

May these words be pleasing.

Last week Ann led our intercessions. She reminded us that last week was one of the feast days for Mary the mother of Jesus ... and (also) an important anniversary for the Mothers Union. This reminded me of the following slide 🌸. Many demands are made on Mums 🌸.....

In the name of equality we need to see the equivalent list for 🌸 Dads

Children make demands on their mums, their parents, from the moment that they are born with a *faith* that their parents will look after them. 🌸 We give thanks that normally this faith is well placed. 🌸

Today's readings encourage us to choose the ways of a faith in God and he (she) *will* look after us. In Proverbs God is Lady Wisdom: Come to my house, leave your simple ways, and you will live. Walk, walk in the light, walk in the way of insight, says Lady Wisdom. In John, strange words: eat of my flesh and live forever, drink my blood, remain in me, have faith in me, and live because of me, your God *will* look after you. In Old Testament times the people of God under Moses doubted, they could not see *how* they would make the journey from Egypt, across the desert and to the Promised Land. And yet God looked after *them* and every day God sent a bread like food called manna to sustain them on their journey. The bread that is Christ is for *our* journey into eternal life even though *you* may struggle to see how you can possibly make this journey – all things are possible with God. We are to have faith. 🌸 (pause)

I want to read to you a poem. Some of you will know it well, most of you will know of it, but there may be some who have never heard it before. 🌸 The picture is of footsteps in the sand. The poem is called 'Footsteps' and is by Mary Powers:

One night I dreamed a dream.

As I was walking along the beach with my Lord.

Across the dark sky flashed scenes from my life.

For each scene, I noticed two sets of footprints in the sand,

One belonging to me and one to my Lord.

After the last scene of my life flashed before me,

I looked back at the footprints in the sand.

I noticed that at many times along the path of my life,

especially at the very lowest and saddest times,

there was only one set of footprints.

This really troubled me, so I asked the Lord about it.

"Lord, you said / once I decided to follow you,

You'd walk with me all the way.

But I noticed that during the saddest and most troublesome times of my life,

there was only one set of footprints.

I don't understand why, when I needed You the most, You would leave me."

He whispered, "My precious child, I love you and will never leave you

Never, ever, during your trials and testings.

When you saw only one set of footprints,

It was then that I carried you."

It's a beautiful poem and of great encouragement to those with a hope and faith in Christ, a faith in a God who can be relied on to look after us, a God who will never leave us or cease to love. We are, as Martin told us last week, we are never to let anything come before the love of Christ to us. Paul in our reading calls us to be attentive to this love, to be attentive to God: Understand what the Lord's will is, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I hope that this morning the joyous encouraging optimistic message of our readings, of Proverbs, of Ephesians, of John and of the poem 'Footsteps' resonates well with you. You are, we are, the people of faith and it is a faith we wish to share with others. We will not do this well if we do not share that sense of joy, and grace, with each other, and with each and every person we meet at our church door and beyond our church door, always build up, never put down.

We need also to be authentic, our joy should not be fake. I worked with a retired friend at the start of the summer break who informed me (interestingly) that he does not inflict his belief on others but he was not a Christian. His late father was an upstanding man of his church, he would go each week and say his confession in church before coming home and being an absolute horror (for want of a different word). The next Sunday he would be back at church, make his confession, doing all the right things at his church, before coming home once more and reverting to type. (pause)

☀ We need also to face up to those times in our lives in which ☀ faith seems distant, there is little hope, and despair is present. When we struggle with despair, when we despair of others it is very easy to blame others / and equally easy to blame oneself. It is easy when I struggle with darkness and despair to blame myself, there must be something wrong, inadequate with my faith, I still believe in the love of God for others, I still believe in the promises of God, for others, but not for me when faced with doubts and despair.

Despair is painful / we do not wish to dwell on it on a Sunday morning but perhaps you would permit me to (quickly) look at a few recent examples.

We learn, through experience, to have great *faith* in the world that has been created for us and around us. Great is the *despair* when things go wrong. There was a bridge in Italy that over many years many millions of motorists have passed over without giving it a second thought – an unconscious faith that they would safely cross over to the other side. This week this bridge collapsed and this faith proved to be misplaced.

On the same day I cycled on a different bridge - a great suspension bridge called the Erskine Bridge which crossed the Clyde. On the paths leading to the bridge were scrawled messages both of hope and despair. In bright pink paint the repeated message on the ground 'Come home, we love you' (no name)x2. As I got onto the bridge way below was the paddle steamer Waverley, making its way downstream as I reached the crest of the bridge. And this distracted me from noticing until the last moment the young man wrapped up in his hoody, stood still and very fortunately attended to by a single policeman. One hopes somebody loves him and wishes him home.

Sometimes it is hard to distinguish between faith (or hope) and despair. On Tuesday we spent a while watching one of the new Astute nuclear submarines make its way to the open sea where it would submerge. On our behalf it will disappear for 3 months armed with its nuclear missiles, location unknown. It is an expensive act of faith that believes in a threat of mutual destruction that therefore brings peace. For others the risk is too great – the risk of unimaginable destruction and despair. I daresay both views would be strongly held by different people in a church such as our own.

We know there are no quick and easy answers to darkness and despair but it is a statement of faith that though we may feel distant from God, God is never distant from us.

☀️And that makes us a people of hope. Thursday was A-Level results day and most students I had met learnt wisdom and learnt to merits of hard work. Nervous, yes, but a degree of faith that they would be getting good grades. A smaller number are not so lucky and they face a degree of despair. Sandra Johnson (you may know) and others work hard to transform this despair into hope by getting these students sorted with their future – normally through a process called clearing to gain university places. We are a people of faith wishing to transform despair into hope.

We grieve over the despair driving many thousands into dangerous journeys of migration. We give thanks for the transformation of John Newton (who wrote Amazing Grace) away from the slave trade. We seek the prophetic voice of today that has insight and demands wisdom. ☀️We are a people of hope with a faith that believes *nothing* is beyond the transforming power of our God.

One final story of *faith* ☀️ by way of thanks. A picture ☀️ from St Marys Richmond (in Surrey) and thank you for prayers and support for the Richmond to Richmond bike ride. As you know it was completed a little over two weeks ago but it was *harder* than it should have been. Some of you know Andrew was unwell here on the Sunday and remained unwell for much of the week. Each day I could not see how he (we) would manage to get to where we needed to be. There was, however, a real sense (a faith, if you like) that we would complete our journey, ☀️ I just couldn't see *how*.

In this life we are a family ☀️ with faith and we wish to share songs of the Spirit, singing from our hearts and giving thanks. Each of us, all of us will, through grace, cross over that bridge to the other side. We are to keep in mind at all times that faith (not in ourselves) but in God that we will get there even if we are not always sure how!