

## Comforter, Helper, Counsellor ?

The Greek word *paraclete*, found only - within the N.T. - in the Fourth Gospel and John's 1st letter, is notoriously difficult to translate - Comforter, Counsellor, Advocate, Helper .... Can we begin to imagine the problems of those people whose calling it is to try and translate the Bible into one of the many spoken (but invariably not written) languages spread across the hinterlands of developing nations ?

Some Bible Society workers were in equatorial Africa in the mid twentieth century, wrestling with translating John's gospel into the Karré language. When they reached John 14.16 there was a great deal of head scratching... How to convey the meaning behind what Jesus was telling the disciples about the Holy Spirit, and was there some kind of local equivalent that would serve to convey the meaning of *paraclete* ?

They found the answer among their 'support team'. The best (indeed often the only) way to transport heavy loads through the difficult terrain was with the aid of porters. In the local culture, whenever one of a line of porters became exhausted from carrying his heavy burden and another bent down to help him up, that second person was called in Karré "the one who falls down beside us." This was the term the translators decided was spot on to convey the meaning behind *paraclete* ....

A couple of further thoughts to chew over as we ponder and reflect - a reasonable literal translation of *paraclete* is: someone who is "called to one's aid."

Beyond that, it was at times also used to convey the idea of someone who is "invited" (shades of Revelation 3.20 here, not to mention Luke 11.13 ?) \*....

Again, in 1 John 2.1 *paraclete* is used not of the Spirit, but rather of Jesus Himself; here the word is usually translated "Advocate."

So, just who is this Holy Spirit, this Spirit of God, this Spirit of Christ, this *Paraclete*, whom Jesus promised dwells (or remains, abides) both with us and within us; perhaps more to the point, who is He to us, what role does He have in our lives ?

Bible Reading: John 14.15-18, 25-26; 15.26-27; 16.7-15.

\* Rev.3.20: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me."

\* Luke 11.13: "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

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Come, Holy Spirit, Comforter, come and surround those in need this day with your presence and peace. We pray for all who need your healing touch..... we pray for all who are struggling with loss and grief, especially the recently bereaved.....

Give compassion and strength to all who work with the lonely and despairing, the homeless and refugees, and give skill and understanding to those who work in our health and emergency services.

Come Holy Spirit, come afresh into the dark places of this world. May you breathe fresh strength and hope into all who seek to be peacemakers, may your fire burn away the hatred and violence that afflict so many people and places, and may you come as the wind to move forward the cause of justice and peace.

Come Holy Spirit, come into our lives. Renew our sense of calling, stir up your gifts in us, and may the fruit of your Spirit, the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control ripen evermore in our hearts so that the worship we bring and the lives that we live may be pleasing in your sight.



## Conversation on the beach.

The Fourth Gospel has both a prologue and an epilogue. In what we know as chapter 21, following what looks very much like a conclusion (John 20.30-31), John's epilogue details a meeting between the Risen Lord and seven of the disciples. Following a 'picnic on the beach', a conversation takes place between Jesus and Peter.

Three times Peter is asked about his love for his Lord, and three times he answers "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." A great deal has been both preached and written about this well-known event, so what might we usefully reflect on at this point in time?

They are no longer in Jerusalem, hiding in the upper room, but in Galilee ('of the Gentiles') - is this perhaps a reminder that the disciples were beginning to move on from the incredible events of that first Easter weekend?

Peter had messed up big time (to put it mildly). He had boasted that he would never leave Jesus no matter what, even if others did (an echo of this seems to be in Jesus' initial question here on the beach - "do you love me more than these?"); that boast must have felt incredibly hollow after his three-fold denial. Jesus now elicits a three-fold affirmation from Peter of his love. He does not ask Peter to say sorry or to grovel, but instead "to affirm the positive rather than recall the negative" (Woodward, Gooder & Pryce, 'Journeying With John').

Equally, each time Peter reaffirms his love for the Lord a call to action follows. Ultimately, answering that call will have consequences, but that has always been true - and always will be - for everyone who heeds Christ's call to "Follow me".

