

“Walking through the valley”

We are offering a series of reflections for individuals and churches who may be finding it difficult to provide midweek prayer and shared learning from Scripture. You can use these by watching the YouTube video, reading the relevant Bible passage and then reflecting on the questions below. To help make this a shared activity, you are encouraged to reflect on this together with friends using an online conference package, or simply arrange with a friend for them to watch it too. Then ring each other up, share your thoughts and responses and then pray for one another, and pray together for our world.

Read Jeremiah 6:16; John 8:12 and Psalm 23

If you can, watch the YouTube video: <https://youtu.be/eOijbEeCGT4>

A lot is being said about “roadmaps” at the moment. One way of describing Psalm 23 could be a “map of the territory” that the Psalm writer is facing. It is a landscape of contrast – green meadows, still waters, but also valleys of shadow and lurking enemies. But a map is only valuable if it is used – and it brings together the ancient landmarks and pathways, with the challenges and opportunities of travelling the land in the here and now. The words of Jeremiah seem inspiring; “choose the ancient paths – the good ways,” but as we read further, they are words of despair, because those pathways have not been chosen by God’s people. We speak of Jesus as the “light of the world” and might often imagine a light that draws and attracts us – but a light can also be used to shine away from us to help us better see and recognise the way ahead. We might notice that Jesus continues by inviting us to follow.

We might well describe our present situation as being a “valley of death’s shadow”. We are confronted with the news of over 126,000 deaths from Covid in the UK alone. This, in itself, is disturbing and challenging, but we will also have our own burdens that we continue to bear too. As we walk through this particular valley there are three things we can remember:

God is with us in the valley: The Psalm begins with a well-known statement “The Lord is my shepherd”. These words may be ancient and familiar, but they are no less true in the reality of today. It is God’s presence that gives us comfort and assurance. We cannot be sure what “rod and staff” are intended to symbolise, but they clearly speak to us of God being with us and having what we need for the tough place.

God invites us to know him in the valley: As we look at the Psalm as a whole, we recognise that it begins as a Psalm *about* God but ends as an *engagement* with God. Halfway through, the language changes from the third person (he) to the second person (you). This happens when the Psalm writer is in the valley – it is here, rather than the green pastures and the still waters, where the writer’s relationship with God seems to deepen. God is not someone to talk about but someone to know. One person has summed this up with the phrase “we may know the Psalm but do we know the shepherd?” You might like to ponder this question – but hear it as an invitation not as a judgement.

God knows the right paths: Jeremiah shared an invitation to choose the ancient and good paths – if anyone knows those ancient paths it will be this Shepherd. A map has the potential to be invaluable or useless – and that depends not on the map but on whether the person who receives it chooses to use it. We might feel offended if the words of this much-loved Psalm were described as useless, but we have to acknowledge that if no-one took notice of them, that is what they would be. The same was true of the words of Jeremiah – a profound invitation had become an indictment and condemnation because people had refused to respond to them. God invites us to walk in the ancient and good paths, but we must choose to follow.

PRAYER

Gracious Shepherd – though we find ourselves walking through a dark and difficult valley, we thank you for the promise that you are with us. Despite all of our struggles and concerns, help this to become for all of us, a place to know you better as you lead us in right and good pathways. AMEN