

Today we are celebrating Luke, the evangelist, historian, doctor (probably), and definitely a companion to St Paul on at least one of his missionary journeys. Throughout the summer we have been reading excerpt from Paul's letters to the Romans and Philippians, and if we followed the same track today we would have had a couple of paragraphs from Paul's letter to Timothy, or possibly a reading from the Acts of the Apostles which was written by Luke. But I have deliberately chosen an Old Testament reading this morning.

There are two reasons for this. The first is that both the New Testament alternatives are essentially outlines of travel, one describing how Paul got from Phrygia to Philippi by a rather roundabout route, and the other listing all the places Paul's companions had gone off to, and giving instructions about what to do with his cloak, books and parchments. I did wonder about giving you a brisk ten minutes on the first-century significance of the difference between books and parchments – but maybe not? And who wants a travelogue when we've all had holidays cancelled, journeys disrupted and plans put on hold?

But my main reason is that wonderful opening of Isaiah chapter 35, verse 3: 'Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees.' That's me, these days – weak hands and feeble knees. It lines right up with another verse a few chapters further on: 'A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly-burning wick he will not quench.' Which of us, in these extraordinary and uncertain times, isn't a dimly-burning wick with feeble knees? We did everything we were told to do: shut ourselves in, cut ourselves off from friends and relations, and from Mass, relied on Zoom and Skype, made phone calls, sanitised everything, worked from home and coped with the kids all day. Then, very gradually, things started to ease up a bit – we came out, met each other in gardens, maybe went back to the office, came back to church. A lot of experts told us that there would be a second wave, but I really hoped that on this they would be wrong. But somehow – and not just with Covid – everything we've worked and hoped for seems to be disintegrating. It looks as though we shall have to go through the same palaver all over again, and none of us can do anything about it. It's not surprising if our wicks are rather dim at the moment.

Many of us have been relatively lucky so far. We have space to work or (if necessary) isolate at home, maybe a garden, we've got the technology to keep in touch and can make it work. We're mostly not dependent on Universal Credit or 80% of the national minimum wage. But some people who are at particular risk are becoming worried again, and I suspect that many of us are demoralised, resentful or angry – or all of the above. There's nothing wrong with those feelings. It's healthy to recognise, own and talk about them. If anyone had told me a year ago that I would be unable to hug my granddaughters for nearly six months, that I wouldn't have sung anything aloud since June, that I could be fined for going to the pub for a drink or into the shop without a mask, I wouldn't have believed them. Nor would I have believed that I would willingly accept it all. We're not used to being so out of control of our lives. It's not easy to give up personal autonomy, especially when the instructions for doing so have been so confusing. But if this is hard, Isaiah is reminding us of something even more difficult, and giving us hope at the same time.

Sacrificing some personal autonomy for the duration of the pandemic is one thing. Placing ourselves in God's hands, asking him to lead and direct us and trusting him in everything that we do, is far harder. As Christians, this is what we have committed to do. It's way beyond not going to Wales for a half-term weekend, or staying at home for a couple of weeks because a colleague has tested positive. 'Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death' –

which is what the threat of Covid must feel like for some people – I must put my trust completely in God, ‘for you are with me.’ That commitment goes far beyond one pandemic. It extends to every corner of our lives: who we are, what we do, who our friends are, the decisions we make, the opportunities we grasp or let go. If God is to lead us, we have to listen to him and be alert for his direction. So often we will fail to recognise it or be reluctant to follow – so often we have weak hands and feeble knees. But God does not abandon us; he doesn’t snuff out the glimmer, leave us behind, give up on us. Isaiah reminds us that God will save us, and together we can make the wilderness flourish.

At the moment that wilderness contains a lot of people who are really struggling: lonely, frightened, depressed, whose work is on hold, whose jobs are lost, whose businesses have failed, whose homes are virtual prisons. It’s full of key workers who must put themselves at risk yet again for the benefit of everyone else. Placing ourselves in God’s hands means being open to the ways he wants to use us to bring healing, companionship, mercy, support and hope to others, however fed-up and wobbly we may be feeling. So, as Luke helped and encouraged Paul through many difficulties, including that ‘thorn in his flesh’ which God wouldn’t take away, let’s look beyond ourselves. We pray that God will show us how we can help and encourage the people who are finding life exceptionally difficult, and we ask for the strong hands, robust legs and determination we need for his service.