Three questions, then, to reflect on and ponder :

When we finally emerge from our 'upper rooms' where we have been locked down, what particular positives might we be asked to affirm, rather than dwelling on whatever negatives we perhaps need to move on from?

Jesus asked Peter to show his love practically in pastoral care; what might the practical outcome of our love for Jesus look like in the times ahead?

In classical Greek, the verb "to follow" was particularly applied to two groups of people - servants and soldiers. St. Paul considered believers (himself included) to be both soldiers and servants (or 'slaves') of Christ. Are we able to follow such a calling, no matter the possible consequences?

The Risen Lord said two deceptively simple words to Peter at the end of their conversation on the beach: "Follow me."

Bible reading: John 21.(1-14), 15-19.

Lord Jesus, we pray for all those who are finding that the foundations of their lives have been challenged and their faith shaken. We pray that you will walk beside them and reveal your presence along the new paths they tread. Lord give us grace to follow you patiently when we are discouraged and the way ahead is unclear.....

Lord Jesus, we pray for those whose way is in the shadows and who long for light and relief.

We pray that you will lead them safely out of the darkness and give them rest beside the still waters of your peace. Lord, give us grace to follow you closely when we are called to tread the darkest paths.....

Lord Jesus, we pray for all those whom you are calling to follow in your way of love. We pray for all those who are caring for others, for all those whose loving deeds go unnoticed and unappreciated and for all who feel that they have been laid aside. Lord, give us grace to follow you wherever you lead, whatever the cost.....

*Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.*  
(Jn 12:26)

Amen



## The Kingdom of God

"Thy kingdom come"; such familiar words, yet one often wonders what people mean when we pray it, and - indeed - do any of those meanings come close to Jesus' original intention when He used these words as part of a 'template' for the prayer of His disciples?

Theologians have demonstrated the truth of Ecclesiastes 12.12 time and again ("of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh"), particularly when it comes to the countless reams produced seeking to explain the meaning behind the phrase "kingdom of God / heaven".... I'd better be brief then!!

As this phrase occurs frequently and almost exclusively in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke), it might be worth taking a peek at the only examples found in the Fourth Gospel.

John uses *basileia* (Greek for 'kingdom') first in the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus (John 3), and then in the interrogation (or is it more of a conversation?) of Jesus by Pilate (John 18). In the former, Jesus makes it abundantly clear to this religious leader that being born 'from above' (or 'again') 'of water and the Spirit' (3.3,5) is absolutely vital if one is to be part of this kingdom.

Then, responding to questions from the political leader, Jesus makes it equally clear that His kingdom (or 'kingship'; same Greek word) is 'not of this world' and not something to be physically fought for (18.36).

Why has John only recorded these two occasions - where Jesus addresses both a religious and a political leader, challenging them to look deeper - among the many times (so the other Gospels tell us) when Jesus talked about this kingdom? Just what kind of a kingdom is it then, whose coming Jesus has asked all His disciples to pray for?

Oh, and one final thought based on the work of N.T.Greek scholar Nigel Turner, who tells us that the tense used with the verb 'to come' in Matthew 6.10 means the proper translation should be "Thy kingdom continue to come"; how does that affect our prayer requests, do we think?

Bible Readings: John 3.1-15; 18.33-38.

Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

|                                        |                           |
|----------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| For those who are lost or lonely ..... | we pray, Thy kingdom come |
| For those who are ill or anxious ..... | we pray, Thy kingdom come |
| For those who are grieving .....       | we pray, Thy kingdom come |
| For those who are caring .....         | we pray, Thy kingdom come |

|                                         |                           |
|-----------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| For those who work for justice .....    | we pray, Thy Kingdom come |
| For those who are peacemakers .....     | we pray, Thy Kingdom come |
| For those who lead the nations .....    | we pray, Thy Kingdom come |
| For those who who cherish the earth.... | we pray, Thy kingdom come |

|                |               |                                |
|----------------|---------------|--------------------------------|
| For ourselves: | we pray ..... | give us grace to be patient    |
|                | we pray ..... | give us grace to be loving     |
|                | we pray ..... | give us grace to be joyful     |
|                | we pray ..... | give us grace to be your light |

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done in our lives as it is in heaven.

