

# Thought for the day: 13-19 July 2020

## by Pat Nicholls

### Monday - Let nothing disturb us



This the opening line of a 500-year-old prayer by Teresa of Avila, a Carmelite nun. The prayer has seven lines, so let us think about one each day in the light of our present situation.

*Let nothing disturb us* is as poignant today as when it was first written, because, God, we have been very disturbed, confused and disorientated! Not only have we been rudely shaken out of our normal routine, our whole way of life has been turned upside down. For weeks we weren't able to go shopping as freely as we did, some of us were more or less confined to our homes, we weren't able to get together with our families and friends – nor could, or can we, come together in church. Many still face serious financial hardship; although small shop keepers and café owners and many others can now re-open, many have lost their livelihood. To say we have been disturbed is putting it mildly and we cry out to you for help! And always there are the voices warning us of the danger of another spike in cases like the one in Leicester at the end of last month. How long, O Lord, how long?

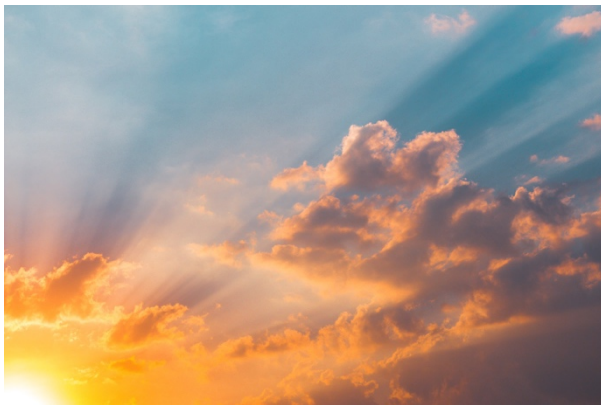
Not infrequently, however, God speaks to us through the words of scripture; so what can we find there to help us?

Psalm 46 opens with the words, '*God is our refuge and stronghold, a very present help in time of trouble,*' and goes on to mention a variety of disturbing situations, but the Psalmist insists twice more that, '*The Lord of Hosts is with us: the God*

*of Jacob is our stronghold*'. We need to hold on to that promise in these uncertain and worrying times and also to believe those wonderful lines in Deuteronomy:

*'The Eternal God is our refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms.'*

## **Tuesday - Let nothing make us afraid**



Are we afraid? Yes, Lord, in all honesty we are, and not only of the dangers of catching Covid-19 (though many have it only mildly and the majority of people do recover from it – some never even realising they have had it).

But, Lord, there are so many people waiting for life-saving surgery which is being long delayed, others have postponed seeking medical advice for possibly serious conditions and the NHS has warned there is an enormous backlog of cases. Children have already missed three months of schooling and school leavers are uncertain about their future prospects. All this in addition to dire warnings that things may not return to what we call normal for a long time. We need to be able to pray *let nothing make us afraid*. Help us, dear Lord, to believe you will respond – and quickly!

What about another look at the words of scripture!

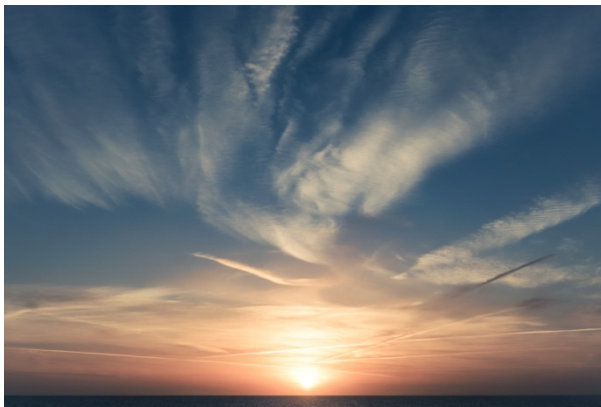
Apparently *'Do not be afraid'* occurs 365 times in the Bible and is to be found in both the Old and the New Testaments. Clearly, we need to embrace that loving command and allow ourselves

to be enfolded in it. Many of us will be familiar with the beautiful Taizé chant based on John 14. 27:

*'My peace I leave you, my peace I give you: Trouble not your hearts. My peace I leave you, my peace I give you: Be not afraid.'*

O God, please enable us to believe what it says and allow it to enfold us.

## **Wednesday - All things are passing**



I have recently reread one of my favourite books in the Old Testament, the book of Job. The first two chapters are written rather like a children's story – they seem to belong to never-never land, although they have a serious side – as do the closing verses of the final chapter.

