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Hello and welcome to this episode of the St Andrews Enfield podcast with me, Steve Griffiths. So as I record this, the Coronavirus continues to ravage our world and our communities and it is an indescribably tough time for us all and I'm sure that many of you listening today have got your own stories of ill health or anxiety or grief as a result of the Coronavirus. It's a bitter experience for us all, isn't it? And in the light of what we're currently experiencing, in this podcast I want to ask a very simple question: 'How do we find God when life gets tough?' When life throws us a real curve ball, it can feel like God is nowhere to be found and we are just left to struggle on our own. So how can we find God when life gets tough? And to think a little more deeply about that question, we're going to look at a really beautiful Psalm together,

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Psalm 27, which is one of those I keep returning to throughout the difficult periods of my own life. Psalm 27 speaks into that question of how can we find God when life gets tough? Because it's primarily a reflection on the nearness of God to us as we journey through life. It's a reflection on how God protects us and guards us even in the most difficult times of life and how we can practically seek God out when life is tough for us. And that's what I want to spend a few minutes with you thinking about today. Now, some of you will know that I'm a priest in the Church of England and uh, as you may know, the Church of England draws on many different spiritual traditions. The first of these is the Roman Catholic tradition, which has informed so much of what we do as a church today.

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The second is the Reformed tradition; a Reformed theology underpinning so much of our practices and beliefs that we hold to in the Church of England. But many of us also draw on what is known as the Celtic tradition. And the Celtic tradition is so beautiful in that it engages all of our senses and it speaks to our emotions and how we can find God in the tangible things of life; creation, people, art and so on. And in the Celtic tradition there's something called 'thin places'. Now 'thin places' are geographical locations where people may go in order to be closer to God, for example, ancient monasteries or maybe the islands of Lindisfarne or Iona, or maybe an ancient church building, places where there are Holy trees or Holy mountains or Holy wells or maybe somewhere like Lourdes or Walsingham to make a pilgrimage. 'Thin places' are so important for us to find because they suggest that in reality, the veil between the physical world and the spiritual world is very thin indeed.

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Now perhaps you have your own 'thin places'. It might be a beach somewhere or a hill or a cemetery or somewhere in the countryside; somewhere where you can go and immediately feel connected to God. And of course it's not the place itself that is sacred so much as the emotions that the place stirs up in us and we realize that God is closer to us than we may think. Now some passages in the Bible act as reminders, almost as a literary 'thin place', to remind us of just how close God is to us if we would open our eyes to see. And I think Psalm 27 is one of those passages. It's a 'thin place' that reminds us of how close we are to God in the present moment. The Psalm has these beautiful words in it: "The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?"

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"The Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?" "Come my heart says, seek God's face." "Your face, oh Lord, do I seek, do not hide your face from me." "I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living". This passage reminds us of the intimacy that we share with God. But that may seem all well and good when life is going well um, but what about when we are struggling in life? What about when we are experiencing turmoil and chaos in our lives? It's all very well speaking about being intimate with God when things are fine. But what about when life is just very tough?

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Well, this Psalm was written by King David when he was going through a tough time. From other verses in the Psalm, we get the sense that life was a real struggle for him. Listen to some of these verses: "Evil doers, assail me to devour my flesh". "An army encamp about me". "War rises up against me." "Do not cast me off. Do not forsake, do not give me up to the will of my adversaries". "False witnesses have risen against me and they're breathing out violence". When David wrote this Psalm, he was going through a really tough time in life. It seemed as if everything around him was chaotic and he was being threatened physically, emotionally, and spiritually. But even in the midst of his struggles, David knew that God was with him and would protect him. This is a Psalm of confidence written even in the midst of life's bitter struggles.

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So how do we find God when life is tough? What do we need to do in order to rediscover our sense of intimacy with him? Well, I think this Psalm gives us two pointers to think about through phrases that David uses in verse four. The first thing that we learn from verse four is that we need to focus on what we know about God, not how we feel about God. In verse four, David writes this: "one thing I asked of the Lord that will I seek after to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life". Now, there've been times in my life when I felt really close to God; a few times at big worship events, I found real intimacy with God. Standing on a beach in South India many years ago, I was overwhelmed with the power of God through nature.

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When I was ordained, I felt the hand of God on my life in a very emotional way. But the reality for me at least is that I have lived more with a sense of the absence of God than I've lived with a sense of the presence of God. When people I love have died, when I've been ill or when I've watched others become ill, through the sheer routine of everyday life, day in and day out, much of the same, when the plans I've made for my life haven't come to fruition. These sorts of events, the difficult moments and the routine of life, have been far more constant, a companion than the spiritual highs of deep intimacy with my Creator. So 95% of the time I have to remind myself what I know about God rather than how I feel about God. If my faith relied on my feelings, then my faith would never really grow at all.

