

Pastoral letter from Sue Stanworth, Local Preacher.

Dear sisters and brothers,

“Are we nearly there yet?”

As I write this letter in Sheffield, we are getting used to more complicated restrictions on our ability to meet together. We're in Tier 3 and we're being warned that the rules for Christmas could be even stricter. People we know and love are ill with Covid. We can't meet family or friends unless they are in our “bubble”.

Yesterday, as it's half term school holiday, John and I were looking after our two young granddaughters. Although the weather forecast was pretty grim, we decided to put on our waterproofs, stow the girls' bikes and helmets in the car boot and go on an adventure from the cafe at the bottom of Endcliffe Park to the cafe at Forge Dam, (which has the wonderful ice-creams!).

Of course, it rained pretty continuously all afternoon but it's surprising how the promise of an ice cream can keep you going up the steepest hill and through the muddiest of puddles. In the end, the girls had sausage and chips though! And there's something special about making a plan and carrying it through, even if it's hard work at times. John and I carried the little one's bike most of the way up the hill, but she rode it heroically down and really enjoyed herself in the end.

“Are we nearly there yet?” When life gets tough, what do we do? Sometimes, we ask to be carried. That's been my prayer at particularly difficult moments in life when I've just felt completely lost. “Lord, I can't do this on my own. Will you carry me?” Maybe you can relate to this too.

This week, as we draw closer to Advent, when we begin to celebrate the coming of God as a baby in our world, our Sunday readings are for All Saints Day. I've chosen to share the reading from Matthew 5: verses 1 to 12 with you. As you read this passage from the Bible, imagine yourself sitting in a quiet spot at the top of a hill. Jesus is with us and many of your friends and family too. Again I'm using “The Message” Bible:

“When Jesus saw his ministry drawing huge crowds, he climbed a hillside. Those who were apprenticed to him, the committed, climbed with him. Arriving at a quiet place, he sat down and taught his climbing companions. This is what he said:

“You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

“You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

“You're blessed when you're content with just who you are - no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.

“You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat.

“You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'care-full', you find yourselves cared for.

“You're blessed when you find your inside world - your mind and heart - put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

“You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family.

“You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom.

“Not only that, - count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens - give a cheer

you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always got into this kind of trouble.”

Matthew 5: verses 1 to 12. (The Message).

There is a lot of food for thought and prayer in these short sayings of Jesus. They are definitely not commandments are they? Jesus is talking about people who are already doing and being what God wants them to do and to be. Jesus is describing the sort of situation that his disciples were finding themselves in: they'd left their families and jobs to follow Jesus. Their worlds had been turned upside down. Their worldly futures were insecure. But still they were committed to following Jesus.

As you imagine yourself having climbed a hill with Jesus and his friends, sitting down and maybe sharing a picnic in a quiet shady spot, read through the verses again and maybe you will recognise something of yourself at this moment and in these times. Be happy and feel blessed by these words of Jesus.

As you say the Lord's Prayer this week, notice the words: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Jesus came to bring God's kingdom in and we are the followers who are struggling, but working to bring a little bit more of heaven to earth every day.

I pray that you will find something here to challenge you and to comfort you in these difficult times. Do let me know if you want to talk. I'm happy to listen!

If you would like to sing a hymn related to our worship this week, I can recommend "Singing the Faith" no 736:

In heavenly love abiding, no change my heart shall fear;
And safe is such confiding, for nothing changes here:
The storm may roar without me, my heart may low be laid;
But God is round about me, and can I be dismayed?

Wherever he may guide me, no want shall turn me back;
My Shepherd is beside me, and nothing can I lack:
His wisdom ever waketh, his sight is never dim;
He knows the way he taketh, and I will walk with him.

Green pastures are before me, which yet I have not seen;
Bright skies will soon be o'er me, where darkest clouds have been;
My hope I cannot measure, my path to life is free;
My Saviour has my treasure, and he will walk with me.

Anna Laetitia Waring (1823-1910)
Based on Psalm 23.

I leave you with a prayer from the Methodist Prayer Handbook:

"Heavenly Father, when days are dark and full of pain,
Give us the strength to live through what we don't understand,
The courage to face it, and your comfort and peace in our hearts,
For we are held safe in your loving arms, Amen."
Jenni Bonner, local preacher, Grantham Circuit.

As before, please give me a ring if you want to talk. My phone number is 07989 533075.
With every blessing,
Sue Stanworth, local preacher.

