

May the words of my lips and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

We often think of life as a journey.

The Christian life, is often described as a pilgrimage. A journey in which we travel with others through life's, experiences, gaining strength and encouragement from each other; sharing in the good times and the difficult times together; growing in faith and trust.

As we journey together, we grow in faith and trust in the God who both calls us to an ever closer relationship with him, and walks each step of the road with us.

Whether we are thinking of life in general, or of our Christian pilgrimage, some parts of the journey are definitely harder than others.

Reflecting on this, I thought back to my teenage years to
- the time when I was a member of the Scouts.

So not very long ago really!

One of the things that we would do from time to time was to go on night hikes.

I was never sure that I enjoyed these.

There was always a sense of excitement and anticipation, but also alongside this, a certain amount of fear and anxiety

- fear of journeying into the unknown
- fear of stumbling on the path.
- Fear of taking the wrong path.
- A basic fear from childhood of the dark.

With all of this mixture of feelings and emotions, we would be taken to the starting point for the walk – sometimes this was in cars and sometimes, we went by train.

One particular walk I remember was from Guildford to Leatherhead, which took us along many woodland paths, across Leith Hill and eventually over the North Downs into Leatherhead.

Although I had walked along many of the paths in the daylight and I was familiar with much of the route – at night time, in the dark – things looked very different. It was difficult to make easy progress along some of the paths because they were very uneven with tree roots or stones.

The trees seemed to close in from either side and took on shapes and patterns which would have been very frightening if I had allowed my imagination to run wild. Distances, and perspective are very difficult to judge in the dark.

All the usual landmarks, colours, and shapes which help us to navigate in the daytime, were not there.

There were a number of things that helped us on our journey.

Firstly, we had a map and compass. Although the usual landmarks were obscured from sight – the map was invaluable because it showed us the things we should be encountering as we journeyed along and helped us to judge where we were in relation to them.

Whether you are in the dark or in thick fog, a map and compass enable you to accurately get your bearings.

Secondly, we had a torch – without the light from the torch, we would not have been able to read the map, or negotiate some of the more tricky sections of the path – where there were stiles gates or other obstacles to pass.

Thirdly, we had each other – the support, and encouragement of each other kept us going, even when individually we might have been tempted to sit down and wait for morning, or turn around and go back.

Fourthly, something very special happened during the walk.

When we had set out, it had been a very dark, and damp evening. Thick cloud lay overhead, obscuring any view of the stars or moon. So there was very little natural light. Not long after midnight, the clouds suddenly began to thin and to drift away. After a little while, we were all treated to a magical sight. Just as we stood at the top of Leith Hill, we were able to see the stars and moon as clear as crystal in the night sky. It was indeed a beautiful sight. And from that point onwards, things were a lot easier.

After many hours of walking, just as dawn was breaking, and we could see all the colour and light of a new day, we safely reached our destination, and enjoyed the cooked breakfast waiting for us.

Journeying through pain and grief when we lose someone close to us, is one of the hardest parts of the journey we make in our lives.

It is a little like that night hike.

Suddenly, the things that have been so familiar to us, lose their colour and meaning. Our perspective on things suddenly becomes different. There are difficult decisions to be made about which way to go. We can often feel frightened, confused, anxious. It is like being in the dark of night.

Just as there were a number of things that used to help me on those night hikes, there are a number of things which help us in our journey through grief.

A little like the map and compass, the Bible serves as an incomparable guide book.

Packed with the experience of so many who have made the journey before us, it affirms again and again our faith in a God who loves and cares for us.

As we read the Bible, we find so many guide posts and milestones in the lives and events that we encounter – which help us to come to know and believe in God's promises to us. Our journey through life is one which takes us ultimately to the safety and beauty of God's eternal and heavenly kingdom.

Secondly, just as the torch gave light to our path as we walked through the woodland and negotiated many different obstacles – so too, as we journey through difficult points in our lives, we find that there is a light to guide and comfort us.