The main body of the book relates Job's reactions to his unmerited misfortunes. His suffering is real, but Job knows it is neither deserved nor has any plausible reason behind it. He had always assumed that such suffering must be the result of sin – and his so-called friends keep stressing that idea. But his innate honesty will not allow him to agree he has committed any sinful actions. *'I know that my redeemer liveth,'* he asserts in Chapter 19. He knows he is innocent and, gradually, he comes to believe it must be God who is in the wrong. He accuses God of hounding him, of behaving like a merciless thug, and he reckons he, Job, could make a better job of ruling the world. The fallacious arguments of Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, insisting his calamity must be the result of sin, were

picked up by Jesus in his confrontations with the Scribes and the Pharisees.

Finally, after a long silence, God answers Job's accusation, beginning with the magnificent speech in Chapter 38: *'Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?'* After listening to God, Job is **finally** ready to acknowledge how misguided he has been and realises that now he has begun to have a clearer understanding of God: *'In the past I knew only what others taught me, but now I have seen you with my own eyes.'* His misfortunes are over: his fortunes restored.

I don't believe we should be afraid to shout at God in our uncertainties and fears, even if we seem only to be answered by silence – so was Job for a long time! What can we learn from our present time of uncertainty and seemingly unmerited affliction? Maybe we have found ourselves praying rather more earnestly – or even desperately – that things will return to some sort of normality. Once again looking to the scriptures, may we be able to pray with the Psalmist: *'The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed, a place of safety in times of trouble. Those who know you, Lord, will trust you; you do not abandon anyone who comes to you.'*

## Thursday - God alone never changes



God never changes, but our awareness of who He is must change in the sense that it must grow. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13: *'When I was a child I spoke like a child, thought like a child, reasoned like a child, but when I grew up I finished with childish things.'*

We need the humility to look at ourselves and acknowledge, as Job did, that there is still much to learn. We have the life and teaching of Jesus to guide us, and he spent a good deal of his time turning people's inaccurate ideas of God upside down – and it's clear he found it hard work!

Looking back over nearly 90 years of life, I can see several occasions when I was prompted (sometimes painfully) to think again and open myself to deeper ways of praying with, and living in, the presence of that mystery we code-name God. For me, one of life's greatest gifts is silence and the past few months have allowed many of us to experience that even more deeply. Sitting in the garden during those warm sunny afternoons in May, I was drawn into the innate stillness and silence in the garden which no outer sound could overcome – even the bird song seemed an integral part of that deep, rich silence which, far from being a mere absence of noise, is, I believe, the very presence of that mystery we call God.

*God for us – we call you Father*

*God alongside us – we call you Jesus*

*God within us, we call you Holy Spirit*

(Richard Rohr)

## **Friday - Patience gains all things**



Can one say Job was patient? He certainly didn't endure his afflictions in silence! Afflictions come in all shapes and sizes, some bordering on the trivial and other potentially life-changing, and, I guess, Covid-19 and its attendant

widespread problems are in that latter category.

Paul wrote: *'In everything we do we show that we are God's servants by patiently enduring trouble, hardships and difficulties. We have been beaten, imprisoned and mobbed, overworked, sleepless and starving.'*

I have to admit that I am a coward and cannot imagine having that sort of courage. Looking at the events of Good Friday is gut-wrenching, but I believe we must try to see beyond the savagery and brutality of that occasion. Paul continued: *'We recommend ourselves by innocent behaviour, grasp of truth, patience, kindness, by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.'* The patient endurance of Jesus in the face of that brutality indeed exhibited loving kindness along with humility, faithfulness and forgiveness.

Several of us have lost at least one friend to this pandemic and the pain and grief of that loss is very real, but maybe, as a way of honouring them, we should endeavour to allow the 'Fruits of the Spirit' to grow more fully in us.

And let us be able to say with the Psalmist: *'I depend on God alone, I put my hope in him... Trust in God at all times my people, tell him all your troubles for he is our refuge.'* (Indeed, try reading the whole of Psalm 62.)

