

The significance of encouragement.

You will notice a commonality with Bob's reflection on blessings,. As I wrote this before reading that, I wonder what God might be saying to us.

I was encouraged to watch 'The Other Bennet sister' by a friend, and found myself surprisingly entranced. It takes the characters of *Pride and Prejudice* and focusses on the bookish, gauche Mary, whose life has been blighted by her mother's disparaging remarks about her lack of social graces, hindering her prospects of marriage.

When her father dies, her uncle and aunt invite her to London. In the warmth of their love and friendship, their respect for her abilities and preferences and their endless encouragement, we see Mary blossom. She gradually gains the confidence to simply be herself. The shift from focussing on her failings to her strengths has a remarkable effect.

The story is highly idealised. Mary readily overcomes her longstanding self portrayal as inadequate and seems to have no difficulty trusting her new found friends, who mercifully behave well as they encourage, guide and support her first steps into London society. But it was the very simplicity of the storyline that created its impact. It felt like wholesome food and my soul was nourished. It was energising too. I wanted both to be myself and to enable others to achieve that too.

Interestingly, the origin of the word encouragement means to strengthen the heart. Isn't that lovely? The 'cour' comes from the French, 'coeur' (heart). I think of encouragement as words spoken, but had witnessed the impact as emotional. Encouragement is like gentle heart surgery, excising the negativity and enabling all that is life-giving to flow through the heart to nourish the body, mind and soul. It brings courage; strength to one's very being.

Turning to the Bible, I discovered that Paul urges us to be like Mary's uncle and aunt! Here is what Paul says in Romans 15.

'We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please our neighbours for their good, to build them up. For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.'

We are called to accept ourselves and so accept others too, seeking to bring out the best in them. The good news is that the encouragement we offer is itself a grace, a gift from God. As we accept and look for the good in each other, we are appreciating God's handiwork and participating in its further refinement. We are seeing Christ in the other and that is to be blessed ourselves.

Encouragement, as I noticed in the programme, needs to be scattered liberally and frequently to take effect. God likes a generous giver!

So a few questions to take with us into the silence.

What do I sense God is saying to me? What is God encouraging me to be?

What words of encouragement have I heard directly from God or through others?

Am I an encourager? Who might God be nudging me to encourage and what might God want me to say to them?

Do I need to ask God for the gift of encouragement?

Leading us out of prayer the final greetings of 2 Corinthians 13:11

Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you. Amen