Jesus said: ***I am the light of the World.***

As he calls each of us to follow his example and teaching, he promises to walk alongside each of us, every step of the way.

And he walks alongside us as one who knows the way, for he has shared in all our human joys and sorrows. He knows how we feel, and is there to embrace us with his love.

The Victorian hymn writer, Joseph Scriven, experienced many difficulties and much grief in his life. He knew the pain of losing his mother, and later in his life two fiancés.

The hymn he wrote speaks wonderfully of the strength and comfort that he gained through knowing Jesus as a friend, as a companion, as a light to guide through prayer.

In one of the verses of his hymn he wrote:

Have we trials and temptations?

Is there trouble anywhere?

We should never be discouraged:

Take it to the Lord in prayer!

Can we find a friend so faithful,

Who will all our sorrows share?

Jesus knows our every weakness-

Take it to the Lord in prayer!

Thirdly, just as the encouragement and support of each other kept us going on our walk – the encouragement and support of family, friends and neighbours is something which helps us to journey through some of the most difficult parts of our lives.

We all have different knowledge, skills and experiences which we share in different ways and at different times.

The important thing is being there for each other. Making time for each other – to talk, to listen, to give a hug or word of encouragement.

For a burden shared is a burden halved. We do not travel alone, but with the love and support of those around us, who also walk that path with us.

Fourthly, on that walk from Guildford to Leatherhead.
Something special happened.

As we were climbing to the top of Leith Hill, at one of the most difficult and tiring parts of the journey. Just as the going seemed to be too tough – the clouds began to lift. The sky began to clear, and the light of the stars and moon began to shine through. Our spirits were lifted, and we could see more clearly which way to go.

As we journey through life, as we journey through grief, we can experience that same kind of lift to our spirits.

Often it is just at our weakest or lowest moment that something happens to make us aware of something beyond the present and enable us to move forward with renewed confidence and hope.

It is as if the clouds lift, the sky clears and we can see and know in our hearts that the present is just part of God's eternal picture, which embraces past, present and future in one.

We can experience this in very real and practical ways-

We might find ourselves smiling with pleasure at the memory of something said or done together.

We might find ourselves laughing again at a joke which used to be told.

We might find ourselves enjoying, in a relaxed and happy way, a piece of music we used to listen to together, or a walk we used to go on together.

From this point on, the journey does become easier. It is as if the clouds have lifted and the sky has cleared.

It is when this happens that the light of the life and love shared with our loved ones, continues to shine in our lives, continues to give colour, perspective, and meaning to the path we take. Each new day is still filled with their love, for we carry it in our hearts as we journey forward. The candles we shall each light and place before the altar a little later in our service, symbolise this light and the light of our ongoing love for them.

Most importantly of all, when the journey of life becomes rough, when we look to Christ for help and strength, the light of his love is there to show us the way, to give us comfort and hope.

Today in our service, as we read the scriptures, as we pray together, as we are here for each other, may we find that the light of God's love shines into our hearts and fills them with comfort and hope, in the knowledge that our loved ones who have journeyed ahead are held safe in his eternal love.

I would like to end by sharing with you a short poem, which reflects much of what we have just been thinking about:-

***Lord, when all around us seems dark and uncertain,
open our eyes to the light of love.***

When our hearts and minds are full of questions,
When fear and doubts cloud our vision,
When the future seems bleak and uncertain,

Open our eyes to the light of love.

When we are afraid of making decisions,
When our feelings and emotions cut us off from others,
When we close our minds even to you,

Open our eyes to the light of love

When we are afraid to move forward,
When we feel guilt in laughter or a smile,
When we lack faith and trust in your promises,

Open our eyes to the light of love

For you walk alongside us on our journey,
As a friend and companion,
And each step is a revelation of your love.

***Lord, when all around us seems dark and uncertain,
open our eyes to the light of love.***