

19/7/20 Reflection 1: John 15: 1-6 **Don't stay apart from Jesus**

In Carlisle, where I now stay, new wee signs appeared stencilled on the pavements in the main street earlier this week: "A stick man with arms outstretched and arrows pointing up and down and on each side with the slogan. *"Stay safe, keep apart."*

An important public health message but dangerous to our spiritual health. As we prepare and plan for re-opening of the church buildings for worship at Shotts and at Allanton, many detailed restrictions will remain and have to be followed in order to ensure safety from contagion of Covid-19, but I do hope that we will not try to make ourselves or others safe or immune from the contagion of God's amazing gracious love through Christ. We have been kept physically apart but the local church has been working hard to reach out to each other and to our neighbours and to keep in touch by a variety of means including phone calls, prayer and deliveries. When we restart services (with limited numbers and without singing) in the church building, we aim to make this accessible to those who are more vulnerable and still shielding at home through the internet or dialling up on your landline to listen.

And be reassured by Jesus' words in John 15: "***I am the vine and you are the branches. Remain rooted and grounded in Me and in My love and you will bear much fruit. Apart from Me you can do nothing that is of lasting value.***"

May we bear fruit as the Lord uses us to share seeds of love and hope for the present and for the future. May we remember that promise every day. ***The Lord is our refuge and our strength an ever present help in trouble. The Lord Almighty is with us.***" Psalm 46:1,7.

## 19/7/20 Acts 8:1b-8 Leaving your Comfort Zone.

When I was growing up through my teenage years at a fairly harsh boarding school in England and then at Oxford University, I learned to bottle up my emotions and not to show weakness. I used to be one of those who never wanted people to cry. I'd change the subject or try to cheer them up. I didn't help them or myself by doing so. Now, as a battle-worn wounded healer, more aware of God's patient grace and compassion in my own weaknesses and pain, I don't change the subject. I listen to their stories. I stand beside them, cry with them, hold their hands. I have learned that "*those who mourn will be comforted*", so I let them mourn. I even encourage it. I understand that mourning is a necessary part of dealing with loss. It is not a weakness in faith.

Certainly, it was no weakness of the "*godly men who buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him*" (verse 2.) God commands us to show our grief: "*Mourn with those who mourn*" Romans 12:15. I know that I can't relieve the pain but I also know that there's no way to get on the side of pain except to go through it. But in Christ, may we know God with us and whose love holds us.

The brutal killing of Stephen by stoning carried out by a mob of Jewish religious leaders was the first of many murders of Christians over the next 2000 years, just for sticking to their faith. This year, in South Asia and West Africa, more have followed. The death of Stephen then had catastrophic consequences, leading to a great persecution of the church in Jerusalem. The disciples except the twelve were scattered throughout the districts of Judea and Samaria and they took the gospel with them. It took this persecution and disruption to get the church to fulfil what Jesus had commanded her. The church began to grow outwards. Dispersed Jews went to Samaria and preached the gospel. Philip preached in the main city of Samaria. Hearing Philip's message and experiencing the miracles brought great joy to the inhabitants of the city, who accepted the good news.

The involvement of many people in the local church is essential for mission. Missionaries of the Sudan Interior Mission had leave Ethiopia during World War II and only a handful of converts remained in that country. When the missionaries returned after the war they found 25,000 new Christians – the local Christians had continued the ministry. A similar story on a larger scale happened when Christianity was banned from Communist China for 40 years. In the local church, we have experienced a temporary close to worship services and meetings but have been aware of God's presence and provision. The church has been active in praying and caring for our neighbours and reaching out. The church will only grow if all members witness to their friends, neighbours and colleagues. Like these anonymous evangelists we need to witness to all we meet, in our homes, neighbourhoods or workplaces.

In the early days of the church it was their gentle encouragement and caring, sharing love in action that made such a big impact. (Acts 11) And notice that the first success was in Samaria, a region whose inhabitants shared a common language but thought very differently about worship and religion. As we slowly emerge from lockdown, may God help you also witness to someone who is near you but different from you.