Amen



## Heavenly Dwellings

The Fourth Gospel approaches the telling of the 'Gospel' story rather differently to the other three. Archbishop William Temple, writing around the time of WW2, commented that John's approach resembled that of a portrait artist while the others were more like photographers. Certainly, the writer has quite a way with words - his prologue (John 1.1-14) being just one example. He also uses ambiguities in the Greek language to considerable effect, especially in the realm of vocabulary. In ch.3, for instance, when Jesus converses with Nicodemus and the phrase 'to be born again' is used, the word translated 'again' also means 'from above' (the primary meaning in classical Greek). It is as if we are intended to understand both meanings at once ....

One of the most famous (and comforting) sayings of Jesus, recorded in John 14, begins: "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms". The word translated '**room**' is rare, certainly in the New Testament, as it only occurs twice (here and in verse 23). Older English speaking versions used the translation 'mansions', largely influenced by the Latin *mansiones*.

There are three aspects to this word that are worth thinking about: -

First, it means simply a 'room' or 'dwelling place.' Jesus tells his disciples that there are "many" of these in His "Father's house". In other words, as William Barclay puts it - "heaven is as wide as the heart of God and there is room for all."

Secondly, it was often used in Classical Greek for a 'way-station', somewhere for travellers to stay. Perhaps this idea of ongoing movement even in heaven influenced C.S. Lewis, when in the "Last Battle" (the final book in the Narnia series) the children reach 'heaven' and Aslan's call to them is "further up and further in." As Mr. Tumnus the Faun says to Lucy in the closing chapter: "The further up and the further in you go, the bigger everything gets. The inside is larger than the outside" (an example of plagiarism on the part of Doctor Who, perhaps?!).

Third, the original word comes from the verb 'to remain, abide, dwell' which is found in John 14 & 15 more than a dozen times. Does this point to our 'abiding in Christ' being a foretaste of a greater heavenly 'abiding'? Equally, the other use of the word is in 14.23, where Jesus says "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him".

Back to "In my Father's house are many **rooms**." Has this rare word been used here so we can see all three shades of meaning at once, perhaps? And, is someone trying to tell us something when John 14.1-14 is the set Gospel reading twice in less than a fortnight (May 1st, Philip & James, and May 10th, the fifth of Easter) ?

Bible Reading: John 14.1-14.

|                                                                        |                           |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| For our homes;                                                         | we thank you.             |
| For the places where we have dwelt in safety in the past;              | we thank you.             |
| For the places that have provided a refuge for us in times of trouble; | we thank you.             |
| For all those who are homeless;                                        | we pray, Lord have mercy. |
| For all those who do not dwell in safety;                              | we pray, Lord have mercy. |
| For all those who fear losing their homes;                             | we pray, Lord have mercy. |
| For the gift of your Son who came to dwell among us;                   | we praise you.            |
| For your promise of peace in our hearts;                               | we praise you.            |
| For assurance that there is a room for us in our Father's house;       | we praise you.            |

*And in God's house forevermore my dwelling-place shall be.*

Amen

## The Good Shepherd

Shepherds (and their sheep) are mentioned throughout the Bible (in both Testaments) literally hundreds of times. Early Christian art (in catacomb, tomb, chalice.. you name it !) repeatedly returned to the image of the Good Shepherd. Discussing this, a nineteenth century Church historian reflected that "The Shepherd ... suggested the recovery of the lost sheep, the tender care and protection, the green pasture and fresh fountain, the sacrifice of life: in a word, the whole picture of a Saviour."

John's Gospel (ch.10) records for us that Jesus consciously focused all this on Himself and His ministry - "I am the Good Shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep" (v.14-15).

In fact, Jesus tied it in not only to his impending death but to his coming resurrection as well - "I lay down my life that I may take it up again" (v.17).

"The verb 'to know' in biblical literature is a rich word that refers to personal, indeed, intimate relationships / knowledge ... It refers to deep and profound relationships between people" (Kenneth Bailey, *The Good Shepherd*). So, Jesus' words here tell us that his sheep can potentially have a close personal relationship with Him which mirrors the relationship between Him and His Father .... because of the cross (and resurrection) !!

