

“Practising Faith in Times of Isolation”

31 January 2021 - Led by Rev. Mark Proctor (Naas, Moderator of Presbytery)

Gathering: I Arise Today (St. Patrick's Breastplate)

Welcome & Call To Worship: Psalm 95:1-2,6-7

Opening Hymn: IPH 486 Amazing Grace (Greystones)

Prayers of Adoration & Confession: Rev. Michael Anderson (Arklow)

Children's Address: Katie Burke (Adelaide Road)

Children's Song: You Are Everywhere (Lucan)

Reading: Psalm 139:1-14 (Esther Jeffery - Aghada)

Reading: Philippians 4:4-9 (John Letshwiti - Galway)

Sermon: Rev. John Woodside

Good morning. It's a great privilege to share in the service with you this morning. Before we come to God's Word, let's take a moment to pray. *May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing in Your sight, for Your great name's sake, amen.*

Let me draw your attention to a single verse in the Bible from Psalm 115:2: *“Why do the nations say, ‘Where is their God?’”* As I think of us scattered all over the presbytery this morning, indeed all over this island, I suspect that there's one thing that we all share in common - the feeling of isolation. Even before Covid, many Christians felt somewhat spiritually isolated in a society where more and more people want to run their affairs without reference to God, so-called “secular society”. Thanks to Covid, now we're also separated physically from family, from friends, from grandchildren and from normal social life, and now in these last few weeks, even from Sunday worship together in church. We miss it - meeting friends, sharing in the means of grace, the singing of the great hymns, and that special sense of God's presence as Jesus promised: *“Where two or three gather in my name, there I will be in the midst”* (Matthew 18:20). But right now, that's a privilege we don't have. So, I suppose we can sympathise with the psalmist in Psalm 115 - exiled in Babylon, surrounded by pagan shrines, far from the temple which he associated with God's presence, wondering why when pagan forces ransacked the City of God that God seemed to do nothing about it. And now his neighbours are asking, “Where is their God?”, because they had gods of gold and silver they could see and touch. Was the psalmist's God languishing somewhere in a temple a thousand kilometres away in Jerusalem? Now, the psalmist is quite emphatic - *absolutely not*. In verse 3, he says, *“Our God is in heaven and He does what He ordains.”* In other words, the psalmist's communion with God was in no way limited to a building or a time or a place. That poses the question for us this morning: if we cannot go to church at present, where can we meet with God? Let me suggest no less than six means of grace commended in the Bible and accessible to each one of us during this lockdown.

I. Recognise God's Nearness (Psalm 139:7-12)

The first one is to recognise God's nearness where we are (Psalm 139). The psalmist reminds us that there is no such thing as a secular space, no place where God is absent. He tells how he tried by every means to escape God's presence, but he had to admit defeat. He writes, "Where can I escape Your Spirit? You hem me in from behind and before." The popular myth is that we human beings are seeking God, we can't find Him, and so we assume that He's not there. But the reality is that we are rebel creatures on the run from God, trying to keep Him at bay, while His presence is pressing in on every side. So, whether we head to the hills or hide in a crowd in the centre of the city, He is there. That's why Paul could tell the philosophers in Athens, "*He's not far from any one of us*" (Acts 17:27). And indeed, that was the great comfort for Saint Patrick as he faced the threats of the druids and preached the gospel: "Christ beside me, Christ behind me, Christ before me. Christ on my right hand, Christ on my left hand." So, wherever you are this morning, He's right there beside you.

II. Delight in God's Works (Psalm 29:2)

The second means of grace is to delight in God's works of creation (Psalm 29). The choir in my home church when I was a child used to sing an anthem, "Worship the Lord in the beauty of His holiness". I used to take that to mean a beautiful church building with stained-glass windows. Then I discovered that the words come from Psalm 29, and the context has nothing to do with being in church. An approaching thunderstorm unleashes its tremendous power over a forest; bolts of lightning bring down great cedars of Lebanon, great oak trees, stripping them of their bark. So evident is the power and the majesty of God on display that the psalmist tells us in verse 9 that the whole temple, and by that he means the whole of nature, cries out, "Glory! Glory! Glory!"

