

THE CARDS OF LIFE - Talk based on Psalm 107. Sunday 05 November 2023 – Alison Cross

Opening game – each of 3 players are dealt 4 cards (health, wealth, relationships and a wild card). In turn, they read out the “fortune” life has dealt them. The congregation then votes on whether each life is likely to be a success or a failure.

Did you find voting difficult? (Yes is what I guess they’ll say!) Well, I’m not surprised, because life doesn’t actually work like that. It’s not what the cards that are dealt to you **are** that determine the success or happiness of your life (though health, wealth and opportunities certainly help!) but how you **use** them. So that was just a bit of fun.

We all get our good cards and bad, and, I suppose, we all do our best to make the right decisions as we go along, but we all make mistakes, have wrong attitudes and also just plain bad luck.

Now, you might say that things for us as Christians should be different. We have a loving God who sorts everything out for us, if we ask Him, don’t we? The outside world would certainly say that, and that’s one of their quarrels with Christianity. If God loves and cares for us all, why doesn’t He sort things out? Not much of a God, is He! And, to be honest, don’t we sometimes think that too?

This is why today’s reading, the opening verses of Psalm 107, is somewhat problematic. Verse 6 tells us “In their trouble they called to the Lord **and He saved them from their distress**”. Easy! A quick prayer and it all comes right……. Too easy. We know it’s not like that. So, what **is** all this about?

I’d like introduce you to my friends Belinda and Dennis (*picture*). They were dealt one of the hardest hands of cards I know of. I’m going to tell you their story with their full permission.

I met Belinda and Dennis in 1997 when our 2 sons palled up in nursery school (*picture*). Over the years, our two families became very close and the Farrars made a huge contribution to our James’s life. Outstanding in memory are wonderful birthday, Bonfire Night and Christmas parties. As the boys grew up, James went on holiday every year with the Farrars to a relative’s caravan in the Lake District and to the Spring Harvest annual Christian convention at Butlins in Skegness. In all these activities, faith was openly discussed and James blossomed.

But there is a dark backdrop. Belinda, a French and German teacher, had been diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis as a teenager, a time when she also, incidentally, became a Christian. As a young adult, the MS largely went into remission and she was able to get on with her life. She met and married Dennis, who, he would tell you himself, had at one time been “a bit of a lad “ but who had recently become a Christian, and they had many plans and dreams.

But it wasn’t to be. Slowly, relentlessly, the MS returned, affecting balance and walking and eventually forcing her to give up her job, unable to get around except by car or electric scooter, and then, quite simply, unable to get around……in and out of hospital, narrowly surviving numerous times when her family were advised to expect the worst, finally confined to bed or, on better days, chair, 24 hours a day, unable to eat or drink, move her body in any way, unable to speak, eyesight severely diminished, with a house given over to carers, in and out all day, and an all-night sitter providing the only means for Dennis to get any sleep. This has been the situation for many years now – yet, through it all, Belinda beams on the world, radiating a gratitude and faith that blesses all whom her life touches (*picture showing her wearing comic birthday glasses, typifying her spirit*).

And what of Dennis? I often think it’s harder for the carer who has to make voluntary sacrifices than for the patient who has no option. He and Belinda once told me of another couple where the wife was diagnosed with MS. Apparently, the husband said, “This isn’t what I signed up for” and off he went. It wasn’t what Dennis signed up for either! But he has proved the most steadfast, selfless and devoted carer, who has made his wife’s wellbeing his life. In the process, his faith has grown enormously and he, too, radiates joy.

In my opinion, Belinda and Dennis are the nearest people to saints I know……and don’t be fooled into thinking that if you’re a saint everything’s easy. Saints are people that feel all the doubt, anger, frustration and times of darkness that the rest of us do, and yet still hold on to faith. They are people whose conviction that God is there with them is

unwavering, even when they can't see or hear Him, there is no answer to prayer – Belinda has been to healing services times without number – and they feel, to all intents and purposes, abandoned.

Going back to Psalm 107, my feeling is that it was written at a time of euphoria when the writer has had a sudden realization of God's presence and answered prayer. Hopefully, that is something we have all experienced at some time, and, if we have, we will know that this experience doesn't happen to order, but in God's timing, which can seem impossibly long. However, when it does happen, the feeling is so powerful that it's quite possible to forget the intervening wait, painful and frustrating though it was, and even to become grateful for it and how it brought us to where we are today. Without going into my own story, I can testify to such an experience in my own life and to the fulfilment of a prayer request – though request is not a strong enough word! – first made in 1985 and only finally answered this very year. Why so slow? I don't know, but do I regret the long wait? On balance, probably not.

That is what I think is behind Psalm 107 – it's not about instant answers to prayer and being saved from any hardship or suffering, but about God's presence with us over a lifetime, bringing out the best for us in the long run. If we are prepared to allow God to work with us, perhaps the end result is that we, in some strange way, find we can take joy from what we have endured and even become grateful for it. The Bible provides us with much wisdom on this theme:-

Paul tells us that "suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us".

Then there's the ancient story of Job who endured a torrent of undeserved suffering, causing him to wrestle with his faith, though, crucially, never to abandon it. He gets no answers to his questions but he does reach a new understanding of the purposes and mystery of God which somehow overrides everything else.

Back to St Paul, who tells us "Be joyful always, pray at all times, be thankful in all circumstances". I think faith and maturity have lead Belinda and Dennis – and many more unsung heroes (or saints!) – to live this out against all the odds. Thus, over a lifetime, in some mysterious and unfathomable way, we can be sure that God is with us every step of the way, even though we may not see it at the time.

I'm sure you will now be thinking of the famous Footsteps poem, so here it is on the screen.....

I don't know about you, but I always find things easier to understand and memorize if they're pictorial, so here's a couple of images that might help.

Going back to the cards of life – we will almost certainly be dealt the Joker (*picture*) at some time, but, remember, we have a King (*picture*) that trumps all other cards! And that King can use our lives for good, whatever may have happened to us and wherever we went wrong. Dennis, who is a man of hidden talents, has recently taken up mosaic-making. Stuart and I admired his work on a recent visit with the result that, just as I was writing this talk – coincidence or what?! - this (*picture of mosaic panel formed from beads from old necklaces, coloured glass and broken china*) arrived in the post. What a beautiful metaphor for the way God works in our lives, taking all our different experiences, including the broken bits, and remaking them all into something new, whole and lovely.

As a final thought, let's jump ahead from the first verses of Psalm 107 which was our passage for the day to the very last verse:

May those who are wise think about such things; may they consider the Lord's constant love.

God's unfailing love is the key to it all. May we find joy in our journeys.