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Instead, I have a history, a personal history in which I've seen the footprints of God in my life, sometimes in quite random ways, and so I know that he has been with me. I've surrounded myself with people of faith and listened to their life stories and so I know that God has been active in their lives. I've tried to soak myself in the Bible stories and learn from them so that I know that God has been active throughout history. And when times get tough for me, or when I'm consumed with boredom and routine, I can go

back to what I know rather than rely on how I feel. And it's such a crucial spiritual discipline for us all to develop. We need to have the discipline of looking back over our lives to discern God. We need to hear the stories of other people's encounters with God.

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We need to soak ourselves in the scriptures to learn about the God of history. And then when our feelings are either negative or just numb, we will be able to go back to what we know is true and lean on that knowledge to get us through. But there's one more thing to say about this if we read verse four again. Uh, David says, "one thing I asked of the Lord that will I seek after to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life and to inquire in his temple". So for David, as he wrote this Psalm, there was a direct link between holding firm to God in the midst of life's trials and regularly attending worship. He said, "I will inquire in his temple". Now, I've said this many times before across my podcast, and I'm sure that I'll say it many times again, that when life is tough or seems chaotic, we must absolutely resist the temptation to stop coming to church.

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It's so easy to fall into that trap, isn't it? When we feel far away from God, we give church a miss one Sunday and then we give it a miss a second Sunday and then a pattern starts to emerge and we find it very easy to cease coming to church altogether. But such a decision is absolutely fatal for us because we cannot stay strong in faith if we cease meeting with our church family to worship together. We need to stay plugged into the church family, even when we may not feel like it, otherwise our faith will just wither and die. So when life is tough and all around us seems chaotic, the first lesson that we learned from this Psalm is that we must rely on what we know about God rather than how we feel about God, and that we must absolutely stay connected to worship with our church family, otherwise we will spiritually die.

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But as true as all that is, we remember that God has made us with emotions as well as rationality. And if we are to get through difficult times in life and stay connected to God, then we must engage our emotions as well as our mind. And that's the second point, really from verse four of this Psalm, um, that we should pursue beauty in life and find God in that. In verse four, David writes this, "to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life to behold the beauty of the Lord". Now beauty is such an important thing for us. Beauty feeds our souls. Beauty enlivens our imagination. Beauty makes us feel whole as it engages our creativity. As emotional human beings, we find God through beauty. Now, beauty looks different for each one of us, I guess. For me, uh, I can listen to a, uh, searing Pink Floyd track or an emotionally dark Marillion song, and I find exquisite beauty that can reduce me to tears.

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But the angst of Roger Waters or Fish may not do it for you. Instead, you may read a Wordsworth poem or look at a Rembrandt painting and it may stir your soul. You may listen to Verdi's Rigoletto and be moved to the depths of your being, or maybe taste some Indonesian cuisine that transforms your understanding of how beautiful food can be. Wherever you find beauty, pursue it. Because in beauty, you will find the face of God. Just as we need food to nourish our bodies, we need beauty to nourish our

souls. So much of our world contains violence and brutality, and we need to temper that with beauty. And we need to share our experiences of beauty with one another and learn about beauty from one another. Um, I might mention Pink Floyd and you may think 'Oh, that's awful music'. But if I sat down with you and took you through one of their songs, uh, it may not be to your taste still, but you would understand what the beauty is for me if I explained it to you. And likewise, I get nothing from landscape paintings. Uh, they leave me pretty cold on the whole, but that's because I don't understand them. It's not that they're not beautiful, it's just that I don't understand the beauty and I don't understand how to find the beauty within. So if you shared with me your experience of beauty in that form of painting, we would both be enriched. In beauty, you will find the face of God. As you proactively decide to pursue beauty, so your heart will soften

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and you will rediscover the closeness of God to you.

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So when David wrote

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this Psalm, he was going through a tough time. There was chaos and disorder in his world. He was in danger physically, emotionally, and spiritually. In the natural course of things, he didn't feel close to God so he knew that he should proactively seek out two ways of filling his life to change that. He had to focus on what he knew about God rather than how he felt about God. And he had to pursue beauty and find in that the face of God. Now, it wouldn't have been any easier for him to do that than it is for any of us when we are struggling in life. But making the determined effort was worth it to preserve and strengthen his faith. David recognized that it was a process; that a rediscovery of intimacy with God would take time. But that's what life is all about. The journey into intimacy with God is the point of our lives.

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And we need patience for the journey. As David wrote in the last verse of this Psalm, "wait for the Lord. Be strong and let your heart take courage. Wait for the Lord". So if you are experiencing a chaotic period in your life right now, wait on the Lord. Focus on what you know to be true and pursue beauty and then intimacy with God will return as sure as day follows the night. Well, I hope that you found this a useful podcast. As always, please do get back to me with any comments. If you've got them, you can email me on steve.griffiths@london.anglican.org. It's always lovely to hear from you. And wherever you are today, whatever your current experiences, I hope that you will know the presence of God with you and that you will know the beauty of the Lord in your life. I look forward to being with

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you again in the next podcast. Until then, Bye.