

Good morning....!

To some of you my face will be familiar and to others, a complete stranger so please let me introduce myself. I'm Fiona.....I am worshipping with you here at Geddington and Weekley (with my husband Jim) as I continue to explore a sense of vocation. We have been made to feel very welcomed here at Geddington (and Weekley) for which we are very grateful and we are glad that our journey has brought us here.

When we hear the word 'journey' it can raise a smile. Everyone it seems is on a journey these days...whether it's an X-Factor contestant, a Strictly Dancer or a Michael Portillo type thing– riding around on a train-type journey, talking about somebody else's journey! On a serious note, we know in our world today there are men, women and children on a very difficult and unwanted journey, searching for a merciful welcome – a place to live their God-given lives away from danger, and away from the siege of war.

So, one way or another, we're all on a journey – some are more serious than others.

Recently, Jim and I were part of a journey with a group. We were on a pilgrimage. There were 31 of us and we had a group agreement - a promise, a faithful commitment, that group leaders would always make sure their little troop was *present and correct* before setting off. I was ever so pleased about this. It felt really safe to me to have this promise, knowing we would be looking out for one another in this way. You can imagine my surprise then, when one morning, the group departed and carried on the journey without us! We got left behind.

I don't know if you have ever had the experience of being left behind....*of being forgotten.....* Initially, I didn't know whether to be more upset about the promise being broken (the faithful agreement to make sure everyone was present before setting off) or with the fact that our absence wasn't noticed!

So for a short time, Jim and I had to find our own way for a bit, not quite sure we were on the right path. But eventually we were found and reunited with the group, and there was relief all around. It so happens, they left without us because they thought we had left without them. So for an hour or so, we were

slightly lost and out of touch with the others. And it came to light that someone had said something that wasn't quite right. Someone had said that they had seen me and Jim setting off on our own. And that wasn't something we would have done. And it was an example of how a few careless words caused confusion (and to some degree) a little bit of hurt in a community.

And life is like that. We have all made mistakes, say wrong things, make poor choices....we all have feet of clay and we all accidentally hurt one another. We don't mean to but sometimes, we know we've got it wrong and can seek forgiveness. And it's also worth asking ourselves, "Have I forgiven myself?" That's always a good question to ask!

In any church community, as Christians live and move alongside one another, there is always the potential to accidentally tread on each other's toes; but we can also be very welcoming, very caring and very attentive to one another, supporting each other as we seek to negotiate our way along life's unpredictable path. And this is especially important when circumstances enter our lives which are really not wanted, such as redundancy, illness, and other losses.

For us as Christians, the journey is a journey *of faith*, and it so happens that through our shared lives, our different stages in life and various circumstances, our faith journey has brought us *together* here; and as we reflect, we might recall those in our lives who taught us about God, people who brought us to church, taught us in schools - and here we are today, sharing that same faith, with our shared Baptism, with the same Heavenly Father. And we come together (meeting together) sharing our lives to come and worship, each of us arriving from very different back-grounds and situations.

But in a funny sort of way, although we have our shared lives in our shared faith, we all have our own individual path of life too – our own spiritual journey – a place where we have come from – a place we are heading towards. And no two paths of spiritual journey are the same. No 2 stories are the same because no 2 lives are the same. Each life here will have its own unique history (some shorter than others), and that life will have taken its own twist and turns with its own high and lows, its own joys and sadnesses, its own celebrations and re-directions. But something which is common to all is this: every life here is

precious to God. And not just the lives here, every life is precious to God. He has made everyone in His image. This is our faith.

Essentially, faith is about trust, and our *path of faith* is based upon trust...upon God's promises to us....that He is a God of compassion and mercy and will help us in every circumstance we find ourselves in.

In my work as a Counsellor, I have sat with many people and listened to their desperate circumstances. Very often, I am listening to people who are experiencing an intense loneliness, a sense of being forgotten, of being detached from any source of love, or hope. More often than not, when the subject of God comes up, many people have a sense that (for one reason or another) God is detached...He's sort of there...and really only bothered about people who have life all worked out – perfect people! If you make a mistake, He walks away; and they tell me that God couldn't possibly be *interested in* them, let alone love them.

And we might all find ourselves in that situation. We don't have to be in counselling to experience this, to be pondering questions about our worth, value and purpose. We can all experience times of wilderness and feel at a very low ebb, and if we think that God is not near to us (not present to us), our hearts are greatly discouraged, and we can begin to feel despondent – and 'loss of meaning' and purpose begins to creep in. A life of no worth or purpose is not the truth about anyone.

God desires to be known, and wants to be in a close relationship with us. Not detached, nor standing far off – that's not God.

Holding on to our relationship of a compassionate, gracious and loving God, who wants to abide in us, walking with us in our daily lives, is essential. In our first reading (2 Thess 2:1-5, 13-17), we hear Paul encouraging a *holding on*..... "So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and *hold fast* to the traditions that you were taught by us." Paul is encouraging the 'holding on' to a God who is gracious, not a God who keeps himself at a distance, keeping a record of sins; a harsh and judgemental God who demands a perfect life, who keeps us at arm's length. No.

