

*A talk given by Revd Dr Steve Nolan
at the Annual Bereavement Service
St Giles' Church, Ashted, Surrey
3pm, Sunday 7 November 2021*

Remembering

*On my bed I remember you;
I think of you through the watches of the night.
- Psalm 63:6 -*

The night time is the worst.

Waking up, when everyone else is asleep, when it's still dark outside and there's still hours to go before morning. That's the worst time.

That's the time when things that would seem trivial in the daylight crowd our minds. We lie there in bed, trying to keep warm and get comfortable again, harassed by thoughts about things we need to do in the morning, disturbed by the problems of those we

care about, mocked by our struggle to slip once more into undreaming unconsciousness.

The watches of the night can be cold and lonely times.

Of course, some people like those lonely times. They choose to work through the watches of the night because it's quieter, work takes on a different, calmer pace.

But when you're bereaved, when a person that you've loved has died, waking during the watches is a different thing.

We know that, and the writer of this psalm of longing knew that.

Of course, his context was different. He was being pursued through the desert by people who wanted him 'out of the way' and he writes about being 'in a dry and parched land where there is no water'.

(Another translation calls it ‘a dry and weary land’.) But he was thinking about what he had lost. Chased from his home, he had lost his familiar surroundings, his sense of belonging, his place of sanctuary.

Actually, he was bereaved. Because bereavement is about loss. It’s about losing something or someone who is important to you. And it affects us deeply. It makes us sad, we know that – we know that only too well.

But even more than the sadness, bereavement, the loss of someone we love, reorders our world. Nothing is the same as it was. Everything has changed. What was familiar is now strange, alien. We don’t feel at home in the way we once did.

This was the case for the psalm writer. ‘I thirst for you’, he writes. ‘My whole being longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.’

His longing for what he had lost was like an unquenchable thirst; his whole world had become like ‘a dry and weary land’.

So it’s instructive to see how he deals with his bereavement. He tells us that, when he wakes in the night, when he finds himself in those cold, lonely stretches of darkness, he remembers. ‘On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night.’

Memory is the psalm writer’s rescue. And he takes refuge in the memories of what had been lost.

Memory is the storehouse where we keep our most important treasures, which are our memories of those times we spend, and have spent, with the people we love.

In a way, the memories we created were an investment in our future.

Some memories were just the result of things that happened. We hadn't made a particular plan to this thing or that thing, but we did it and it was good. And afterwards, we look back on the event and there it is: a memory we didn't know we were going to make, but that we now have and that we can return to and relive as a memorable event.

Other times, of course, we did set out to create a memory. We made a plan to do something, to hold a birthday celebration or mark an anniversary or a special occasion; or take a long-anticipated holiday; or maybe just do a simple something that allowed us to have quality time with the people or the person that we've loved.

And when that event passed, we had our memory, but this time it was something we set out to make.

And so we store our memories so that, when times are lean for us emotionally, when we are in that ‘a dry and weary land’ or when we wake in the ‘watches of the night’ and need some comfort, we can retrieve those memories, we can relive them and find some strength.

Memory making is an investment; waking in ‘the watches of the night’ is the time when we cash the investment.

Memories are, of course, a mixture. We all have memories we would rather just forget – we wouldn’t be human if we didn’t. And it’s true that some of us have a natural tendency to gravitate towards the difficult memories, the ones that drag us down or leave us feeling depleted.

But the good memories, the ones we want to relive, those memories that nurture us and cause us to flourish, they need to be treasured. We need to keep those memories strong and we do that by revisiting them, reliving them, revelling in them and enjoying them.

It is not an indulgence to spend time reliving our memories. It's not escaping the real world and it's not denying that the person we have lost has died and is no longer with us.

Reliving our memories is endorsing the fact that the person we loved and with whom we shared an important part of our life, that they have lived and they've made a difference in our world.

More than that, it is about acknowledging that, in some way, though they have gone, yet they are still part of us and they are still with us.

Reliving our memories is not an indulgence. Actually, it is another kind of investment. If you like, it's doubling our investment. We made the initial investment when we created the memory; now, we're investing again by nurturing that memory, keeping our investment fresh and alive and healthy and – which is most important – health giving.

As the psalm writer discovered, tending our memories can be an act of rebuilding our world, in a way that turns our loss into an opportunity for growth.

I'd like to finish with a poem.

Awake

and sleep has fled my eyes I leave once more
my bed and go to seek my loyal friends
and wander through our life the odds and ends
that bring to mind the things that reassure

Those friends
those random memories mind all our years
our past our lows and highs and in between
the things that we have done and seen and been

We lived those years

Those were our ripening years

Awake
to all that I have learned With you I woke
to find that life is growth that love gives life
the time it must to grow and love, above
all else, forgives – I heard the words love spoke

Love grows
and growing alters loved and lover's spheres
Love's subtle undetected way worked out
its unexpected change I have no doubt

we lived those years

Those were our ripening years

Awake

and night has left me now So with the dawn
I rise to lodge again 'tween memory
and tomorrow Time stalls, and every
simple matter defies me to go on

And yet

sustained by all that we have meant what fears
can overcast? Educated by you I will
go on and grow and be what yet I will

I'll live these years

They'll be my ripening years

Storing up resources against the lean times is important

- storing up emotional resources against the emotionally lean times that inevitably come, is equally important

- having warm thoughts, warm remembrances of good times spent together, can be a vital resource to a thaw a lonely sadness

A psalm of David. When he was in the Desert of Judah.

¹ You, God, are my God,
earnestly I seek you;
I thirst for you,
my whole being longs for you,
in a dry and parched land
where there is no water.
[In a dry and weary land

where there is no water. NASB 1995]

² I have seen you in the sanctuary
and beheld your power and your glory.

³ Because your love is better than life,
my lips will glorify you.

⁴ I will praise you as long as I live,
and in your name I will lift up my hands.

⁵ I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods;
with singing lips my mouth will praise you.

⁶ **On my bed I remember you;
I think of you through the watches of the night.**

⁷ Because you are my help,
I sing in the shadow of your wings.

⁸ I cling to you;
your right hand upholds me.

⁹ Those who want to kill me will be destroyed;
they will go down to the depths of the earth.

¹⁰ They will be given over to the sword
and become food for jackals.

¹¹ But the king will rejoice in God;
all who swear by God will glory in him,
while the mouths of liars will be silenced.