

JANUARY-APRIL 2021



New Daylight

Sustaining your daily journey with the Bible



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I write this at the very beginning of a new year, looking at the illuminated decoration in the shape of a star which a clever carpenter has made and which sits now at the top of our church steeple. It is a visual reminder that 'the light shines in the darkness' and also that the 'darkness has not overcome it' (John 1:5, NIV). In the post-Christmas gloom that can sweep over us during the cold days of January, it is important to hold on to a belief in the light. This is particularly the case when we are facing death – our own or that of someone we love. Margaret Silf encourages us to take the brave step of exploring what death means to us, gently and generously leading us to the prayer that death is 'not the fracturing but the completion of the circle of life'.

On a more cheerful note, in her reflections on gladness and generosity (as part of BRF's Holy Habits initiative), Fiona Stratta invites us to participate in the 'virtuous circle: thanksgiving and praise give rise to gladness, which results in further praise, leading to more joy!' Elizabeth Hoare reminds us after Easter that 'no day can ever be ordinary, because Christ is risen', and we are encouraged by her to celebrate the risen Christ in every aspect of our lives, drawing us into the experience of self-giving love, which is at the heart of Christ and which is the aim of every follower of his.

In her reflections on the character of a saint, Amy Boucher Pye refers to her fortnight mid-Lent as being in the 'messy middle' of the season: 'We've passed the first rush of inspiration and the end isn't yet in sight.' We can feel that our faith journey has more than a touch of the 'messy middle' about it, which is why the new year can be a good time for bringing change into our prayer lives or Bible-reading patterns. Amy uses the list of Old Testament characters found in Hebrews 11 to remind us that 'messy' people too can be used by God and that all we need is to keep faith in the light.

I pray that the reflections you find in here will keep the light burning in your hearts and minds this season.

Sally Welch

Image of the invisible God



When asked ‘What does God look like?’, children tend to produce something along the lines of an old man with a long beard and a white robe, sitting on a cloud – a slightly more angelic version of Santa Claus. It’s interesting to speculate what imagery adults might use, especially if they were unfamiliar with traditional Christian symbolism. The ten commandments included a ban on making images for worship (Exodus 20:4), but most churches are well-endowed with statues, crucifixes, icons or other forms of art, to aid devotion. These figures, depicting Jesus, Mary and assorted saints, offer a variety of ideas about what ‘holy people’ should look like. Representations of God the Father, however, tend to fall back on the ‘old bearded man’ theme, while the Holy Spirit rarely appears as anything other than a dove or a flame.

More creative depictions of the members of the Trinity can sometimes be found in story form, offering helpful correctives to all the Victorian blond-haired, blue-eyed stained-glass images of Jesus. One popular example was C.S. Lewis’ talking lion Aslan (a Christ figure) in ‘The Chronicles of Narnia’, who conveyed majesty but also compassion and even playfulness. More recently, William P. Young’s *The Shack* surprised many with its bold re-imagining of God the Father as an African-American woman. In this book, Jesus appeared as (less surprisingly) a Middle Eastern carpenter, while the Spirit took the form of an Asian woman.

The gospels record Jesus’ statement that ‘anyone who has seen me has seen the Father’ (John 14:9, NIV), but the Bible includes many more ways of describing God than might emerge from simply reflecting on the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Over the next two weeks, I have selected a variety from across the scriptures, ranging from the impersonal to the highly personal, the consoling to the slightly unsettling. Whatever images of God we prefer, we should remember that God is only ever ‘something like’ a dove, or a shepherd, or a father. Our God is found in relationship as the Trinity: spoken of as Father, Son and Spirit, yet remaining beyond our understanding. Genesis tells us that we are created ‘in the image of God’ (1:27). We should resist the temptation to make God in our own image.

NAOMI STARKEY

Shepherd

‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land... I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land... I myself will tend my sheep and make them lie down.’

We begin with perhaps the most beloved of all pictures, cherished even in contexts far removed from scenes of shepherds walking their flocks through the countryside, trusty dogs at their side. It is the basis of many classic hymns, art and stories, especially for children. I still remember the emotional force of Patricia St John’s 1948 book *The Tanglewoods’ Secret*, when unhappy runaway Ruth learns of the good shepherd’s love and care.

God as shepherd is a picture speaking not only of love and care but guidance and benevolent authority. Psalm 23 (one of the few parts of scripture still widely known beyond the church) describes how the shepherd ‘makes’ the sheep lie down and ‘leads’ them to places of refreshment. If they are part of his flock, they are not left to wander aimlessly.