Paul is referring to our faith in a God of infinite mercy. Our faith is founded not upon rules and living a perfect life (no-one can do that). Our faith is based upon a Person, Jesus Christ, the only son of God. He is the Good Shepherd, the one who lays down His life for the sheep. He is not the hired hand who suddenly disappears when then the going gets tough. Jesus is the one who reconciles us to God so that we can turn around from our old ways of life and have a fresh start. And this grace (which we mark at our Baptism) is life-giving.

In this reading, Paul is also encouraging *steadfastness*. Don't give up. When we read the gospels, the disciples were often despondent and confused. At times the disciples were walking on the firm footing of a sure road, or the unseemingly impossible terrain of being called to walk on water!

In fact, when it all became too much for them (the terrain of the journey was becoming a bit steep) some of Jesus's disciples started to leave Him and He actually asked the 12 disciples "You don't want to leave me too do you?"

In our own walk of faith, the terrain can become a bit rough. The circumstances and pressures in life can cause us to lose our footing for a bit; we begin to lose stability and our balance, and we become less sure about things. The path of faith becomes a struggle and we start to stray a bit. When we try to pray, we find we can't, and maybe it all seems a bit dry. Reminders of past failures can sometimes begin to make us feel this way, and it can be very difficult to stay on track – we can want to withdraw and become independent. We can begin to wonder: Does God really care about me? Does God notice me ? Does he remember me ?

God does not forget anyone. Isaiah (49) God says this: ¹⁵ "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! ¹⁶ See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands."

So we do not lose hope....

There are a few things which sets the Christian faith apart from all other faiths and world views, and it all centres around the person of Jesus (the forgiveness of sins) and the hope that we have; the hope of Heaven.

In the reading from Luke (20.27-38), the Sadducees didn't believe in a resurrection and their conversation about who will be married to who is not really a question about marriage. It's a question about the afterlife. And Jesus's answer is about resurrection - that we will recognise one another *in a new way*. Jesus said "Whoever hears My word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life" and that is the **good hope** that we have.

Secondly, another thing that makes the Christian faith different is about Jesus's promise to always be with (abiding with) His followers. Jesus has promised *to be with* His followers by His spirit. Here is His promise "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever - the Spirit of truth. But you know him, for *he lives with you and will be in you*. I *will not leave you* as orphans; I will come to you. (John 14:16-18)

Jesus is a promise keeper. He promises to never leave us nor forsake us. He is faithful, and it's His love for us that keeps us bound to Him and one another.

We all have choices to make, and at times it can seem as though we don't know which way to turn, but it is possible for God to guide our steps. In the times of Jesus, in Israel, the shepherd would guide his sheep by the sound of his voice. He would walk, and talk, and the sheep recognised their own shepherd's voice. If two shepherds met each other with their flocks along the way, the sheep would not follow the wrong shepherd. That's why Jesus says in John 10: My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.

As we walk our path of life, we do well to stay close to the shepherd and it is a walk of faithfulness. In the reading from the psalm (17) today it says : My steps have held fast to your paths; my feet have not slipped. Notice again the need to hold fast. There are always temptations before us that make our feet want to slip. And God yearns to keep us on the right path by leaning on His grace and He strengthens our hearts with the help of the holy spirit. God points us to the right path, and He does this through the sacraments, through His word where we find wisdom, warning and help with choices; through creative arts and science and so on. And it is God's design to keep us on the right path together in a church community, in unity and peace.

The early Christians knew about this. They experienced very hard times of opposition and despite this, one of the choices they made (and insisted upon) was *not giving up the habit of meeting together*: “They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer”. And it's as true for us today as it was for them 2000yrs ago.

Jesus says: “Follow Me.” This can be particularly difficult if we don't like change.

When we think about God having plans for us, wanting to draw us in to lead us on to explore a slightly different path, it can raise anxieties: Where will it lead? We don't always realise it but we can have a general expectancy about how our lives will pan-out but often, there can be an unexpected turn, or choices and dilemmas are laid out in front of us, and our path can embrace a direction we had not anticipated. (*If you had told me at the start of this year that I would be here doing this I would never have believed you*). Our journeys do change and change can bring anxiety, but it can also lead us to places of new opportunities and flourishing in a way we could never have imagined.

God is faithful and remains faithful in all of life's changes. The Christian life is lived in relationship with God through Jesus Christ and with one another and our walk in faith is a walk of perseverance, and trust. And as we carry out our endeavour to discover the plans He has for us, we can trust that the Good Shepherd will bring us to a place where we are meant to be.

Jesus says: I am The Way, The Truth and The Life. So we walk with the promise keeper, as He leads us on, by grace, and we follow Him. He gives us an eternal hope and a peace which the world can't give. And this is the hope that establishes our steps as we walk our path, and strengthens us in His peace.

Kris will lead us all in a moment with an invitation to prayerful contemplation through the use of a walk, and it's simply a way of helping us to pray and reflect on our life of faith in God's presence.

Final words from our reading from Thessalonians today : “May our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God, our father, who loved us by His grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.”

And so we journey on, and we do this *together*, in community, with one another, walking alongside one another, loving God and neighbour as self, forgiving one another, (forgiving ourselves), strengthening one another, serving and encouraging one another to stay on the path of good hope, as we continue to walk together, in the name of His love.