

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY, WEDNESDAY MARCH 25th

SHIELDED
Loveday Alexander

BIBLE READING: PSALM 91

Whoever dwells under the shelter of the Most High,
And abides under the shadow of the Almighty,
Shall say to the Lord, My refuge and my stronghold,
My God, in whom I put my trust.
For he shall deliver you from the snare of the fowler,
And from the deadly pestilence.
He shall cover you with his wings,
And you shall be safe under his feathers:
His faithfulness shall be your shield and buckler.

Got a letter this week from YouGov telling me I'm in the "extremely vulnerable" category (me and 1.5 million others). Not really a surprise — but still a bit of a gunk to see it in black and white. I like to think I'm tough and independent —not frail and elderly!

Made me think about "shielding" — and what it means to be "shielded." The weird dynamics of the epidemic turn our definitions upside-down. Most of us would much rather feel we can help by getting out there and doing something useful. But actually, staying at home and keeping out of trouble *is* the most helpful thing we can do. Being "passive" has a purpose: staying at home saves lives. So here's a morning prayer for living courageously, for all of us who are staying at home:

This is another day, O Lord.
I know not what it will bring forth,
But make me ready, Lord, for whatever it may be.
If I am to stand up, help me to stand bravely.
If I am to sit still, help me to sit quietly.
If I am to lie low, help me to sit quietly.
And if I am to do nothing, let me do it gallantly.
Make these words more than words,
And give me the Spirit of Jesus, Amen.

But staying at home means being “shielded” by other people — people in shops, delivery drivers, neighbours who help, people who care — and of course the front-line staff in the NHS and other key workers. These are the real heroes: they make themselves vulnerable to keep others safe. And then there are the medical resources, the infection control, the years of painstaking research that will lead eventually (we hope) to a vaccine. You’ve only got to read the stories of plague and pestilence from history to realize how much we are “shielded” from their full effects (at least in the western world). So my prayers turn outwards, to give thanks for all the people who “shield” me. Thank God that we live in a world where people care.

Gracious God, give skill, sympathy and resilience to all who are caring for the sick, and your wisdom to those searching for a cure. Strengthen them with your Spirit, that through their work many will be restored to health; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

And that brings me (last but not least) to the “shielding” of God. Today is the feast of the Annunciation, when the angel told Mary about the birth of Jesus. God chose to make himself vulnerable to keep us safe — to shield us from evil (even the evil that’s our own fault). God promises to be faithful to us: he is worthy of our trust. God is totally reliable — even when we’re not. That’s what Psalm 91 is all about (quoted above — it’s worth reading the whole Psalm, especially at bedtime). So around and above all the other “shields” that keep us safe — including the frontline health workers — are the outstretched wings of Almighty God, shielding us like a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings. (You can find more “shielding” prayers in the psalms: look at Psalm 3.3; Psalm 7.11; Psalm 18.31; and Psalm 84.10.) So here’s a prayer for yourself, placing yourself and all those you love under the shielding wings of God (you can sing this one!).

Calm me Lord, as you calmed the storm:
Shield me Lord, keep me from harm.
Let all the tumult within me cease,
Enfold me Lord, in your peace.