Mind you, there are a couple of provisos to ponder:

first, as His sheep we must be able to recognise, respond to, and follow His voice. Just how good at listening (to others, ourselves, the Holy Spirit) are we ?

Second, even though this relationship is highly personal, it is also interpersonal. We are part of a 'flock', not a random collection of highly individual sheep!! William Barclay tells the story of the first missionary to Canada's first nations (indigenous peoples), Egerton Young, in Saskatchewan. One elderly chief responded to Young talking of Jesus' teaching of God as Father very warmly indeed. Eventually he asked, "Did you say that the great Spirit is *your* Father ?" When Young said yes, the chief then asked, "And did you say that he is the Father of *our* people ?" Again the answer was yes. "Then", proclaimed the chief, "*you and I are brothers !*"

Some words of the poet John Donne come to mind; words written when he fell seriously ill in the winter of 1623:

"No man is an island, entire of itself;  
every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main."

Bible Reading: John 10.1-18.

Lord, the Great Shepherd of your sheep,  
lead us into your green pastures and restore our souls.  
When we wander from the paths you have set before us,  
help us to realise that you will never cease to seek us  
and bring us back into the safety of your care.

Lord, the Great Shepherd of your sheep,  
You have promised to be with us through the darkest night,  
so we ask that you would bring light and hope to all who walk  
in the shadows at this time.  
May we all know the blessing of your peace and the comfort of your presence.

Lord, the Great Shepherd of your sheep  
We thank you that we are all part of your flock;  
may we walk together in love and fellowship,  
rejoicing in each other and following our  
Great Shepherd in all that we seek to do.  
Amen.

## Eastertide Reflection

Isn't life strange? A question posed in song by the Moody Blues as part of their 1972 album Seventh Sojourn (yes, I was - still am - a fan!). This past Holy Week and Easter has been just about as strange, not to mention surreal, as it gets for most of us, hasn't it ?

Makes one wonder how the first disciples felt, living through the strange events of that first Holy Week and Easter; they were such changed people afterwards, weren't they ?

Watching their hopes crumbling before their eyes, their Lord seemingly doing nothing to prevent what was happening, and then ... Fear, loss, they were scattered fearing for their lives, and - for a time - alone.

Until, fear slowly begins to fade in the face of renewed hope. The emptiness of loss gradually gives way to... Well, what exactly? Reassurance that He, who truly died, and seemed lost to them, is equally truly alive again. And, farther down the line, all that Maundy Thursday teaching and those great promises about the Holy Spirit (see John chs.14-16) fulfilled on the day of Pentecost (but we are getting ahead of ourselves a bit ...).

Changed people? After going through all that, especially the fear and loss, to learn the hard way that everything Jesus had said was true, was real, and to have that strengthened ('confirmed') when the Comforter's daily presence with them became not just a hope or even a promise, but a reality in their hearts and lives. Changed indeed!

So, then, what of us? With the experience not only of Holy Week and Easter 2020, but also this extended period of 'lockdown', will we be changed people after all this, or will we simply be glad to get back to 'normal' asap (singer songwriter Bruce Cockburn once wryly observed in song 'the trouble with Normal is ... it always gets worse' !) ?

What might we learn, perhaps, that will be honouring to God? What can we take forward that will show due respect for those whose lives have been lost, especially the courageous medical and care workers who put other's needs first?

Practical lessons about care for others, about the importance of family and friends and community, about remembering (in prayer and action) those whose loss (whether of life, health, liberty, employment, shelter ...) is more permanent than the (hopefully, prayerfully) temporary losses 'lockdown' has brought to the majority of us? Perhaps that brief list might prove a starting point for our prayers and lifestyle choices as practicing Christians?

May we all, by God's grace and the Spirit's help, be people changed for the better in the weeks and months ahead.

Take my life and let it be consecrated Lord, to thee.

Take my moments and my days, let them flow in ceaseless praise.

