

St Nicholas Church, Sighthill
13th September 2020

*Even
though
I walk
through
the
valley
of the
shadow
of
death...*

God is good... all the time ...

Psalm 23: 1 – 4a (NKJV)

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside the still waters.
He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths
of righteousness for His name's sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...

Acts 18:9-10

Now the Lord spoke to Paul in the night by a vision, "Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; 10 for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city."

1 Corinthians 15:55-57

O Death, where is your sting?
O Hades, where is your victory?"
The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Call to worship

Jesus says: I am the gate. Come, and be loved.
Come, and receive peace. Come, and find life.

Opening hymn: He will hold me fast

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tE3-QLX-3pc>

Opening Prayer

Living God, You gather us together from across the face of the earth, that we might worship your holy name.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Living God, we gather together in strange times.
Whether virtually or actually, we ask that You will accept our worship of Your holy name.

Lord, in Your mercy, hear our prayer.

Living God, You gather us together in the company of those who have gone before us. Hold us safe in Your keeping and watch over us as the people of God.

Lord, in Your mercy, hear our prayer.

Living God, we come in the assurance that, where we gather in the name of Jesus, He is there among us.

Lord, in Your mercy, hear our prayer.

Living God, whether we gather in twos or in threes, or whether we come to you in our own company, never leave us or forsake us.

Lord, in Your mercy, hear our prayer.

Living God, we come, in the company of all your people, and together we confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Lord, in Your mercy, hear our prayer.

Poem: 'The Guest House'

by Jelaluddin Rumi

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice.
Meet them at the door laughing and
invite them in.

Be grateful for whatever comes.
Because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

Reflection: 'Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...' (Psalm 23: 4a) – copied with permission from Rev Donald Thomson's book, 'Reflections on the 23rd Psalm'.

During a funeral service it is quite usual for the organist to play this verse quietly. If the word 'death' is minimised, somehow it's impact on the mourners will be lessened. Thus, the members of the congregation will not be confronted with the idea of the mortality and finite number of years left to them.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

*And forgive us our debts, as
we forgive our debtors.*

However, for anyone with faith in the Good Shepherd, this verse is the expression of the triumphant victory over death that has been wrought on our behalf by the Good Shepherd Himself. It should be sung with a full orchestra, for God has opened a way for us to be with Him for ever. Death is not the end of life, but a transition to eternal life.

Through the valley of the shadow of death

On a conducted tour of the Holy Land, the guide asked the coach driver to stop at the side of the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Jericho. Most of the passengers were looking around to see what wonderful sight would be brought to our attention – another monument, a church or perhaps even a refreshment stall where we could buy some fresh fruit. But there was nothing to be seen except sharply undulating valley sides, barren and with no interest to any tourist.

The guide reminded the passengers of the parable Jesus taught about the Good Samaritan. She spoke of the man who was walking down the same route as ourselves, and how he was set upon by a group of robbers, who beat him and left him stripped of his clothes.

How could a band of robbers hide themselves in such a place that was devoid of any bushes or trees, and surprise the lone traveller?

The answer was in the nature of the little valleys that ran off at right angles to the main road. When the sun was shining at an angle, one side of the valley was plunged into dark shadows. In that situation, the eyes become accustomed to seeing things in the bright sunlight, and the contrast between the sun shining on the golden yellow limestone and the shadows themselves is so great that it is difficult to see anything in the shadows.

One thing that the little side valleys have in common is that they all lead upwards to the summit of the larger hill. At the summit there are no longer any shadows – all is bright sunlight.

God leads us through the shadows of life, upwards, and into the sunlight of His presence. He doesn't lead us into the deep shadows of the valley and leave us there.

The most wonderful point the Psalmist makes is when he refers to the 'Valley of the shadow of death'. Shadows have no substance. For the believer, the power of death is only that of a shadow, which may darken and surround us for a while, but cannot harm us.

Prayers for ourselves and others

Living God, we come before you in prayer - some of us on our knees, some hands folded, palms to heart, forehead to ground, some raising a sign in protest, some gritting their teeth and eyes tight shut and others lighting a candle. We ask for your mercy and protection in these tumultuous times. Lord, have mercy. Bring your compassion and comfort,

Dear Lord, you call us forth when it seems as though there is nothing, nothing we can do in our corner of the world, our little spot, our shelter from the storm, our valleys of death. Help us to don our gloves, mask, gown and face shield of tolerance, moderation, restraint, self-control and mercy. We have so many tools and fruits of the spirit. Grow in us a remarkable love that opens, perhaps speaks loudly, listens and even coos. You show in so many ways as we walk through these horrors and calamities, natural and human made. Teach, speak and help us to listen, learn and serve.

Loving Father, we pray for a deepening awareness of our need for one another and of your image in the hearts of everyone we meet. Help us to always be aware of one another's needs and to respond accordingly and assist them with words and deeds on to their road to recovery. Lord God, ninety percent of low and medium-income countries and even developed countries are having to set aside primary health care services as they address COVID-19. The World Health Organisation, in its report last week called attention to the inevitable gap that must be minimized. Lifesaving vaccinations, women's health care, family welfare home visits, and midwifery services for pregnant women and infants hang in the balance.

Almighty God, we ask that you help us to reconcile the supply chains for essential medicines and health products. Sustain these programs and shepherd funds equitably and swiftly to those most in need. We fear for epidemics and outbreaks – all these words that have become so common in our language. Lord hear our voices. Amplify our gifts. Help us to discern and forgive, honour and respect, and trust in your Holy Spirit at work among us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Closing Hymn: Great is thy Faithfulness,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UgUFxh-Nax8>

"Great is Thy faithfulness!"
"Great is Thy faithfulness!"
Morning by morning
new mercies I see;
All I have needed
Thy hand hath provided—
"Great is Thy faithfulness,"
Lord, unto me!

Final blessings

The Good Shepherd leads us forward, from this place, into the world to serve God's people, to witness to God's love in all that we do. We go in peace and God's peace goes with us. Amen

