

Fear No Evil

Fear No Evil, is a book written by a man called David Watson – not one of our David Watsons, but the one who was Rev Canon David Watson of the Church of England, known for his prolific Christian writings. Sadly, he passed away in 1983 at the age of only 51, but left behind him a trail of wonderful Christian books – *Fear No Evil*, traces his personal encounter and struggle with cancer which sadly was to take his life a year later.

Fear No Evil, is an account of a man brimming with faith but suddenly cast into the darkest of valleys. A man who was an international speaker, who had preached to packed churches and student unions around the world about the certainty of eternal life; he was now suddenly stripped of all such certainty and made to look deeply at his faith.

Rev David wrote, “When I heard earlier this year that I had cancer, the news hit me like a thunderbolt. All human hopes and securities were suddenly shattered...One test of any religion is how far will it stand up to the crisis of life, especially the final crisis of death. The shock of having to come to terms with death made me examine again the whole basis of my Christian faith.”

These words spoke to me this week...One test of any religion is how far it will stand up to the crisis of life...it made me think about my own faith and how strong is it?

Arguably the most profound literature doesn't come from academia but it comes from people who have gone through the furnace of life.

This week our world remembered the Holocaust and its victims and the Holocaust represents one of the darkest moments of the 20th Century but there have been others just as dark. But out of the Holocaust we have inspirational stories of how people survived the darkest of days.

A little girl once passed a parish church with a stained-glass window in which she saw the four Gospel writers on it. The window was beautifully backlit with a spotlight. One day in school the teacher asked: *what is a saint?* Immediately the little girl replied. *Miss, a saint is someone through whom the light shines.* She was right, saints are not just people in stained glass windows but saints are real people, who do God's will, in God's way by God's power.

What makes the Bible so real? It is that we meet real people struggling with the crisis of life. We see real accounts of individuals who have walked the darkest of valleys. People like Job, who said that he is being tested in a fiery

furnace and when he comes out he shall be like gold. We meet with those walking through fire who can literally say, *I fear no evil*.

This is the life of a true saint.

But who wants to go through a fiery furnace? And yet for Job he was to see a greater purpose in his suffering. He said that he would come out shining like gold.

Psalm 23 is the words of someone who looked back on his life and summed it up in 6 verses.

It is a psalm brimming with metaphors...

Green pastures, still waters, straight paths, dark valleys, rod and staff, the prepared table, the anointed head, the overflowing cup, goodness and mercy and the house of the Lord forever.

That's the picture he paints of his life experiences.

We believe that this is a picture of David's life – the shepherd boy, the one who defeated the giant, the one anointed King, hero of his nation, the one fallen from grace, adulterer, murderer, the one who lost a child. His life was a full complex life with many ups and downs.

If you were to paint a picture or write a song of your life, what would it look like?

What metaphors would you use to describe it?

Because I think that's what the psalmist has done, he has stood back, near the end of his life, perhaps leaning on his shepherd's crook, and he has thought to himself, what has my life all been about?

Can you identify with the psalmist?

Have you been there and taken time to reflect...what was the purpose of my life?

The psalm is a kaleidoscope of different colours and events. He could have filled the stained-glass windows in this church with all his life experiences.

So where did David the psalmist find strength in his darkest of valleys?

What was behind these words?

*Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,^[a]
I will fear no evil,*

*for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.*

That's what I wanted to know? Where did he find his courage? Because if we find where David found strength then perhaps we might also.

One constant thing that the psalmist had in his life was the Shepherd. The Shepherd was at his side whether in green pastures or beside the water of quietness or in the dark valley of the shadow of death, the psalmist is assured of the Shepherd's presence. Four words...which for me is the core of the psalm...*I am with you*. There would have been times when the shepherd was not visible but the psalmist knew that he was there was enough for him.

In Israel a shepherd was the personification of tender care and unwearying watchfulness, and people gratefully applied the term to God as provider and protector of his flock.

This is a psalm full of comfort and assurance, and provision and promise, that for some three thousand years, saints of every age have been singing it on every occasion.

It is a psalm for us also. It is a psalm for all who are journeying in life – whether of joy or sorrow.

It was enough for him to know that the Shepherd was with him and that the shepherd carried a rod to beat off all attackers and a staff to draw him close to the shepherd.

Where did Rev Canon David Watson find strength in his dark valley of cancer?

He speaks of God's Word as being a tremendous source of comfort. His favourite psalm was Psalm 16.

*You, Lord, are all I have,
and you give me all I need;
my future is in your hands....
I am always aware of your presence;
You are near, and nothing can shake me.*

This was one of his favourite passages. He had preached on it often and now he had to trust it.