The sheep in our passage from Ezekiel have not simply wandered; they have been scattered by a storm. When bad weather strikes, sheep will huddle wherever they can find shelter, so they may end up stuck on a ledge or (in colder climates) buried in snow. They cannot return to safety on their own but must wait for the shepherd to rescue them. That was the situation for God’s people who had been forced into exile – and the wonderful promise is that God the shepherd will find them, bring them home and nurse them back to strength.

*‘Loving shepherd of Thy sheep, keep Thy lamb, in safety keep;
Nothing can Thy power withstand, none can pluck me from Thy hand’
(Jane Leeson, 1842).*

NAOMI STARKEY

Rock

In you, Lord, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame; deliver me in your righteousness. Turn your ear to me, come quickly to my rescue; be my rock of refuge, a strong fortress to save me. Since you are my rock and my fortress, for the sake of your name lead and guide me. Keep me free from the trap that is set for me, for you are my refuge. Into your hands I commit my spirit; deliver me, Lord, my faithful God.

Living in Wales, land of both mountains and castles, the combination of ‘rock’ and ‘fortress’ in this psalm feels very familiar to me. Even if there’s no fortification still standing, names on a map, such as Craig y Ddinas (Fortress Rock), indicate what once stood there. Rocks or mountain tops offer a natural vantage point to keep an eye on what’s happening across the surrounding countryside, hence their desirability as castle locations.

Standing on a rock (whether or not in a fortified building), you’re less likely to suffer a surprise attack; you’re also much safer from natural disasters, such as floods (the image used by Jesus in his parable of the wise and foolish builders, Matthew 7:24–27). The solidity and weightiness of rock and mountains thus make all the more alarming such passages as Psalm 46, which celebrates trust in God ‘though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea’ (Psalm 46:2).

Throughout the Psalms in particular, we find God referred to as a ‘rock’ – one who offers strong and sure protection, whether as the foundation for a fortress tower, as a sheltering cleft from the elements or as the solid ground for safe footing when all else is in upheaval. While the idea of God as rock could sound a bit harsh, when life becomes stormy we may find ourselves craving the stability and permanence of rock more than the tranquil comfort of ‘green pastures’. And while even the mountains will one day crumble to dust, our God the rock will never fail us.

*‘Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in Thee’
(Augustus Toplady, 1763).*

NAOMI STARKEY

Fire

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, 'I will go over and see this strange sight – why the bush does not burn up.' When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, 'Moses! Moses!' And Moses said, 'Here I am.'

The Mount Horeb referred to here may be the same as Sinai, the mountain where Moses mediates the covenant between God and his people. Whatever the exact setting, this fiery meeting takes place in the surrounding wilderness, through which Moses will eventually lead the Israelites in their exodus from Egypt, en route to Canaan.

Fire is one of the basics for human survival, offering warmth, light and a means of cooking food, as well as protection from predators. Used carelessly or maliciously, it can cause terrible destruction, but the fire discovered by Moses is different. Even though it looks like some kind of wildfire, perhaps the result of a lightning strike, miraculously it does not consume the bush as it burns. Maybe this fire is more akin to the blaze of heavenly glory, which scripture describes as associated with God's presence (see Exodus 13, Ezekiel 1 and Matthew 17). As Moses discovers, this burning bush is a place of encounter, not destruction, as the Lord Almighty breaks through into the everyday world of shepherding.

Notice, though, that Moses has to 'go over to look' for encounter to turn into dialogue. His response to the extraordinary spectacle is not fear but curiosity – and his willingness to explore leads to his life-changing commission.

The priest-poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote of the world 'charged with the grandeur of God', glory bursting out for those with eyes to see it. How can we be alert to the possibility of such connection?

NAOMI STARKEY

Wind

When the day of Pentecost came, [the disciples] were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Wind and fire: powerful forces of nature which, like so much in the natural world, are capable of harm or healing. Wind can be a cooling breeze or a vicious hurricane; here the description of a ‘violent wind’, heralding the coming of the Spirit of God, reminds us that God can be experienced as loving Father but also stern judge. There is fire, too, and then the Spirit fills the believers, literally ‘inspiring’ them in their utterance to undo the curse of Babel, where humanity was divided by language (Genesis 11:1–9).

The same Hebrew word can mean ‘wind’, ‘breath’ or ‘spirit’, an ambiguity that challenges our tendency to remake God in our own image. On the day of Pentecost, however, God’s Spirit comes not in human form – which is possibly what the disciples had been expecting – but signalled by what sounds and looks ‘like’ wind and flame. In describing the scene, we sense Luke struggling to make sense of spiritual realities beyond comprehension.

