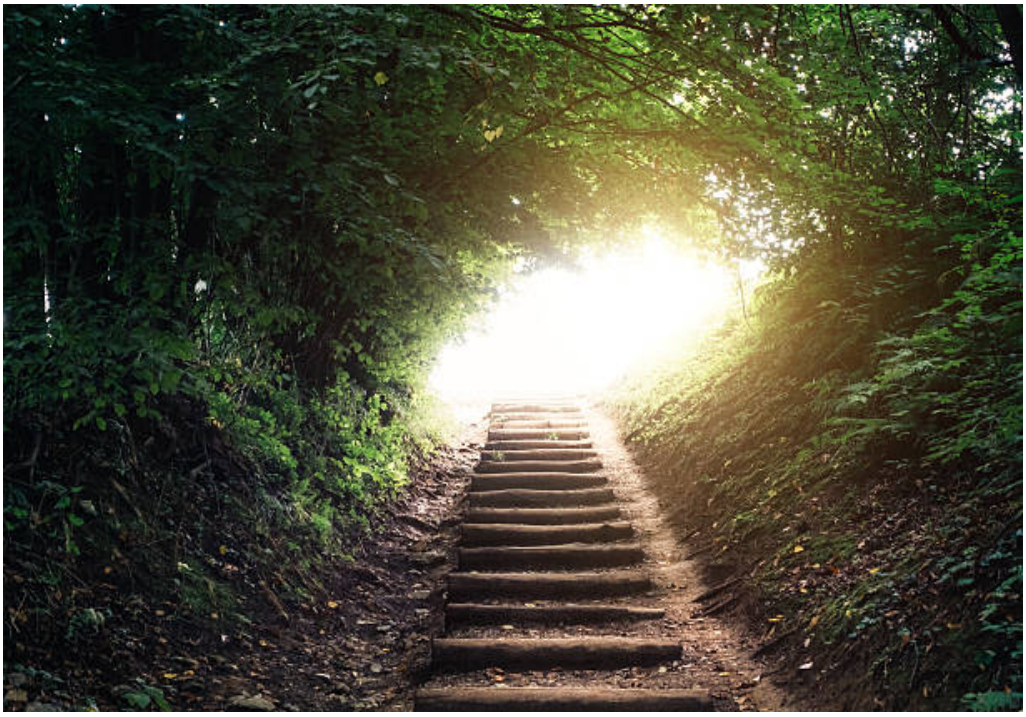
RETREAT IN DAILY LIFE

AN INTENTIONAL JOURNEY WITH GOD DURING LENT



HOPE THROUGH DARKNESS

ANGLICAN PARISH OF WARRACKNABEAL

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A PROJECT REGENRATE INITIATIVE

EXPLORE. REJOICE. GIVE.

As a young man I used to dread the 'darkness' of my soul.

This 'darkness' can be different for all of us. For me, it was something I couldn't trust - mainly because it was unknown and seemed difficult to deal with. As life starting to shape me more and more - mistakes, triumph's, travel, responsibilities, missing trains, camping rough, waking up to snow on the tent, children, faith … it seemed that this 'darkness' was never going to leave me alone - it was an integral aspect of my human condition.

Luckily, through a variety of circumstances I had a counsellor who loved 'darkness'. Whenever I talked about my dreams about going down holes or getting trapped in crucible's … all the good stuff - he used to invite me to go deeper into these 'dark' places. Although awkward at first - I came to relish his guidance and I build a great deal of confidence in managing these 'dark' places within my life - which remains with me today.

In this Retreat in Daily Life, I am inviting you to 'enter' an intentional time with God - whoever that may be for you - each day during this particular week in Lent.

This year I invite you to explore 'Hope Through Darkness' using a series of poems that speak of life's difficult experiences.

Hope is God's real and present invitation to dispel darkness with God's everlasting light. In this journey - we are not abandoned by God - even if God seems absent. I hope that you will find this intentional time useful and fruitful.

Along with your usual devotions and reading of Scripture, the Labyrinth will be in the Parish Centre for quiet prayer and meditation.

"BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO TRUST IN THE LORD,
WHOSE TRUST IS THE LORD.
THEY SHALL BE LIKE A TREE PLANTED BY WATER,
SENDING OUT ITS ROOTS BY THE STREAM.
IT SHALL NOT FEAR WHEN HEAT COMES,
AND ITS LEAVES SHALL STAY GREEN;
IN THE YEAR OF DROUGHT IT IS NOT ANXIOUS,
AND IT DOES NOT CEASE TO BEAR FRUIT."

