**Psalm 121 Survivors Reflection**

Survivors of Abuse are, unwillingly, thrust into this journey, that for every moment of life after abuse, will always be mountainous at times, steady and more settled in parts and also near on impossible at others. Much like the journey of Isaiah which included the painful experience of loss, a desert and barren time, yet in his prophetic insight he also saw the flowers that would one day bloom in the desert.

When I think about the spiritual connection between the Isaiah Journey and the Journey of Survivors, I can understand why the Bishop’s Conference has titled the working group as such.

The survivor journey can often feel lonely and isolated, and whilst always trying to move forwards, that sense of loneliness, of feeling fragmented, facing that steeply impossible mountain is often accompanied by a silent cry of ‘Who will help me?’

This question is often left unanswered, as the very nature of abuse can make it impossible to trust anyone to have your best interests at heart, to want to help you with your heavy load. Life lived in a paradox of needing help, but not being able to trust enough to accept it. This paradox means that the psychological impact continues to be perpetuated long after abuse ends.

A Survivor Explains:

‘I find it a great comfort to know that God is watching over me through the difficulties of my journey. I have been through what is unimaginable to most and there have been times, back in the early days, where like Jesus, I have cried out ‘’Lord, why have you forsaken me’’. How could God let this horrific abuse happen to me? I admit that I have been cynical and untrusting of the Church’s reputation.

Although my abuser had no connections to the Church, as an adult, the historical stories in the paper, where people knew what was happening but did nothing more than move the perpetrator elsewhere, and survivors went unbelieved and disregarded, really affected my relationship with the Church that I’d spent so much time as a child, before my pre-adolescent years, which was when the abuse began.

One day, I was brave enough to admit to a Priest, that I was a survivor of abuse as well as a whole host of life troubles which followed. I was a walking cliche and I was afraid and expected that I’d be thought of as this shameful being, stood before him and that I would be ushered away faster than he could say Amen.

Bu in reality, that didn’t happen. In that moment, I was cared for with words, humanity and empathy. I was accepted for who I was. Signposted to support. The time was taken to explain the safeguarding practice and structure that is in place in the Church today and it was acknowledged that the Church has needed to improve and is on its own journey, striving to protect those who are vulnerable and have been harmed and to make atonement for all the survivors who are still feeling hurt and abandoned by the Church.

It had a really powerful impact on me to hear a Priest of the Catholic Church acknowledge the harms of abuse perpetrated form within the church, to admit the disastrous responses were not ok and to accept that a culture change in the way the church responds to and supports survivors of abuse, was not just needed, it was essential

The church I was witnessing on this day was such a contrast to what I had expected it to be. That moment changed my future and I found a new hope that helped me with my healing. I found my way back to journeying with the Church and upon reading the words for Psalm 121 on the search for a Psalm for a family occasion, the words struck me. Thinking of this journey, from an unsafe place, a journey that would be difficult and heading somewhere new and unknown, I recognised the experience of being a Survivor in what the writer of this Psalm was facing. To know that whatever dangers lie ahead, God will be watching over, always and forevermore at my side, is such a powerful force of encouragement in my healing. To trust in God rather than be angry with him that the journey exists, gave me a freedom that I never expected to feel.

I hope that like me, there are survivors who can find a place on their Journey where they do find God, and the Church, to be that comfort, shade, protector from stumbles. There is so much work still to do.

I’m grateful that there are Services like this one today. I’m sitting out there listening, praying, looking at the people here today who are standing up and saying that they care. And I thank you that you are here. You can never know how much it means to Survivors. The ones sitting here amongst you tonight, sat within the pews during mass, stood on the Altar, serving and celebrating the mass, quietly and without mention of our horrific past, wanting only for kindness and love from the Church and its people.