

Rite of Spring

... *The LORD will guide you continually, giving you water when you are dry and restoring your strength. You will be like a well-watered garden, like an ever-flowing spring. Some of you will rebuild the deserted ruins of your cities. Then you will be known as a rebuilders of walls and a restorer of homes. Keep the Sabbath day holy. Don't pursue your own interests on that day, but enjoy the Sabbath and speak of it with delight as the LORD's holy day. Honour the Sabbath in everything you do on that day, and don't follow your own desires or talk idly...*

"Isaiah 58 v 9 - 14

The seasons of the year are so clearly marked in Scotland – and as I write (as usual, slightly behind the deadline!) the daffodils are upon us. And with the daffodils come the various rites of spring – the opportunity to de-clutter (take it to the Church Auction!), the longer and brighter days which make the joggers push themselves a bit harder, and the relentless chiming of the biological clock has the gardeners out in force! The study of the fruit of the spirit has got various mental cogs (springs?) turning in our house, particularly regarding vegetable reproduction...

The spring bulbs are a source of endless fascination to me. I love the pools of crocuses on the green lawns outside Callendar House and the cheerful clumps of daffodils on the motorway. I have dragged the family on a snowdrop lecture tour in the Botanical Gardens in Edinburgh. Cut tulips in a vase entrance me as each stem develops its own personality as the petals open and the stalk twists itself around. I have even planted a variety of bulbs in tubs at the back of the manse and (this is the most interesting of all!) I am awed and surprised at how, year after year, with absolutely no input from me, those daffodils pop up again!

Growing up in Africa, the seasons are not as distinct. Spring arrives in August or September, and in the

highveld plateau of southern Africa is hardly distinguishable. If you look closely, you may notice new fresh green leaves on some of the trees (except for the Msasa trees – which suddenly are covered with rusty red, orange and golden leaves which fade to green). But all the leaves are green and dusty by the time summer arrives in October. Towards the end of that month, the need for rain is overwhelming. By two hours after sunrise you are too hot. There is a particular bird called the rain bird, that in African legend summons the rain, and you are continually aware of the call. The ground is dry and cracked. What grass has survived the winter is yellow and crunchy. There are no flowers. October is known as the suicide month in Harare. The ground, the plants, the insects, the birds, the animals and the people long for the first rain and as each week and day passes without rain, the expectation turns to desperation. Usually, the rains come by the end of October, but often they are delayed.

In Africa, frequently, and often over several years running, there is drought. Water is treasured and rationed and prized – never taken for granted – there is just never enough. Rain is always a treat. The fresh, new start after the first rain is always uplifting and the spiritual significance of God's provision in allowing the rain to come is obvious. Churches pray for rain. The farmers tense, ready to 'spring' into action as soon as that first shower starts. So much depends on the rain.

But in Scotland, we have rain aplenty. The grass is usually green. The rivers and burns flow all year round. The lakes are full. If you miss the rain today, you can catch the next shower tomorrow or the next day, there will be little difference. We take it for granted. It is easy to forget how wonderful is God's blessing of rain.

We have an easy life here – the seasons roll around without our assistance. We don't pray for rain. Maybe we ask God for a few

sunny days to allow us to plan an outdoor function, but we can rely on his sending the rain!

I think our attitudes in the church are a bit like those spring bulbs, which come up year after year. The bulbs split and new plants grow up next to the old. It just happens. What would happen if the daffodils did not come up next year? I think some of us would miss them. We may not realise that we are in a spiritual drought.

It seems to me that we are taking the reproduction of members in the church for granted. Like those bulbs, perhaps there will be a few more of us next year. Probably a few less, if the squirrels and the thistles get in the way. Perhaps some of us will try and come up under the tarmac. We are taking God's provision of His blessings for granted, and we are under the impression that the next generation will just 'pop up' like the daffodils. We can remain complacent and unmoved, someone else will tell them about Jesus and going to church. Someone else will cultivate our children.

Yes, someone else will – and that someone will probably not instil the values and the importance of the things we hold dear. The next generation will reap the benefit of our materialism and the way we take matters of faith for granted, with a harvest of lower moral standards, more closed churches and a bleaker spiritual outlook – a worsening of the spiritual drought we are currently experiencing. The less honour we have for the Sabbath and the things of God the easier it is for those that follow to have even less regard too.

It is not too late, we can still pray for the spiritual rain to start. We can still hope for and expect the change that God's spirit can bring. Father, end this drought. This Easter may we feel the rain of the love of Jesus' Spirit, bring your harvest of good, wonderful and spiritual fruit in our lives.

*With love
Tracey O'Brien*