Take my hands and let them move at the impulse of thy love.

Take my feet and let them be swift and beautiful for thee.

Take my will and make it Thine, it shall be no longer mine.

Take my heart it is thine own; it shall be thy royal throne.

Take my love, my Lord I pour at your feet its treasure store

Take myself and I will be ever, only all for thee.

## Reflection on LUKE 24.(13-27), 28-35.

Meals have been taking on more significance than ever while being currently confined to barracks. They help to break up the day into manageable chunks, as well as being a time for the family (of whatever size) to come together.

In the events Luke describes, a couple invite a seeming stranger to share a meal with them, but when this 'stranger' gives thanks and breaks the bread he is revealed as the Risen Lord, who promptly vanishes from sight. Tom Wright gives us food for thought by linking the first meal in the Bible (Eve and Adam eating the forbidden fruit) with this one, which he dubs 'the first meal of the new creation.'

Wright goes on: "The couple at Emmaus - probably Cleopas and Mary, husband and wife - discover that the long curse has been broken. Death itself has been defeated. God's new creation, brimming with new life and joy and new possibility, has burst in upon the world of decay and sorrow."

While we are chewing on that remarkable thought, a little question for us to consider - Jesus broke open two types of food that evening. The first 'food' was the written Word of God, which warmed their cold and broken hearts sufficiently for the couple to be open to what had previously seemed impossible, that Jesus was alive and really had been there, present with them.

The question, then, is this: while the sacramental 'food' of the Eucharist is presently not accessible, have we allowed ourselves to be properly fed by the written Word, have we rediscovered that we are truly a people of Word as well as of Sacrament, and have we rediscovered the fire of the Spirit within (remembering how Paul linked the work of the Spirit to the Scriptures, describing them as 'God-breathed') to warm our hearts and refresh, renew and encourage us forwards, moving ever deeper in our journey of faith ?

Lord God,

Open our minds to the wonders of your Word today,

Open our lips that we may always speak your truth,

Open our eyes that we may see you in unexpected places,

Open our ears that we may hear the whisper of your voice,

Open our hearts that we may live your Word of truth and love everyday.

And give us joy as we walk beside you today and everyday

Amen

## A Reflection for HOLY WEEK

Holy Week. What emotions do those two words evoke in us? We remember the momentous events of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Day - all absolutely crucial to us as Christians, and all absolutely incredible in so many ways. But perhaps we can empathize with Ida Gorres, whose journals from the 1950s (quoted by Martin Smith in 'A Season for the Spirit') include this powerful reflection:

*"Holy Week is beginning again, and here I am once more, feeling so unadjusted to it, so utterly inadequate. Not that 'heart of stone' feeling, simply the sense of being completely out of proportion - something momentous, like the Niagara Falls is thundering down, right beside me, and there I stand, with a thimble in my hand, and I'm supposed to dip in and collect something, catch it up, reacting properly, goodness knows how."*

Ida then reflects that under such circumstances, the only way to receive anything at all is "to hold the cup up carefully at the very edge, under a lost thin trickle." To do more may catch very little, but to attempt more is to risk stepping too close to the torrent and being swept away. Ida's next words are, for me anyway, helpful and profound:

*"But maybe this helpless state of just standing aside, this overpowering sense of not being able to do anything about it is the only sort of adoration I'm allowed just now. One's eyes closed, turned away - this, too, is one way of divining the immensity of this tremendous mystery, of paying reverence, at least, to something surpassing by far either comprehension or emotion."*

Helplessness, powerlessness, these are surely emotions we are all too familiar with in the face of the effects of Covid 19. They are also an echo of what the disciples must have felt during that first Holy Week. As for Jesus Himself? Perhaps John's Gospel may give us some insight, particularly in the writer's repeated use of the Greek verb *paradidomi*, variously translated as 'betrayed', 'gave up', 'handed over'. Judas hands Jesus over to the Jewish authorities, who then hand him over to Pilate, who in turn hands Him over to be crucified. As Woodward, Gooder and Pryce point out (in 'Journeying with John'): "Jesus the 'passive Lamb' is passed from pillar to post by Judas, the Jewish leaders and Pilate, but he remains in absolute control throughout his trial and death. He wrong-foots Pilate in their discussion of power and truth, and ultimately, when the moment comes for him to die, hands over his own spirit (19.30; the NRSV translation 'gave up' also translates *paradidomi*)."