JEREMIAH 17:7-8

Day One - Sunday 06 April: HOPE - is an inner strength.

Hope is the Thing with Feathers *Emily Dickinson*

"Hope" is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -
And sore must be the storm -
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm -

I've heard it in the chillest land -
And on the strangest Sea -
Yet - never - in Extremity,
It asked a crumb - of me."

Very simply, Dickinson's poem suggests that hope is like a resilient little bird that continues to sing - even in the stormiest conditions.

Hope is innate and enduring.
Hope provides comfort without asking for anything in return.

Hope exists even in the darkest, most unfamiliar places.
No matter the hardships - hope is always present, quietly uplifting the spirit.

"But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be feint." [Isaiah 40:31]

Hope can provide an inner strength when faced with hardship.
Trusting in God can provide this strength - a gift when we are lost or frightened.

Reflection & Action:

What makes you resilient? What does 'hope' look like when life is difficult?

Who inspires you: which person / people; nature; or a mentor?

What will you request from God today?

Day Two - Monday 07 April: **HOPE - is being malleable.**

INVICTUS *William Ernest Henry*

"Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul."

Perseverance. Self-determination. I like the word 'malleable' also - the ability to bend when put under pressure.

Standing strong can be misunderstood by those who are threatened by the three qualities above. There are times when we do not have to cope - and can let self-pity or our inadequacies dwell a little longer.

However, there are more times in our life when we need to be the *'captain of my soul'* - and find the strength to move forward, to confront fear, and stand up for injustice or oppression. To be determined in the face of suffering. To refuse to surrender to despair.

Reflection & Action:

What attitude or personal strength do you find helps you to 'stand strong'?

Is this a quality that you show others or keep to yourself?

How does God help you to persevere in your simple acts of daily determination?

Still I Rise

Maya Angelou

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.

How do you claim 'your inner joy' when all about you taunt and jeer?

How do you claim 'your dignity' when all about you sneer and ignore?

How do you claim 'your inherent power' when all about you dismiss and judge?

The Easter Mystery - the death and resurrection of Jesus, has much to say about joy, dignity and power. Angelou's poem is an empowering charge for all of us to rise above the jealousy and complacency and distain of those around us.

Our 'inherent' power within us is not something to be dismissed.

Assertiveness is such an important aspect of being human. And, should not be confused with arrogance, or a persons role or title, or social status within our communities. Workplaces, families, community organisations are full of the misconceptions of who hold true and wholesome and healthy 'power.'

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." [Philippians 4:4-7]

Action:

Are you happy within your own skin?

Is there something or someone that would help develop your assertiveness that would empower yourself or others?

What does your heart need today - to be truly peaceful or content?

Who are the people that empower you? Get in touch with them this week.

The Darkling Thrush *Thomas Hardy*

I leant upon a coppice gate
When Frost was spectre-grey,
And Winter's dregs made desolate
The weakening eye of day.
The tangled bine-stems scored the sky
Like strings of broken lyres,
And all mankind that haunted nigh
Had sought their household fires.

The land's sharp features seemed to be
The Century's corpse outleant,
His crypt the cloudy canopy,
The wind his death-lament.
The ancient pulse of germ and birth
Was shrunken hard and dry,
And every spirit upon earth
Seemed fervourless as I.

At once a voice arose among
The bleak twigs overhead
In a full-hearted evensong
Of joy illimited;
An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,
In blast-beruffled plume,
Had chosen thus to fling his soul
Upon the growing gloom.

So little cause for carolings
Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things
Afar or nigh around,
That I could think there trembled through
His happy good-night air
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
And I was unaware.

Despair can be real.

It can feel like ‘winter’ - bleak and cold and unfriendly.
It can feel like Death - even as the world bursts into life!

I've said many times before, grief is one of the most insidious of our emotions. It cares not at what time it 'comes to visit'. It cares not what you are doing or who you are with. It knocks on the door like an unwanted guest and settles in for the morning, the day … it has time to dwell and confuse and unsettle.

The paradox of grief - is it just wants to be heard.

It needs our human doing to stop long enough for us to have a conversation with the things that 'have not gone to plan' - and become a human being …

… and listen. And 'listen' well *(if you have the energy to manage it!)*.

Disappointments, lost dreams, unrealised opportunities, maybe even death itself - is all real and significant and in my opinion occurs daily within our lives.