The Spirit’s coming enables the infant church to begin the task of sharing the good news of salvation with the world, beginning with the pilgrims gathered in Jerusalem for the Pentecost celebrations. Just as wind, rightly harnessed, is a source of renewable energy, so we could describe the Holy Spirit as God endlessly energising us to do God’s work, drawing us to share in the ongoing building of the kingdom on earth.

‘Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit”’ (John 20:21–22).

NAOMI STARKEY

Light

God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Many of us will know the shock when springtime sun bursts through our windows at a new angle and with a new intensity after the long months of winter shade – and we realise quite how much dust covers the household surfaces! As our passage describes, light lays bare every flaw, every fault, so that speaking of God as ‘light’ can bring to mind the searching beam of a spotlight as much as a gentle ray of sunshine.

The light that is God exposes us, like the dust from which we were first created, and it would be so much more comfortable to be left discreetly hidden. But God’s light shines on us not to sweep us away but to cleanse us and heal us, preparing us to walk in the light with him. Perhaps there are echoes here of Eden (Genesis 3), when God came to walk with the man and the woman, sharing the beauty of the garden, but found them in hiding, ashamed of their disobedience.

Our Bible passage reminds us that we also need the light of God, the light that is God, in our relationships with others. As many a church leader has discovered, some congregations are grimly determined to keep to the shadows, spiritually speaking, clinging on to cobwebby internal politics and power play instead of seeking the richer fellowship that will be theirs if they admit their need of forgiveness and healing – a fellowship in which they will find the very things they seek.

‘Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil’ (John 3:19).

NAOMI STARKEY

Hiding place

One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple. For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent and set me high upon a rock. Then my head will be exalted above the enemies who surround me; at his sacred tent I will sacrifice with shouts of joy; I will sing and make music to the Lord.

I'd seen 'noddfa', the Welsh word for refuge or safe place, often used as a house name locally, but I hadn't grasped the full force of the word until a church pilgrimage took me into a remote landscape of tiny lanes, scattered farms and small hills. There, on a plateau, we came to a 'noddfa', a standing stone marking the boundary of sanctuary offered by a long-vanished church. According to ancient tradition, anyone managing to reach the 'noddfa' was guaranteed protection.

The sense of hiding place offered in our passage draws on a range of images, including 'rock' as a safe place from which you could check for approaching enemies. We also hear of 'the house of the Lord' and 'his sacred tent', evoking not only the temple in Jerusalem but also the original dwelling place of God with his people: the tabernacle in the wilderness (the same Hebrew word is used for 'tent' and 'tabernacle'). The psalmist's assurance is astonishing: the Lord himself will offer sanctuary in his most holy space. On the 'day of trouble', protection will be freely available to the fugitive: 'shelter first, questions later', we could say.

We see, too, the right response to such welcome. Despite being confident of gaining sanctuary, the psalmist does not take it for granted but overflows with thanksgiving and joy to the one who has saved him. He knows he is safe, but he also knows he is loved.

'The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge'
(Psalm 46:11, NRSV).

NAOMI STARKEY

Bird

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’ At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness.

The symbolism of different living creatures derives from a variety of cultural memories and assumptions: we speak of a wise owl, man’s best friend, the big bad wolf. In many parts of the world, doves are traditionally associated with peace and purity, probably because of their soothing call and white feathers. Maybe that is why the Spirit takes the form of a dove for this post-baptismal moment. Doves (or pigeons) were also acceptable sacrificial gifts according to the Jewish law, being the more affordable option for the poor (such as Mary and Joseph; see Luke 2:24). While we are familiar with the idea of ‘lamb of God’, we’re less likely to think of ‘dove of God’, yet both creatures served similar purposes in purification rites.

Reading this account of Jesus’ baptism, we need to be aware of our own assumptions, because we can overlook the scene’s spiritual energy. We can picture something a bit soft-focus – all white wings and gentle light – but being ‘descended on’ by a bird can be very frightening. We should also note the violence in the description of the heavens being ‘torn open’. This is not necessarily a soothing scene; remember that after this, the Spirit who has thus descended sends Jesus out into the wilderness, where he will face physical hardship and temptation.

Something of this slightly alarming energy was captured by the priest-poet R.S. Thomas in his poem ‘Raptor’, in which God is described as having the characteristics of an owl. This is no wise old bird sitting in a tree but a powerful hunter – and we are in his sights.