This Holy Week may God grant that each of our thimbles are filled with whatever it takes to not only help us cope with the present emergency but also filled with that which may in turn be of help to others. And may we also glimpse enough of this awesome and truly holy mystery that we may be renewed in our worship, reverence and adoration of our Lord. May we be given grace to give thanks for all that He endured for us, for His immense love for each of us, and for His glory and victory revealed in such different ways by both Cross and Resurrection.

Thanks be to you, our Lord Jesus Christ,  
for all the benefits which you have given us,  
for all the pains and insults which you have borne for us.  
Most merciful Redeemer, Friend and Brother,  
may we know you more clearly,  
love you more dearly,  
and follow you more nearly,  
day by day.  
Amen. (Prayer of St. Richard of Chichester)

*This reflection was used to set the ball rolling at our recent Quiet Morning. It may perhaps speak to some folk in the present circumstances ?*

*“TREASURES OF DARKNESS.”*

We've been fortunate over the past forty odd years to have lived in a real variety of places, including several valleys - one valley in particular, a gentle open valley with a river running along the bottom, was truly amazing due to the quality of the light. We found that we could look across that valley at the same time on different days, sometimes even at different times on the same day, and somehow the view looked slightly different ....

Because the light was different, somehow .... - never ending change, yet always the same, incredible !

To me, it truly was a wonder to behold, but it really is very hard to put into words. One Christian writer, the late Eddie Askew (one time head of the Leprosy Mission), who was also something of an artist, wrote these words about 'light'(in his book *Many Voices, One Voice*):

*“Painting is about light. The interplay of light and dark, the contrasts, the way each bit depends on every other bit. The way one colour modifies the colour next to it. It can be breathtaking to work on a painting, to build it up and then, with a few considered or, more often, fortunate brush strokes of high key colour, to see it spark into life .... But there are times when the strokes of colour don't produce that feeling of light. Then you look at the painting in dismay until you realise that the problem is a lack of contrast. The shadows aren't deep enough. The high tones don't register because the darks aren't there. The brilliance of the one depends on the depth of the other. And the feeling of light is produced by deepening the darks !  
Even further, if you look closely at a landscape painted by a master, you'll see that in his lights there are subtle hints of the shadow colours; and to bring real unity and harmony the light colours have to be there in the deep shadows, enriching them. It's not a case of either dark or light, but of both. And you begin to realise that **the darkness and shade in a landscape are an indication, not of the absence of light, but of its presence.**”*

These words can be found in Isaiah 45:1a, 3, (ESV): “Thus says the Lord... I will give you the treasures of darkness and the hoards in secret places, that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by your name...”

This passage then refers to light and darkness, wellbeing and calamity, and using the ideas of a rather different time (two and a half thousand years ago, give or take) reminds its hearers that in the midst of all of these things God remains the Lord, the One who is ultimately in control.

'Light and darkness'; we're always grateful for the light when it's shining brightly in our lives, but the darkness, the dark times, that's all too often something else entirely...

Isn't it strange how we take for granted the gift of being able to see in the dark? After all, artificial light, first gaslight and the electric light, has made a huge difference to people's lives over the last one hundred and fifty years or more, hasn't it? Yet this gift of effectively being able to see in the dark - we really don't think about it, just take it for granted.

A few Sundays back, I told the story of R.L. Stevenson as a young lad looking out of his Edinburgh home, transfixed by the sight of the lamp lighter going past on his rounds, so much so that when he was called for his supper, the youngster kept his face pressed to the window and cried out 'Look, look, there's a man out there punching holes in the darkness...' Light and dark. Both are there, whether in the world around us, or in our own personal lives. Eddie Askew, quoted earlier, spoke of 'the darkness and shade in a landscape' being 'an indication, not of the absence of light, but of its presence.' A truth that can be very hard indeed to get our heads round when we're in the midst of times of darkness, and yet a truth we need to see and recognize to help us not just to cope with the dark times, but grow through them as well.