I have a little grandson who's just got two words. "Hiya" is what he greets everybody with. Then, there's another word he uses when he sees an insect in a flower head, feels the texture of the bark of a tree, or watches a little robin skipping from branch to branch in front of him - he says, "Wow! Wow! Wow!" John Calvin tells us that the whole of nature is a theatre of God's glory. Wherever we look - whether it's the first snowdrops, the starlit sky, the crashing of the waves, the scent of roses or the breaching of a great whale on the Wexford coast - all of these are designed to cause us to look upwards and say, "Wow! Wow!" Or to put it in the words of this psalm, "*Give to the LORD the glory due to His name. Worship the LORD in the beauty of His holiness.*"

III. Pursue Daily Devotion (Psalm 27:7)

The third means of grace is to set aside time for daily devotion. God gives us an amazing invitation in Psalm 27 - He says, "Seek my face." Our Lord Jesus Christ did just that when He drew aside to a quiet place daily and communed with His Father, and He instructed His disciples to do the same. The apostle James assures us, "If you draw near to God, He will draw near to you" (James 4:8). I suppose for most of us that means the age-old practice of reading our Bibles when God speaks to us and saying our prayers when we speak back to Him. And perhaps for some of us, if that's not been our practice, this is an opportunity to perhaps take a gospel or some part of the Bible and during this period say, "I'm going to read a little bit every day - just a small section, not rush through it. Read it, think about it,

meditate, see what God is maybe going to say to me. Then, I'll turn that into prayer as I speak back to Him." And perhaps what may begin for us as a discipline or a duty may end up becoming a delight, for Psalm 19 reminds us that, "*The law of the LORD enlightens the mind . . . and refreshes the soul . . . and rejoices the heart . . . and will become sweeter than honeycomb to the soul.*"

IV. Do All for God's Glory (I Corinthians 10:31)

The fourth discipline is to do everything for the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31), what the mystics called the sacrament of living. Because we have inherited a mindset in this country which distinguishes between sacred and secular duties, it gives the impression that God is most pleased with us when we are at church, singing hymns or praying, as distinct from the rest of our life at work, at play or with our families. But is it not significant that after 30 years of living as a carpenter in a local village, having preached no sermons and worked no miracles, it was then that God the Father looked down on the Son and said, "*This is my beloved Son; with Him I am well pleased*" (Mthw 3:17)? Because Jesus lived an undivided life, He did everything for God's glory. So whether we're driving a tractor or serving in the ward, serving customers in the shop or doing up the books, plowing a field, in the factory or in an office, Paul says eating or drinking - do everything to God's glory.

V. Maintain a Thankful Spirit (Philippians 4:6)

Fifthly, the Bible calls us to maintain a spirit of thankfulness (Phil. 4:6). Paul says in 1 Thessalonians, "*Give thanks in all circumstances*" (5:18). It can be so easy to moan about the things we *don't* have, rather than to be thankful for the things that we *do* have. Just over a week ago, I received a letter from someone who's a member of one of our churches in the Dublin & Munster Presbytery. This letter was written over ten days, because the lady has Parkinson's, walks with crutches, suffers from osteoporosis, and has two metal knees and a metal hip, which help ease the pain she's had for years. This is what she writes:

I am so grateful to God to be so well. Lockdown is not as bad as lockup. The very word reminds me of that terrible little room on the locked ward in a psychiatric hospital - no handle on the inside of the door, a shutter over the window - for I was a suicide risk. Thank God that those days have gone, though I can't avoid the memories.

She goes on to recall how on Palm Sunday twenty-three years ago, through a caring friend, she was invited to church to hear a choir. She writes:

During that service, something happened to me. God spoke to me. I realised for the first time that a very special Somebody loved me. I didn't have to be afraid anymore. Heaven began for me then. I began to walk along His path and everything changed. I became a new person. The body is wearing out, but the spirit is young again. I have pain, but I've never been so happy, for I can talk to Him anytime without having to make an appointment. So I don't waste time thinking about the things I cannot do. I am so happy to enjoy what I can do. Life is wonderful.