He meditated on the words, *You Lord are all I have* and he handed everything over to the Lord, his work, his family, his health, his life, his all. One by one he released them to God until he could say in his heart, *You Lord, are all I have.*

This takes me back to Will Smith – one of the World's famous actors - and his autobiography, which I read at Christmas time and to his thoughts about trusting in God.

He was influenced by his Christian gran whom he called Gigi. He writes this near the end of his book, “I began to understand a perplexing phrase that Gigi used to use, 'Let Go and let God'. That had always seemed wrong to me. It felt like absolving yourselves of your own responsibilities, like something people say when they are too lazy to do what's necessary to build the life they want. But all of a sudden, it took on new and magical meaning.”

He writes, “There's an energy that is at work while you are asleep. The energy that fires the sun, that moves the oceans, that beats your heart. You don't have to do everything; in fact, most of the things that get done, you don't have anything to do with them. Actually, it's a great thing that you were asleep, because if you'd been awake, you probably would have messed it up.”

And then a new wording of Gigi's axiom came into his mind. It's not just “let go and let God” – it's “let go and let God work”. The surfer and the ocean are a team; the mountain and the climber are partners, not adversaries. The great river is going to do 90 percent of the work – your 1 percent is to study it, to understand it, to respect its power and creatively dance within its currents and laws. Act when the universe is open and rest when she is closed.”

Beautiful words that point us to our relationship with our Creator God.

David Watson wrote that trust in Jesus was a great source of strength, he wrote, “When it comes to the most critical issues that ever face us, I would rather trust Christ than any other person in the history of the world. And we all have to trust someone for no one knows what happens at death. Who else, apart from Christ and his resurrection can give us any solid hope for the future? There is no one. Yet one day we all must die and then what?....Sadly, it is often only when our faith faces the final test that we begin to consider these questions seriously.”

He writes, “For many years I had been telling people that I am not afraid to die. I know the reality of Christ in my experience. He has made God real in

my life, and has promised that one day he will welcome me into his home in heaven. At the same time, with the sudden and alarming discovery of cancer, I realised that the time had now come to place the whole of my life into God's hands once again and to renew my trust in him for all that lay ahead of me."

One Sunday after communion in his church, he wrote, "Quietly I confessed my sins to God, thanked Jesus for dying for me, and told him that my life – and the future of my family – was in his hands...I took the bread and the wine, tokens of Christ's ultimate sacrifice for my sins and the guarantee of God's unchanging love and mercy. I knew that I belonged to him forever. Not even death could separate me from his love.

He prayed, "Lord I'm yours. You can do with me whatever is your perfect will." In that surrender he found his profound peace. In his own words, He was ready!

He also found strength from God's people; not all, some showed him great love, often with few words, others were patronising and condescending.

We can receive the comfort of Jesus through his followers.

Open Doors is an organisation which supports persecuted Christians throughout the world.

In their daily devotion book, there is a story of a man who had been in prison for many years. Those were years of suffering, torture, brainwashing. After his release Open Doors spoke to him and asked him: What was the secret of your victory whilst you were in prison for so long?

He pulled out a little notebook from his pocket. This is the secret he said. These are the people who prayed for me while I was in prison. They sent me postcards and I kept their names. You have no idea how we depended on getting these postcards. They encouraged us and the other prisoners.

During the Troubles of Northern Ireland, there was a Church in Belfast which was sadly blown up by terrorists. The pastor of the church was asked afterwards, "And how's your church?" to which he replied, "my church is fine, it's the building that's the problem." That man said something profound, his church was not about the stones but about the people working together, caring and loving each other and they were fine.

How's our church?

I hope that we can say – *our church is fine because we work together and tend each other.* Remember what Jesus said, *this is how others will know that you are my disciples by how you love each other.*

Last week we looked at the five marks of mission – do you remember them?

Telling the Good News

Teaching God's people

Transforming society

Treasuring Creation

Tending others.

Today we are thinking about tending others and in doing so we are doing the work of Christ in our midst. St Theresa of Avila wrote this prayer,

Christ has no body now on earth , but yours,

No hands but yours,

No feet but yours,

Yours are the eyes through which is to look out Christ's compassion to the world;

Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good;

Yours are the hands with which he is to bless men now. Amen.

“Fear no evil” writes the psalmist, and we can when we put our lives into the care of Almighty God, when we allow his presence to be our constant companion, and when we seek fellowship with those who love and care for us.

Tending others is a mark of mission but more than that it is the heartbeat of the church, it is what the church is all about – an important part of the Cadder church jigsaw.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Amen.