

Hymns: **91** **The God of Abraham praise**
 611 **Brother, sister, let me serve you**
 504 **May the mind of Christ my Saviour**
 272 **From heaven you came, helpless babe**
 503 **Love divine, all loves excelling**

Readings: **Psalm 27**
 Luke 13:31-35

“In the land of the living”

Prayer

May the words of my lips, and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord.

There comes that moment, in the life of most children, when we turn to our parents and say 'I want to do that myself!' For some of us it comes later than others – some parents of adolescents or young adults may long for those words or that sentiment to come – 'I want to do that myself!' When it relates to doing laundry or cleaning the bathroom? Or even paying a mortgage?

Other parents may dread it, watching through fearful fingers the mess that some of us get into, when we set off bravely to 'do it ourselves,' when we are not perhaps QUITE ready to fly the nest.

One point this morning only, and this is it - fear, either the parent's fear or the child's, is not a reason not to grow up! We all feel fear – but fear is not to be authorised to control our actions.

However much our parents may long to keep us safe from the world, untouched – and if so for our human parents, how much more so with God? And where will we see the goodness of God? In the land of the living.

But God is not a parent who tips us out and lets us go –listen to what Jesus said – how I long to gather my chicks! This is a parent who stays involved!

And healthy parents take great joy as children crawl, then walk and run with confidence, will take great joy, and also have some very normal fears along the way, as most parents do – but let them go, and grow.

We are here today not just about babies and parents, but about all of us growing into spiritual maturity – this Lent as we prepare for Easter – we are here about hope, about pledging ourselves to support each other in Christian community not just by wrapping ourselves up in cotton wool and keeping each other from harm – like a child never allowed out in the world, but by preparing each other for all that will come, joy and hardship alike.

We are here preparing each other to walk the way of the cross, as Jesus prepared his disciples.

And I take us to that extraordinary verse in the end of Psalm 27, I believe I will see the goodness of God in the land of the living.

Because we who are a little older in body, we who have been 'doing it ourselves' with more or less success for a few years now will know that there will be days when the world seems a very big and frightening place. There will be days when, we do not feel like we are seeing the goodness of God— days when we risk heartbreak, or when the world deals us blows – when we lose a job, or suffer illness, or grieve for someone we love.

Days when we hear news of hate filled murder – this week, of New Zealanders – Muslims going about the business of Friday prayer. This dreadful atrocity has sent ripples of fear all around our world. I never thought that having doors unlocked during worship might feel a radical statement, but it seems it is. We stand alongside to witness that all should have this simple security. That our peace is linked to peace for all people, of all faiths. And our peace broken when another's peace is broken.

For those of us getting a little older, we are used to having to squint to see things – and have to hold things further and further away to see them well? There are days when just in simple terms, it takes a hard squint to feel like we see the goodness of God in the land of the living.

How long will our arms need to get to stretch far enough we can read God's goodness in the blurry mess of some of the situations around us now?

Here's the thing - God holds us closer and closer as goodness gets hard to see – closer and closer, not further and further away. And here is our antidote to fear. Here is our food today.

In the Gospel reading from St. Luke, as Jesus moves closer to the events of that final week in Jerusalem, he speaks with the frustration, the worry of a mother who can see her children in danger, and longs to protect them: In verse 34, '...Ah, Jerusalem, how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!'

This wise hen, flustered to see her chicks scattered before the 'fox,' as Jesus has described King Herod, would cover them with her wings to protect them from his teeth. The image of the fox here stands not only for Herod, but for all the evil that might harm us – wily, conniving, sly.

Not for nothing that Jesus described himself as the mother hen, wanting to protect her chicks from this prowling fox. Not for nothing the lament of the mother who sees her children scattered and exposed, who wants to protect them and sees them run from her protection. And frankly, chickens do not fare well against foxes.

I had one aunt and uncle growing up who always kept a few chickens – among other livestock behind their country home. There was one very special hen. She was

always known by us and called 'survivor chicken,' because she managed to avoid the fox who with casual regularity made his way under the door of the coop. Survivor chicken, the exception who proved the rule that hens do not fare very well against foxes.

In worldly terms, terms that an insurance agent or actuary would recognise, Jesus did not fare very well against the foxes that prowled for him, either. He was not a good risk, Jesus.

And his chicks, the children of the city, would not even gather under the safety of the mother's wings, fickle soft chicks, unaware of the danger of the fox that prowled.

Jesus was aware of the danger, as we are aware of the danger for our children, for our loved ones. As we are aware of the danger for ourselves and our world. This is why we need to know that verse by heart - we believe we will see the goodness of God in the land of the living.

And it is important. In the land of the living. Not far away, not tomorrow, but today. In the land of the living.

In calling himself the chicken to the fox of hardship that comes, I think we are meant to understand from Jesus that we are not meant to survive life. Love will also hurt us, will perhaps be costly – because we worry for our children doesn't mean we don't have them, and nurture them, and let them go. Because God worries over the world, does not mean God keeps us from growing and trying and finding our way either – as God does not stay away from the world, but went then and goes now to the heart of the world's suffering. God is an involved parent, a creator still at work among us.

Because the journey of faith in Christian community, our journey, is not about living a life tidied up into church – where nothing touches us, no one hurts us. A church like a nation is defined by that which it gathers around, by what is at its centre, not by the strength of its protective borders. And Jesus is at our centre.

Were we to stay safe in immaturity, chicks hiding from the world, the world would be untouched by our lives. And we don't want that, no - you called the Psalm – I believe I will see the goodness of God in the land of the living! How do you think that happens? It happens through God at work through our lives.

God's love is not about removing us from worldly risk into some holy huddle, untouched by pain, as joy.

Any more than the work of Jesus is about escaping worldly risk and staying safe from evil.

We are called out into life, to living full whole beloved and risky lives, lives where we pledge ourselves to support each other without knowing if we can meet the cost, pledge ourselves to loving our children come what may, God's love calls us not to get religious, but to get living.

To get living where God is living already, in the backstreets and offices and bus queues and hospital wards and refugee camps and prisons and palaces where God is living already. God calls us to pour out our lives in the kind of open-ended promises that say I will be for you, I will stand with you, and not only to our nearest and dearest but to those whom the world has forgotten.

God calls us to join in the sacrificial love for the world that says 'Ah, how I long to gather you under my wings' that greets the stranger, that cares for the sick, and feeds the hungry. God calls us to love as chicks among foxes, in ways that care more for loving our neighbour than protecting our necks, our bank balances, our lives themselves.

And like wise parents, God will let us grow, and stretch, and even make mistakes, and the world will be touched by our lives, and we will see the goodness of God in the land of the living. And like wise parents, when days are hard, God will be closer still, closer than the breath that eases in us now.

This Lent, we have adventures ahead of us. Spiritually, politically, economically - preparing to pick up our cross and follow Jesus up that broken path. And among the adventures we will be peace makers, and reconcilers, and advocates, and evangelists.

And we are held in the love of all these people here. We belong to one another – gathered with Jesus at our centre, we will see the goodness of God, close at hand.

Every blessing for the days to come, this week, always.