A spirit of thankfulness.

VI. Remember God is Sovereign (Psalm 115:3)

Finally, we're told to remember that God is sovereign in all things, even in a Covid pandemic. Back to Psalm 115 - what did the psalmist say? "Our God is in heaven and He does what He ordains" (v.3). Israel's exile in Babylon was no surprise to God, for indeed He ordained it and told Isaiah in advance it was going to happen (2 Kings 20:16-18). He also said that the people would return to their home, which they did. God was working out His purposes for good even in exile, and He still is during this pandemic. Let me give you an example.

There was a young teacher assigned on teaching practice to a school where a former teacher was the vice principal, a man who he found difficult to work with. The older man was cynical and critical of his young colleague's Christian faith and didn't mind letting him know. He gave him a hard time. But in due course the young teacher was called into full-time Christian ministry, and just over a year ago took up his first charge. Covid intervened, forcing him to conduct services online. Just a couple of months ago, he received a call from his former vice principal. "*When I heard you had become a minister,*" he wrote, "*I decided to listen to one of your services. I've been tuned in ever since. I've come to see that you were right and I was wrong. And I want to let you know I've just committed my life to Christ.*" We never know what God is up to, what blessings will flow from these difficult days.

Just a final word. During this year, some of us have lost friends and loved ones, and they remind us that even when we return to going to church and this whole thing is over, we will still be isolated. For as the Bible reminds us, "Here we have no continuing city, but we seek that which is to come" (Heb. 13:14). We are still pilgrims and strangers, and the ultimate comfort this morning is to know for certain that we are on that road home to that city. That is possible not because of anything we have done or any merit that we have achieved, but because God's Son left home and He faced the ultimate isolation on the cross, so that He could blaze open a trail, a way home to God for us to follow. And He says to us, "*Follow me.*" If some of us this morning find ourselves like the psalmist in Psalm 139, still on the run from God, we could learn from how that psalm ends. Note how the psalmist says he comes to his senses, he stopped running from God and he turned to God, and he prayed. He said, "Lord, I've got it wrong. Please, *lead me in the way everlasting*" (v.24). And that's where the journey can begin for each of us.

Dundrum Shopping Centre in Dublin has been described as a secular cathedral. Some years ago, as hundreds of shoppers were going about their business, they were stopped in their tracks by the sound of 400 voices bursting into magnificent song using words from the last book of the Bible, what we call the Hallelujah Chorus. "The Lord God omnipotent reigns! King of kings, Lord of lords, forever and forever! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!" A so-called secular space filled with the music of heaven, pointing to that day when there will be no more isolation or separation, when the church on earth and the church in heaven will be one, when Christ has reconciled all things in heaven and on earth to Himself, when we shall see Him and we shall be like Him, when we shall renew fellowship with those who have gone before, when God's whole creation will be filled with the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea. But we're not there yet, and tomorrow is Monday. So let's remember while we're still in lockdown to recognise God's nearness, delight in God's works, seek God's

face daily, do everything to God's glory, be constantly thankful, and rejoice that He is sovereign, even in days of Covid.

Let's take a moment to pray. *Father, even in these days when we cannot meet together to worship You, help us to see You more clearly, to walk with You more nearly, and to love You more dearly, through Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.*

Prayers of Intercession: Rev. Alistair Dunlop (Howth and Malahide), Katy Lumsden (Sandymount), Simon and Ann Lockwood (Drogheda)

Benediction: The LORD bless you and keep you. The LORD make His face to shine upon you and be gracious. The LORD turn His face towards you and give you His peace.

Closing Hymn: IPH 105 Jesus, Draw Me Ever Nearer (Dun Laoghaire)

Discussion & Application:

*Recognise God's Nearness | Delight In God's Works | Pursue Daily Devotion
Do All For God's Glory | Maintain A Thankful Spirit | Remember God Is Sovereign*

In this season of isolation, which of these means of grace has come most naturally to you? How has it impacted you in the past year?

Which of these means of grace are you most likely to neglect? Why?

What are some practical ways you can grow in one of these means of grace this week?