Grief is important to wrestle with, to spend time with - in order for us to hear the *'thrush sing from the barren bush'.* It takes time to hear our own soul laugh again. It takes time to feel the warmth of the sun on our face *(or our hearts once more)* as we share a cuppa - with grief.

Simple right?
Not simple. But necessary!

[If you want to know more or talk more about this 'listening to grief' I'm really up for the conversation.]

Reflection & Action:

In a gentle way, and without judging: take a piece of paper and start writing some of the 'things', events, circumstances that contribute to your own experience of grief: It may be a dream dashed.
A disappointment.
A person you miss.
An expectation unmet.
An inadequacy within that always seems to 'trip you up.'

For each situation - try to name what you value/valued about that grief:
Was there a reason it didn't happen or fulfil?
Was it in your control or someone else's?

Can you conceive of 'letting these moments go' - this Lenten season.
Burn the sheet/s above.
Plant a seed as a sign of HOPE - even through darkness.

Give thanks to God for something important to you today.

Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night *Dylan Thomas*

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Thomas wrote this poem urging his dying father to fight against death.
There is no question that 'life' is worth fighting for!
How can you and I LIVE WELL - even in the face of death?

Let's be clear - death is not to be feared. But it can be resisted.
Life is worth the passion and the vigour we dare to give it.

Reflection & Action:

What can you do today - to make it better than yesterday?
In what ways do you resist the urge to 'give up' or be complacent?
Is there a 'death' that you are inspired to 'rage against' in your life?
What does God look like for you in this state of resilience and confidence?

Day Six - Friday 11 April: **HOPE - is transcending.**

Ode to a Nightingale

John Keats

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:
'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
But being too happy in thine happiness,—
That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees
In some melodious plot
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been
Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country green,
Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!
O for a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stained mouth;
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs,
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:
Already with thee! tender is the night,
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;
But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
Wherewith the seasonable month endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
And mid-May's eldest child,
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
To thy high requiem become a sod.

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.
Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades:
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?

Can ‘beauty’ literally transcend suffering?
Human life seems so fleeting and yet some things endure.
Why is life so painful?

It is such a long poem - I am including an explanation of each stanza to aid your reflections today. *(I’ve borrowed the commentary from the world wide web)*

Stanza 1
The speaker feels an overwhelming drowsiness and numbness, likening it to the effects of drinking poison (*hemlock*), taking an opiate, or sinking into the river *Lethe* (which, in Greek mythology, causes forgetfulness). However, this feeling is not from envy but from excessive happiness in response to the nightingale’s song. The bird is described as a "light-winged Dryad" (a tree spirit), singing effortlessly in a peaceful, shadowy forest.

Stanza 2
The speaker longs for wine, a metaphor for escape from reality. He desires a vintage that embodies nature’s beauty, evoking the imagery of flowers (*Flora*), dancing, and rustic joy. He also references *Hippocrene*, a mythical fountain associated with poetic inspiration. By drinking, he hopes to join the nightingale in its forest, leaving behind the burdens of human life.

Stanza 3
This stanza contrasts the carefree world of the nightingale with the suffering of human existence. The bird has never known the burdens of sickness, aging, and despair. The speaker laments life’s miseries: illness (*palsy*), premature death, and fleeting beauty and love. The transient nature of joy reinforces his desire to escape.

Stanza 4
Rather than escaping through wine (*Bacchus and his pards*), the speaker turns to poetry (*Poesy*) as his means of transcendence. He feels transported to the nightingale’s world, describing a mystical, moonlit night with fairy-like stars. However, darkness still surrounds him, suggesting an incomplete or fleeting escape.

Stanza 5
The speaker, now fully immersed in the nightingale’s world, cannot see but can imagine the surrounding nature through scent. He describes various flowers (*hawthorn*, *eglantine*, *violets*, *musk-rose*) and evokes a sensory experience. The references to fading flowers reinforce the theme of transience.

Stanza 6
The speaker reflects on his past thoughts of death and finds the idea of dying peacefully while listening to the nightingale’s song appealing. The bird’s song seems eternal and divine (*requiem*), while human life is fleeting. However, he

realizes that even if he dies, the nightingale will continue singing, indifferent to his fate.

Stanza 7

The nightingale's song is presented as immortal, not subject to human suffering. It has been heard across generations, from kings (*emperor*) to commoners (*clown*), and even by biblical figures like *Ruth* (a foreigner in an unfamiliar land). The song's timeless nature links it to myth and legend, evoking magical landscapes.

