

Message from Bishop Rachel

21 November 2023

A Song of the Wilderness (Advent)

- 1 The wilderness and the dry land shall rejoice,
the desert shall blossom and burst into song.
- 2 They shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God.
- 3 Strengthen the weary hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
- 4 Say to the anxious, 'Be strong, fear not,
your God is coming with judgement,
coming with judgement to save you.'
- 5 Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
- 6 Then shall the lame leap like a hart,
and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy.
- 7 For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
- 8 The ransomed of the Lord shall return with singing,
with everlasting joy upon their heads.
- 9 Joy and gladness shall be theirs,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Isaiah 35. 1,2b-4a,4c-6, 10

This canticle, A Song of the Wilderness, with words from Isaiah 35, will be used in the coming days and weeks as we move into Advent, and will be part of my prayer as I spend three days at the end of this week on retreat, staying in a hermitage in the grounds of a religious community. It will be my time of 'going into the desert' to be with God. I delight in solitude and silence to pray, reflect and dwell in scripture, and I am expectant for God to water those places within me which have become parched.

I have always loved that imagery of God's refreshment and life breaking out in the desert places, yet in recent weeks I have been deeply aware of deserted places where life-giving water seems so absent, and where the only thing which seems to be growing is pain and trauma, not least in the Middle East: A deserted kibbutz where life has been wiped out; and deserted ruins and rubble where missiles continue to fall and life is being destroyed. And then there are those forgotten places such as Myanmar, Sudan, Democratic Republic of the Congo and more, where people feel deserted and for whom it seems that no one is marching or crying out.

So this week, I find myself asking and praying about how my going into the desert to be refreshed by God might enable me to be a source of God's life-giving water for deserted people and places.

I ask myself the same question following the debate in [General Synod](#) about same-sex relationships and the Prayers of Love and Faith (PLF). For some people it feels as if small streams are finally beginning to water the desert, whereas for other people the landscape is becoming ever more like a wilderness. It was good to have an item on this at our Diocesan Synod last Saturday.

Across the Diocese, people will hold different perspectives on everything I have mentioned, and people will be living with different experiences and will know people who are closely impacted by one or more of the above situations.

In all that we hear and see, read and watch, whether it be the devastating situation in the Middle East or the very different situation of the Church of England and PLF, there will be assumptions, fears and firmly held views. It is my hope and prayer that, as in that Song of the Wilderness, eyes and ears will be open to one another and to God.

The canticle mentions both fear and judgement, and I hope and pray that fear or judgement of each other is not what shapes our lives, but rather that we go on drawing from the wells of God's salvation, grace and love. The saving judgement in the canticle belongs to God.

I have recently heard people speaking of judgement and salvation not only in discussions regarding the different peoples of the Middle East, but also in conversations and debate around PLF. Yet, it is God who is God and not we ourselves, and amazingly nothing can stop God being God. God's grace, love, judgement and salvation belong to God alone, and it is God who brings forth streams in the desert.

It is apt that this Sunday before Advent is named as 'Christ the King' – As we pray for God's life-giving streams to flow in the desert of our hearts, Church and world, and cry out for sorrow and sighing to flee away, may we continually open our eyes and hearts to 'the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God.'

With my thanks and prayers as ever

A handwritten signature in black ink on a yellow rectangular background. The signature consists of a small cross symbol followed by the name 'Rachel' in a cursive script.