

I want to focus this morning on the reading from the Prophet Isaiah. And let me just say in passing, how pleased I've been in recent weeks to hear in various settings, the name of the Prophet Isaiah pronounced properly. I'm working on the choir now. I know that Alex is a fan of the English tradition, so I'm hoping it won't be hard to win them round.

There's a word in the reading that leapt out at me. It's not just because it came three times. It's because it's a word that expresses how I feel at the moment. Weary. We read this at the end of the reading.

"God does not faint or grow weary. His understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. Even youth will faint and be weary and the young will fall exhausted. But those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint."

I'm sure I'm not the only one who's feeling weary. This pandemic is proving to be wearing for many of us in different ways. What added to my weariness this week was having to start preparing for Lent and Holy Week again, the second Lent but the same pandemic. It just seems to be coming round and reminded me of how long this pandemic has gone on. Who would have thought last Easter when there was that brief little promise that we'd all be singing together in church last Easter? Who'd have thought that here we are still this Easter not able to return to our church building?

There's at least two different kinds of weariness. There's the weariness that comes after a long bracing walk. This type of weariness could be cured by a nice long sheep... sleep. Don't think sheep would be any help but sleep might help. There's another kind of weariness to do with being ground down over a long period of time, tired out by events that have dragged on. Well, this is the sort of weariness that I'm experiencing at the moment.

I learnt this week that the root, the Hebrew root, for the word that the prophet uses here for weary is the word yaga, which means to grasp, as in to grasp onto something so tightly that it becomes exhausting. We might call this white-knuckling, gripping onto something, just trying to keep everything together. And when life gets complicated, that's often what we do, and that is exhausting.

I once went for a cold winter walk in England's Lake District, a very lovely part of England. And the end of the walk involved traversing a very narrow ridge that's called Striding Edge. When I did it, there was no striding involved. I'm not really comfortable with heights, so I shuffled along Striding Edge, clinging on very, very tightly to the rock to make sure I didn't fall over the very steep sides I could see either side of me. When I got to the end, I thought that my fingers were rather cold and I looked down and I saw that I'd been gripping on so tightly to the rock that I'd completely worn through my gloves and my fingers were now exposed. I'd ruined a perfectly good brand-new pair of gloves simply by clinging on so tight. That's exhausting. We can only white-knuckle it for so long.

I know that I'm weary because I've been trying to white-knuckle this pandemic. I've been thinking, "Well, if I just hold it together for a few more weeks, we'll be the other side of it." And we never get there. It doesn't seem to get better very quickly. It's dragged on for so long, for months, we've been holding on clinging, grasping, and it's very wearing.

The Prophet Isaiah was writing to the people of Israel when they were similarly worn down. They'd been in exile in Babylon for decades. They'd been taken to a strange land and there seemed to be no way back for them, no end to the exile. They were ground down and weary. And Isaiah was a prophet sent to comfort them in their distress. And in this passage, the prophet enters into a kind of dialogue, although we're not quite sure who he's dialoguing with.

So, he begins by saying, "Have you not known? Have you not heard?" And it's not exactly clear who the you is. It could be one of the exiles. Could be one of us. I think the you is a representative figure here. It could be someone who's taken into exile. It could be someone caught up in the midst of a pandemic. Whoever the you is, let's see what the prophet has to say.

He begins with this rhetorical question, "Have you not known? Have you not heard?" And he asked the question, knowing full well that the hearer has heard of God and has been told the stories of God's activity in the world. Prophets like Isaiah weren't sent to the people of Israel to prove to them that God exists or to persuade them of the reality of God. No, they were sent to the people to remind them of God, because they'd forgotten. The Psalmist said, "Bless the Lord. Oh my

soul. And forget not all His benefits." The Deuteronomist says, "So be careful not to forget the covenants the Lord your God has made with you." As Isaiah reminds his conversation partner about all that God has done, he says, "Remember that our God sits above the heavens. Remember He created the ends of the earth. Remember that His understanding is unsearchable." We need to be reminded of God's power, God's goodness, and all that he has done for us because we forget.

The you in the passage interrupts the prophet and says, "My way is hidden from the Lord. And my right is disregarded by my God." Well, that might be a very good description of how the person feels, but it's actually not a good description of their reality. They need to remember that God is still in heaven and that whilst we may forget God, He never forgets us.

So, a few chapters later in the Book of Isaiah, we've come across this glorious passage. We read these beautiful words. The people say, "The Lord has forsaken me. My Lord has forgotten me." God says, "Can a woman forget her nursing child or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I the Lord will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hand." The Prophet Isaiah reminds the weary people that God has not changed. God is still the Lord of the universe and He has not forgotten them. So he encourages the people to lift up your eyes and see on high. Lift up your eyes. Don't look down with discouragement, look up with praise.

I'm going to share another one of my hiking stories. And actually, there are a lot of them because when I was young, before I got married, coincidentally, I did a lot of hiking. And my favorite-ever hiking trip was to the Dolomites in Italy. I went with two friends called Hugh and Chris. On the first day, we were going up a mountain and we came to a stream. It was a stream. It wasn't a river, although it was extremely fast flowing. And Chris and I got up to it and we didn't even take our backpacks off. We just hopped across the stream onto the other side and carried on. We'd actually gone quite some way before we realized that Hugh wasn't with us. So, we turned around and we saw that he'd taken his backpack off and was standing on the other side of the stream, just looking down. He was looking down at the fast-flowing water and he'd got stuck. I think he'd have been there for the rest of the day if we hadn't gone to help him. What he needed to do was to lift his eyes to the opposite bank, and

it wasn't actually that difficult if he did that, just to find a few steps to cross the stream.

When we're weary, let us lift up our eyes on high and see. In so doing, we may remember all that God has done for us. All that He might be doing in our midst. So, Isaiah encourages us to remember. He also offers us a promise. He says this, "God gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint."

Note that the promise isn't you'll be given the energy to flap your wings and fly wherever you want to. It's not about getting our life back with us in control. It's a promise to mount up with wings like eagles. Eagles have such amazing wings that they don't need to flap. They're the opposite of the beautiful hummingbirds we see in our gardens. Hummingbirds flap furiously. Eagles soar. They barely move their wings. They move by simply riding the thermal currents. The air from the high pressure beneath their wings flows over the wing tips into the low pressure above their wings, which allows them to soar and glide, gracefully and effortlessly.

It's a powerful image of how we are to learn to rely on God's strength and God's power, God's leaning. We wait for God to renew our strength. When the wind of God's spirit blows on us, let's be ready to soar. Just like the eagle waits and senses the coming of the thermal air, let's look for and expect God's spirit to come and invite us to launch out. Let's be ready to go with Him, to be ready to soar.

I want to close by reading a well-known verse from the Gospels. When God came in the person of Jesus Christ, He reiterated the promise of Isaiah and made it more personal. Jesus said this, "Come to me, all you that are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light." May all of us who are weary know the rest that Jesus offers.

Amen.