verdi’s ‘Rigoletto’ and be moved to the depths of your being or maybe taste some Indonesian cuisine that transforms your understanding of how beautiful food can be…

Wherever you find beauty, pursue it, because in beauty, you will find the face of God. Just as we need food to nourish our bodies, we need beauty to nourish our souls. So much of our world contains violence and brutality that we need to temper that with beauty.

And we need to share our experiences of beauty with one another and learn about beauty from one another. I might mention Pink Floyd and you think, ‘Ugh! That’s awful music’. But if I sat down with you and took you through one of their songs, it may not be to your taste still, but you would understand what the beauty is for me. Likewise, I get nothing from Landscape Paintings: they leave me cold on the whole. But that’s because I don’t understand them and I don’t understand how to find the beauty within them. So share with me your experience of beauty in that form of painting and we will both be enriched.

In beauty, you will find the face of God. As you proactively decide to pursue beauty, so your heart will soften and you will rediscover the closeness of God to you.

So, when David wrote this Psalm, he was going through a tough time. There was chaos and disorder in his world; he was in danger physically, emotionally and spiritually. In the natural course of things, he didn’t feel close to God. So he knew that he should proactively seek out two ways of filling his life to change that. He had to focus on what he *knew* about God, rather than how he *felt* about God. He had to pursue beauty and find in that the face of God. It wouldn’t have been any easier for him to do that than it is for any of us when we are struggling in life. But making the determined effort was worth it to preserve and strengthen his faith.

David recognised that it was a process; that a rediscovery of intimacy with God would take time. But that is what life is all about; the journey into intimacy with God - and we need patience for that. As David wrote in the last verse of this Psalm: “Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!”

If you are experiencing a chaotic period in your life right now, wait on the Lord. Focus on what you know to be true. Pursue beauty. And intimacy with God will return as sure as day follows the night.