*‘You yourselves have seen... how I carried you on eagles’ wings
and brought you to myself’ (Exodus 19:4).*

NAOMI STARKEY

Father

While [the son] was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms round him and kissed him. The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'

Speaking of 'God our Father' is such a familiar part of our worship that we may forget that 'father' is one of many biblical images for God. In recent times, awareness has grown that using the word 'father' can in fact create emotional distance, even fear, in the minds of some, who did not enjoy a positive (or indeed any) relationship with their human fathers.

As with every way of speaking about God, we face the tension of trying to express the inexpressible, but we have in Jesus the one who made explicit the possibility of knowing the Lord God as 'Father': 'No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' (Matthew 11:27). In Jesus' revealing of his Father's character, he tells the story of the lost son with its unforgettable climactic scene of the father running to his son, 'while he was still a long way off', to forgive him and bring him home.

Speaking of God as father does not mean he is a remote, chilly figure, making an appearance only to issue rebuke or punishment. It does not mean 'funny old Dad', a benign but largely irrelevant presence at the edge of family life. It means mercy and love; it also means justice and righteousness. Above all, it means one who loves so much, he sent his only Son as Saviour.

'O come to the Father through Jesus the Son' (Fanny Crosby, 1875).

NAOMI STARKEY

Mother

It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realise it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them... Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!

Conceiving, carrying and giving birth to a child are demanding, life-changing experiences. Raising children to maturity (including the two examples quoted here – teaching them to walk and feeding them as babies) takes much time, patience and energy. The instinctive bond with a birth mother is profound, often retaining significance even when the emotional and hands-on mothering has been done by another since the earliest days.

While the Bible clearly uses maternal imagery for God, calling God ‘Mother’ has tended to generate unease for some. Calling God ‘Father’ is not usually equated with saying ‘God is male’. Accordingly, the term ‘Mother’ should not be heard as ‘God is female’.

Of course, fathers can be sheltering, nurturing and tender, but scripture also cites such qualities in God using explicitly maternal terms. It is deeply moving to reflect that God’s love for us is described as more intense and enduring than a nursing mother’s for her baby. In the last 50 or so years, awareness has grown of the need to pay attention to the language we use when talking about God (especially in terms of gender) – and much liturgical creativity has resulted. New prayers, poems and hymns have been composed that draw on the rich biblical store of maternal and feminine imagery for God and have proved transformative for the faith of men and women alike.

*‘As verily as God is our Father, as verily God is our mother’
(Julian of Norwich, 1342–c. 1416).*

NAOMI STARKEY

Gardener

‘I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.’

Knowing what and when to prune may be a matter of some debate, but confidently wielding the secateurs (or more heavy-duty tools) can transform an unsightly tangle of branches into an attractive corner of the garden. While we may be familiar with the idea of cutting back dead wood, here it’s about removing living but less fruitful parts of a plant.

The imagery is rich and complex. The Father is the gardener, working to maximise the vine (Christ’s) productivity, which involves shaping us, the branches that should bear fruit (reminding us, perhaps, of the fruit of the Spirit; see Galatians 5:22–23). There’s a wonderful interdependency: branches cannot be fruitful without the trunk; a trunk without branches is almost as diminished, although it could grow more branches. Without pruning, growth will be unchecked and eventually strength-sapping: vine and branches need the gardener’s care.

The scriptures took shape in a world dominated by subsistence farming, where skilled husbandry meant the difference between thriving and starving. Describing God as a gardener (‘smallholder’ might be a more accurate term) evokes the image of someone who knows the seasons and soils, who patiently labours in all weathers, whose reward is unlikely to be riches and power but rather food security and a happy family. It evokes humility, commitment, diligence and a thought-provoking contrast to ideas of ‘the Lord Almighty’.

‘Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed’ (Genesis 2:8).

Bread

Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.’ ‘Sir,’ they said, ‘always give us this bread.’ Then Jesus declared, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe.’

Bread is one of the world’s staple foods, along with rice and maize, and the sort of bread referred to here was probably what we know as pitta or flat bread. In Jesus’ day, it was eaten with every meal and could be used to scoop up other food in the absence of cutlery. With meat a luxury, ‘daily bread’ (as requested in the Lord’s Prayer) meant what you needed to survive. During the Israelites’ wilderness wanderings, the Lord provided a miraculous bread substitute, ‘manna’ (Exodus 16:31), which became a symbol of God’s protection and care.

Now Jesus reminds his hearers of that miraculous provision and tells them that in him they will find food to satisfy them forever, heart and soul. This ‘food’ is still spoken of in terms of the humble loaf, though, rather than the exotic delicacies that would have graced a Roman emperor’s table. Jesus comes to meet the needs that we may not even recognise – for forgiveness, healing, transformation – in and through the reality of our daily lives. All we have to do is come as we are and receive with thanksgiving.