## **Saturday - If you have God you want for nothing**

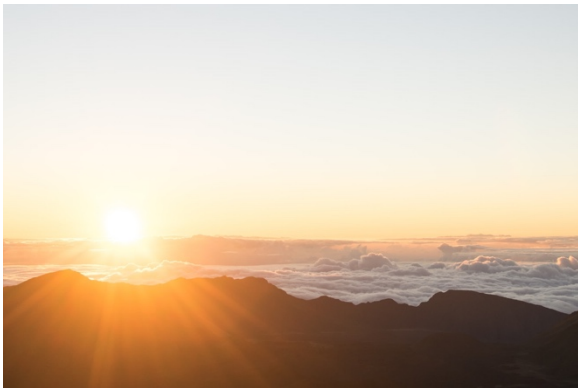
How can we have or possess God? Surely he possesses us?

What do we understand by the word **God**?

After all the excitements of Easter, Ascension and Pentecost we

are now in that long stretch of the green fields of Trinity: maybe we need to look at how we understand the concept of Trinity.

In the early 14<sup>th</sup> Century, the Italian poet Dante wrote his famous narrative poem the Divine Comedy. In the final part, he refers to the Trinity not as a plant leaf (sorry, St Patrick!), nor a triangle, another common analogy, but as a circle. Even earlier, in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, the Cappadocian Fathers called the flow of love within the Trinity a 'circle dance'. Perhaps that concept may help us to a better understanding of the nature of the Trinity.



We are taught that God is love, and love is a relationship, a Divine relationship of ever-flowing love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As Paul said in Athens, '*In Him we live and move and have our being.*' As we are caught up in that endless Divine Dance of Love, surely we are both possessed by God and possess Him – at one and the same time. As Jesus said, '*I am in the Father, and you in me and I in you.*'

A 14<sup>th</sup> Century German Dominican wrote:

*Do you want to know what goes on in the core of the Trinity?*

*I will tell you.*

*In the core of the Trinity the Father laughs and gives birth to the Son.*

*The Son laughs back at the Father and gives birth to the Spirit.*

*The whole Trinity laughs and gives birth to us.*

Like much religious language that is metaphorical – but that doesn't mean it isn't true – it just shows us a different kind of truth.

## **Sunday - Alone God suffices**



The day after my husband had died, suddenly and without warning, I was saying Evening Prayer and finding it hard because that was something we had done together for many years. I came to the Psalm for the day

and it contained the words:

*Happy are the people whose strength is in you!*

*Whose hearts are set on the pilgrims' way.*

*Those who go through the desolate valley will find it a place of springs, for the early rains have covered it with pools of water.*

*They will climb from height to height,*

*and the God of gods will reveal himself in Zion.*

. . .

*O Lord of hosts, happy are they who put their trust in you!*

Those words spoke to me in my desolate valley of numb grief and I knew that I was not alone in it, nor would I remain in that desolate valley.

A few weeks later this conviction was strengthened when I heard Psalm 139 read at the interment of his ashes:

*If I climb up into heaven you are there;*

*if I make the grave my bed you are there also.*

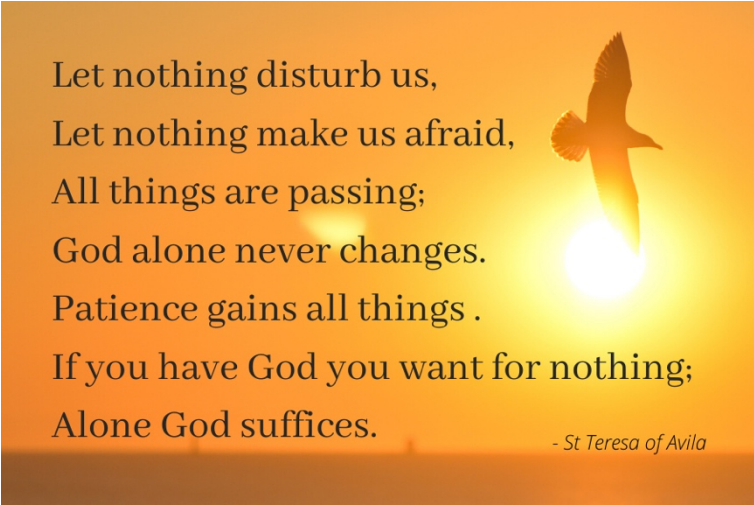
*If I take the wings of the morning*



*and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,  
even there your hand will lead  
me and your right hand hold me fast.*

### **Alone God suffices**

In the shadow of your wings, let us sing your praises, dear Lord.



Let nothing disturb us,  
Let nothing make us afraid,  
All things are passing;  
God alone never changes.  
Patience gains all things .  
If you have God you want for nothing;  
Alone God suffices.

*- St Teresa of Avila*