

28th Sunday

What is our faith? How does it shape the way we live, the burdens we carry and the hope that keeps us going? Well, today's readings invite us to explore those questions through the image of a journey: the road we travel, the companion who walks beside us and the home towards which he leads us.

Recently I was walking with the dogs deep in the North York Moors when, suddenly, the sky darkened and rain came down like stair rods. The dogs' ears flattened, my ears flattened! Their tails dropped, and we all put our heads down into the wind, making for home.

It is surprising how quickly our horizons can contract. Moments earlier, there had been a landscape to admire. Now there was simply a path to follow. Eyes down, thoughts turned towards home: a light in the window, a blazing fire, dry clothes, something warm to eat. Ordinary things we think nothing of when we have them, suddenly precious when we are cold and far away.

The inner landscape of our life can change just as unexpectedly. A diagnosis, a bereavement, a relationship that breaks down, a telephone call, and the world we thought we knew feels strangely altered. Sometimes the change comes quietly, and we find ourselves carrying burdens settling upon us over time: the exhaustion of caring for someone, the worries we take to bed, the ache of watching someone we love struggle when we just can't put things right.

There may be the quiet loss of purpose when work ends or children leave home; the slow discovery that we can no longer do what once came easily; the loneliness nobody notices because we always smile and say we're fine. We can have a life full of people and yet still yearn to belong.

It's a yearning that finds its voice in a hymn by St John Henry Newman, whose feastday we celebrated on Friday. "Lead Kindly Light" is the prayer of someone who cannot see the road ahead but asks for enough light to take the next step. A similar longing is expressed by Minnie Louise Haskins in a poem famously quoted by the King as the nation stood on the brink of war in 1939: 'I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year, give me a light so that I may step into the unknown. He said 'put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than a light and safer than any known way'.

The readings at this Mass portray life as a journey – one which finds its ultimate purpose in its destination. Every journey brings its weariness, its uncertainties, its stretches of rough terrain. Even our happiest moments cannot quite still the longing within us, because we are not yet home. As St Augustine said, "Our hearts are restless, Lord, until they rest in you."

Today, Isaiah illustrates our final destination with a feast of rich food and fine wine, the psalmist of a table prepared and a cup overflowing. Then Jesus tells us of a king who has prepared a wedding feast for his son.

These images offer hope that a place is prepared for us.

Isaiah goes on to give the promise that God will wipe away the tears from every face.

Every tear. Every face.

We hear those words differently if we have a particular face in mind - someone whose voice we would give so much to hear again, whose empty chair still catches us unprepared.

Our hope needs to be strong if it's to bear the weight of our sorrow. And we find that hope in Jesus Christ, who entered the places we most fear: loneliness, abandonment, suffering and death. The hands that promise to wipe away our tears still bear the wounds of the cross.

Sometimes, Christ comes to us through others.

In the midst of suffering, when words bring little comfort, we can be lifted by someone willing to stay and listen without judgement, who simply sits beside us when there is nothing left to say. There is a particular tenderness in being with someone for whom we need not put on a brave face. In military chaplaincy we speak of a 'ministry of presence', turning a familiar saying on its head: "Don't just do something - sit there!"

Paul appreciated the kindness of others. He tells the Philippians: "It was kind of you to share my trouble." They couldn't unlock his prison but they could ensure that he didn't feel forgotten within it.

Whose trouble might we share this week? Who can we help feel more free? A telephone call or a visit, a text, an arrangement to meet up may seem small things but, to someone feeling alone, it may be the light in the window.

The Gospel asks an interesting question. If God has prepared such a feast, why would anyone refuse to come? Why do so many reject faith?

The answer, perhaps, lies in those who turn back to their farms and businesses. There is work to do, a living to earn, and the demands of the immediate crowd out the things of eternity. For some of us, this touches a tender place. We think of children or grandchildren whom we love dearly, who no longer practise the faith, who seem to have little room in their lives for God. We see their goodness and their struggles, and maybe we long for them to know the strength and hope that faith can bring.

We cannot make that journey for them. But we can keep loving them, listen without reproach, and let them see what faith makes possible in our own lives. We can hold them in prayer, remembering that our love for them is already enfolded in God's greater love. The invitation to his feast will remain open, and He may be quietly at work in ways we cannot yet see.

There may be times when we, ourselves, put faith on the back burner. We shall pray when things are quieter, come to Mass when the weekend is less crowded, seek reconciliation when we feel more ready.

And so the years pass. The invitation remains in our hands, but we never arrive at the feast.

When someone discovers faith for the first time, their joy can help us see afresh what familiarity has hidden. Our younger converts here at St Robert's have done just that. Their hunger for faith asks a searching question of those of us who have grown up with it: do we still treasure the gift we received at baptism?

Today's psalm, familiar from so many funerals and weddings, gathers these promises together. The Lord is my shepherd. He guides us through life and remains beside us in the dark valley. He prepares a table and brings us to dwell in His house.

There is a lovely change in the psalm. At first, the psalmist speaks about God in the third person: "He leads me"; "He guides me". But in the valley of the shadow of death, he speaks directly to him: "You are there."

In the place of greatest fear, that prayer becomes most personal.

Perhaps that is all we can say at a hospital bedside, in the silence after a funeral, or during a long night when sleep simply will not come.

"You are there."

The psalm teaches us not to wait until we feel stronger before turning towards God but to come to Him as we are - tired, bewildered, scarcely able to pray.

Out on the moors, with our heads down against the rain, all I wanted was to get us home. We may feel like this in life at times when grace grants us a glimpse of what awaits at the end of this mortal coil. It's a grace that brings an eternal context to the trials and sufferings of this world. We are the pilgrims of John Henry Newman's hymn – still on the way, one step at a time. Perfection and even satisfaction may often elude us in this life. But Christ knows our concerns. He sees into our heart. He walks the road with us and lights the path ahead of us. And so we put one step in front of another with loving trust.

And when, at last, we reach the end of our earthly journey, as death beckons and those who love us have accompanied us as far as they can, Christ will remain firmly in step beside us. The one who brought us into being and shared our journey through life, will lead us through the valley of death, until the veil is lifted and we shall see him face to face. The crucifix that guards our church is the pledge of that love: Christ entered into the darkness of death so that we need never face it alone.

And the words we whispered in the valley will become words of wonder: "You are there."

So, what is our faith? It is the trust that we can place our hand in the hand of God, even when we cannot see the way ahead. It shapes us as we learn to walk with Christ and to share the burdens of those who walk beside us. And it gives us hope that, beyond all we struggle to understand, there is a home to which he is leading us, a feast prepared for us, a love that will not let us go. This is our faith. Let us stand and profess it together: I believe...