Stanza 8

The word *"Forlorn"* brings the speaker back to reality, breaking the spell of his imaginative escape. He acknowledges that imagination (*fancy*) cannot fully deceive him into escaping life's pain. As the nightingale's song fades into the distance, he is left wondering whether his experience was a dream or reality, reinforcing the poem's theme of blurred boundaries between art and life.

As I have voiced before - I do not believe that there is value in suffering in and of itself. We are not being tested. Suffering does not mean we have deserved punishment for choices we have made. Suffering is simply an aspect of our human condition - for reasons that rarely can be explained.

It is our response to suffering that gives it 'value' and meaning, and how we choose to integrate this suffering into our experience of whatever life throws at us.

This is valuable - as we try and make sense of our human being.

This can help us to empathise with others. This can help us grow into mature human beings that help to prevent, and not just promote further suffering in our own or others people's lives.

Reflection & Action:

What is your *'nightingale's song'* - the thing, person or action that allows you to deal with and make sense of suffering at the moment?

Was this something you were given (like a gift) or learnt from experience?

What strength can you claim as your own - because of the way you have engaged all the things that life has dealt you?

For instance: is it courage; patience; humility … or confidence?

Write a 'stanza' of your own - that sympathises with Keats, or goes out on its own. Have some fun with it … try and put some words to your own experience of suffering.

Day Seven - Saturday 12 April: **HOPE - is borne from within.**

If- *Rudyard Kipling*

If you can keep your head when all about you
  Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
  But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
  Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
  And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;
  If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
  And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
  Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
  And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
  And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
  And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
  To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
  Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
  Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
  If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
  With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
  And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!

This poem lived in our toilet when I was a child.

It has been quietly instrumental *(because I don't think it has been always conscious)* in helping me deal with many situations in my life - as well as learning and accepting my own human condition!

Hope is something that comes from within us.

Do you agree or disagree?

Hope is an act of willpower and resilience.

'Hope' is not some ideal that sits on the shelf to remind us from time to time that there could be another option when faced with life's difficulties. HOPE IS REAL - and manifest within us, our very being - if only we give it a chance to surface and move and have 'its' being.

Hope is something attainable for each and every one of us.

It can be the bottom rung of the ladder that someone has thrown us when we are 'deep in the pit' - but we still have to take the first step. It can be the star in the night sky that reminds us that there is a Universe of wonder to explore and appreciate. It can be …

… I am sure you will be able to articulate your own metaphor.

Action:

Which line or phrase in Kipling's poem speaks to you now?

What is a symbol of HOPE for you today (or this week)?

How can you help manifest a sense of hope in your own life, or in another person you care about this Easter Season?

What do you need from God to help make this happen?

Day Eight - Sunday 13 April: **HOPE - is real!**

Sometimes it is in our 'darkness' that God visits us most.

God is not afraid of the tomb, the crucible, the depths … God relishes it.
God relishes *(I accept that 'relish' may not be quite the right term)* it because God's LIGHT extinguishes the greatest darkness.

Vulnerability - in my opinion - could be God's 'middle name'.
God relishes the human being who is prepared to be vulnerable and still engage the world, still resist the temptation to inflict suffering onto another and still fights for what is right and good and worth living for.

However, vulnerability requires courage and truth.

ACTION:

Celebrate HOPE! *(In whatever way you feel is appropriate for you!)*

It takes time to bake a loaf of bread,
to grind, to knead, to wait….
Time for friends to break and share their lives.

It takes time to craft in wood,
to strip, to wound, to bleed….
Time for the original to be released from the prison of our fear.

It takes time for us to build
and fortify our lives,
Time for the steal of the Divine to slay our pride.

It takes time to be with pain,
to yield and let the healing have its way,
Time in the darkness to trust the dawn.

It takes time to be alone
to become one's intimate friend,
Time in the dry for the hidden stream to fill the empty well.

It takes time to wait in silence
for the coming of the spring.
Time for the bud to swell on winter's dreams.

It takes time to let your life be turned around,
to accept a vision's death,
Time in the void to see with different eyes.

It takes time to still within
and merge with life,
Time in the wild to let a river slow you down.

It takes time to tend a crop of grain,
to plough, to sow, to wonder….
Time for love to ripen and be harvested.

Noel Davis
[from 'Heart Gone Walkabout']