A little more then from the pen of Eddie Askew:

*"The interplay of pattern, of light and dark, is always changing. It's part of the joy and frustration of painting. A never-ending exploration. You struggle to get to grips with a particular composition, and then the clouds increase, and the light changes. The clouds roll on, the sun shines. Never ending, endlessly varied, yet the changes are grounded on concrete things, on the warm earth, its contours, its solidity. The light may change in a moment, but the shape of the hills will still be there, tomorrow. A moment's change may bring out different colours but the form of the hills, their structure, is still there, the same. Dependable.*

*Shadows and light, continually forming and reforming, dissolving, reshaping across the landscape of my life. It's unsettling, joyous, frightening, frustrating, stimulating.*

*Yet beneath it, in it, reassuring and strengthening, the hand of God. Painting it with love."*

And that, ultimately, is the point - to be able, by faith and trust, to see the hand of God at work, present at all times, by day and by night, both in the light and in the dark. To somehow keep hold of that hand and be guided through both the light and the darkness that at different times are present in all of our lives.

To bring this reflection to a close, a prayer written by Henri Nouwen, a Roman Catholic priest who left a successful career in academia to serve first a congregation of indigenous peoples in South America and later profoundly disabled

people in a L'Arche community, a man who both saw and knew personally a great deal of both light and darkness in his life. Nouwen wrote:

"I call to you, O Lord, from my quiet darkness. Show me your mercy and love. Let me see your face, hear your voice, touch the hem of your cloak. I want to love you, be with you, speak to you and simply stand in your presence. But I cannot make it happen. Pressing my hands against my eyes is not praying, and reading about your presence is not living in it. But there is that moment in which you will come to me, as you did to your fearful disciples, and say: 'Do not be afraid; it is I.' Let that moment come soon, O Lord. And if you want to delay it, then make me patient. Amen."

As we are reminded so eloquently in Psalm 23 -  
*Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil;  
for you are with me, your rod and staff, they comfort me...*

***Barry***

Here is a reflection on **'Fellowship in the Holy Spirit'**:

BIBLE READING - 2 Corinthians 13.v.14.

"I'll be with you in spirit"; how often has that been said, when we wish to be with friends/family on a special occasion but circumstances prevent our being there in person? Yet for us as Christians, saying this is far from simply uttering a well-meaning platitude. Paul's farewell greeting to the early believers in Corinth is very familiar I'm sure: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of (literally 'in') the Holy Spirit be with you all." Our 'fellowship' in God's Holy Spirit may be unseen, but it is very real indeed. First, we are part of the 'communion of saints'; and second, as the new Archbishop of York Stephen Cottrell once put it: "There is no such thing as private prayer. Prayer always unites us to the God who is Trinity; a community of love."

When we worship, and when we pray, we are united through the Holy Spirit with our Lord and with each other, not to mention countless fellow believers, even if we are physically on our own, and even if our emotions tell us we are isolated and alone.

In the current situation, one way to remind ourselves of this hidden reality is to ensure we stop for worship at our regular time(s) on a Sunday or midweek, confident that those who usually worship physically alongside us are still doing so 'in spirit'; it's just that we are all scattered about in our respective homes rather than in one single building.

Another way, for those of us who wish, might be to covenant with two or three others to stop during the week at a set time (or two) and pray separately yet together 'in spirit'; we may even wish to have agreed certain prayer requests beforehand, and to share any thoughts that may come in the stillness afterwards, whether by phone or electronically. Effectively, we would be entering into a prayer 'partnership' with several other believing friends...

May our Lord's grace, the love of our heavenly Father, and the fellowship in the Spirit be especially real to us and all whom we love and pray for in the days and weeks ahead.

Lord, as we join together in the community of love which is The Trinity  
May the grace of your Son fill us  
May the love of the Father surround us  
May the fellowship of the Holy Spirit draw us closer together  
And may we know the unending joy of your Kingdom  
Amen.

**Barry**