The offer is straightforward – too much so for Jesus’ hearers, who struggle to believe that the young man standing before them really is God’s gift to the world. Even though we know the story of Easter resurrection after the crucifixion, we can still forget to reach out for our risen Saviour’s care. Worrying tends to come so much more readily to us than trusting.

*‘Bread of heaven, feed me till I want no more’
(Williams Pantycelyn, 1717–91).*

NAOMI STARKEY

Lamb

Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the centre of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. The Lamb had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people.

The final reading in this series, on Saturday, will consider the splendour of heaven's throne room, where the Lord Almighty reigns in majesty, as described in Revelation 4. Today's passage is from the following chapter, where centre stage in that same throne room is an astonishing sight: a lamb 'looking as if it had been slain'. This suggests not the spotless white lamb of so much Christian art but something bloodied, damaged, shocking to behold.

Setting aside the strange apocalyptic language of 'seven horns and seven eyes' (while noting that seven is associated with perfection, perhaps suggesting all-powerful and all-seeing), this is not intended so much as a literal lamb as a drawing together of profound spiritual truths. Here is the Lamb of God, the one who died for the sins of the world and who is now risen to eternal life, present at the centre point of heavenly power and authority. The vulnerable sacrificial victim is heir to the throne of eternal glory, worthy of worship – and worthy to take the scroll from the one seated on that throne, revealing God's purposes for human history.

We are reminded of the Passover, when the blood of lambs was daubed on doorways to protect God's people from the angel of death, as they prepared to escape from Egypt. We are reminded, too, of the last supper, when Jesus took the Passover cup of wine and spoke words of a new covenant, proclaiming a new deliverance, a greater exodus.

'The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"' (John 1:29).

NAOMI STARKEY

Potter

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: ‘Go down to the potter’s house, and there I will give you my message.’ So I went down to the potter’s house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him. Then the word of the Lord came to me. He said, ‘Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does?’ declares the Lord.

Watching a skilled potter at work on their wheel, clay taking shape beneath their fingers, is an absorbing experience, as their precision ensures that the jug or bowl or cup grows shapely and strong. Jeremiah the prophet is led to the potter’s house and, through what he sees, gains divinely inspired insight into how God is at work in the world.

Even if the clay doesn’t mould quite right, the potter is undeterred and simply chooses another shape, making what he can rather than lamenting what he can’t do. Thus it is with God: his purposes are unstoppable, although they must still take account of the free will with which God has blessed his creatures. If one way does not work out, another avenue is tried – and it’s not a matter of picking a second-rate Plan B because Plan A has failed: God’s ‘works are perfect, and all his ways are just’ (Deuteronomy 32:4). The potter does not give up on the clay; God does not give up on us.

There is a deep security in reflecting how the Lord continues to be at work in and through us. Our heavenly Father is like a patient potter, who works day after day to create beautiful, useful objects from lumps of mud. Like the clay jars and bowls, we are formed by the one who sees us clearly in all our muddiness and knows that we too can be fit for heavenly purpose.

*‘Yet you, Lord, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter;
we are all the work of your hand’ (Isaiah 64:8).*

NAOMI STARKEY

King

There before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby. A rainbow that shone like an emerald encircled the throne. Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. In front of the throne, seven lamps were blazing... Also in front of the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

We come once again to a vision of the throne room of heaven, described by the prophet John. It is a dazzling presentation of kingship beyond any earthly powers and authorities, laden with imagery of precious stones and metals, brilliant light and astonishing purity. This throne room is not the seat of a tyrant, however, because surrounding the seat of power is a rainbow, symbol of God's mercy as promised to Noah, a covenant that 'never again' will floods sweep away all living creatures (Genesis 9:15). Eternal power is tempered with eternal love and forgiveness.

The idea of God's kingship may sit uneasily with us, accustomed as we are to voting for our governments and maintaining the monarchy primarily for ceremonial duties. What we see here, though, must be set alongside all the other images of God on which we have reflected. We worship God Almighty, king of kings, lord of hosts, whom we also experience as tender shepherd, gentle mother, patient potter and the lamb who bears on his risen, glorious body the scars of his cruel death. By that death, we have the right to take our places at the heavenly banquet, sons and daughters of the one seated on the throne.

'God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus' (Ephesians 2:6-7).

NAOMI STARKEY

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New Daylight is edited by Sally Welch. Sally is Vicar of Charlbury and Area Dean of Chipping Norton.

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