

**NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH**  
**EASTER 6**  
**SUNDAY 18 MAY 2014**  
**Rev. Anneke Oppewal**  
**Deuteronomy 33: 27-29; Psalm 31: 1-5, 15,16;**  
**John 14: 1-14**

**“The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms”**

I wonder.... what image pops into your mind when you hear that phrase? Have you ever heard it before? Or is it completely new to you?



For me, it is one of the phrases that has been with me as long as I can remember, words deeply nestled in my subconscious somewhere that will sometimes pop up, without prompting, when I am either feeling extremely well, or extremely unwell.

They are the best words for me to describe an exceptional sense of wellbeing that goes a lot deeper, and is a lot more profound, than just feeling happy. They are also words that tend to surface from somewhere in my subconscious to give me more than ordinary comfort and support when I am feeling extremely vulnerable and anxious.

You may have words like that, or images, like I do; words that travel with you through life, hitching a ride with your unconscious mind for most of the time, but very effectively popping up whenever you need them.

A while ago, something happened that made these words pop back into my mind once again. This time, instead of letting them drop back into my unconscious, I wondered where they had come from and what their context could be, and I decided to look them up.

These words have been with me for so long that I don't remember who planted the phrase in my subconscious, or in what context I came by these words. Church? School? My grandmother? My mother? Or had they just resonated with me some time when I was reading the bible?

I didn't have a clue where they fitted into scripture. I had just gratefully accepted their presence whenever they popped up, as part of the treasure trove of quotes and bible verses I carry with me, thanks to a childhood drenched in scripture.

So where did those words come from, I wondered. And would they, by any chance, be surrounded by other, equally profound and wonderful words that could expand my treasure trove of quotes even further?

I looked in the Psalms first. Somehow it was there I expected them to have come from. In the context of a poem about God's everlasting love and care for instance, or about trust and God's faithfulness. However, nothing in the psalms that I could find sounded even remotely like the words that, over the years, had nurtured me so much. I tried several translations, but no. No everlasting arms to be found anywhere in the psalms!

Next I turned to the New Testament. Perhaps it was a quote from one of Paul's letters, or maybe it came from John's writings? That would fit. Words written to comfort people that struggled through times of trouble and persecution. But no, not there either.

In the end, the computer and the old King James came to the rescue, and I found the words in Deuteronomy 33, in a context that was totally different to what I had expected.

They are a part of blessings that Moses offers his people at the end of his life. The more general phrase, "The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms" in the middle of other, much more specific and concrete words of blessing directed at each tribe; words that promise various forms of prosperity, abundant harvests, fat and healthy herds of cattle, sheep, fertile farmland, the conquering of enemies and a peaceful and fulfilled old age.

Not what I expected at all!

And yet, at some level, once I began to think about it, it made sense. Where we tend to spiritualise God's comfort and support, for the people of Israel, in the context of the scriptures, comfort and support is usually referred to in concrete situations, in concrete trouble, in a real way, addressing people who are in real danger and under real threat.

Moses, close to death, encourages his people not with general words of blessing, but with concrete, clear promises of a positive future. It must have been difficult for him to let go. And the text portrays him, in the short time that is still left to him, trying to convey his own faith and confidence in God's guidance onto his people, as eloquently as he can. His people, at that stage, must have been anxious. They are in dire trouble. With one foot in the promised land and one foot still in the wilderness, the future is far from secure. After leading them for 40 years, Moses' passing comes at a time where they must have been feeling vulnerable and insecure.

It will be alright is what Moses tells them. Each of you will receive a blessing suited to your needs. God will secure the future, for each of you, in a way that will fit in with who you are. Judah's people one way, Manasse's people another way. Levi, Benjamin and Josef's people, all of you will receive what you need from the God that has liberated you from Egypt and has travelled with you through the wilderness, I am sure. He will be with you, even when I am gone. Trust me. "The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms". There is nothing to worry about, no matter how scared and insecure you may all be feeling right now, while you are transitioning from one way of being into the next.....with everything about to change, God's presence and love in your lives will not change.

So that's where those everlasting arms come from. From a man who struggled to let go and trust that his people would be ok without him. Who tried to comfort them, each at their own level, respecting their individual quirks, character traits and needs. It was spoken to a people who were collectively moving into another way of being, another way of life, into a future they could not, at that stage, even imagine. People facing significant existential change at the end of one era, moving into the next.

Did you notice the other half of that sentence? "The eternal God is your dwelling place"?

When read alongside John 14, it suddenly sounds familiar, doesn't it? In John's gospel, Jesus addressed his disciples, his people, at the end of his life, echoing words Moses spoke at the end of his life. I don't think that is a coincidence. I think it was deliberately put that way to trigger a memory. The memory of a people on the verge of crossing the Jordan into an unknown future. The memory of a man about to be taken up to God and leaving his people with words of wisdom and blessing that will prove to be true, and will serve them for thousands of years to come.

I think the words as we find them in John 14 were designed to bring the old story of Moses and his people on the verge of moving from the wilderness into the promised land to the surface, and trigger an automated response in anyone familiar with the scriptures.

God's eternal dwelling place? Underneath are the everlasting arms!

So what do they look like, these everlasting arms? This eternal dwelling place that both Moses and Jesus conjure up in their final words?

Me, personally? I always imagined the house with the many mansions, or dwelling places, to look somewhat like Hampton Court. And perhaps that was why I came to love Hampton Court so much once I'd found it! For me, Hampton Court is as close to that image of what heaven might be as anything can get.

A house with many rooms. A house with many different rooms, each and every one totally different from the others, each beautiful and unique, part of a maze of rooms and corridors, nooks and crannies, where there never seems to be an end to the wonders that could be discovered. Surrounded by extensive, beautiful, varied, most exquisite gardens, and bordering on a beautiful river. The kitchen, the weapons room, the chapel, the hall, the bedroom and even the privy, all built and furnished to the highest standards.

The years when, living near Hampton Court, we had an annual pass, we enjoyed our visits there every time we went. We each had our own favourite room or rooms, and we would always, without fail, discover something new and exciting whenever we went there.

That's what I imagine, or what I would like heaven to be like. Spacious, exciting, with something for everyone to enjoy and to share with others. A place to take friends, and see them get excited and full of wonder at what they find. With children running from one space to the next because they can't decide which part of the building or the gardens they like best.

Of course, heaven is not like that. But when John imagines where Jesus' friends are headed after he has gone, moving into a very challenging future with the threat of death and persecution around every corner, he imagines a house such as Hampton Court Palace when he wants to reassure them. A house with many rooms, where there is space for everyone to come to rest and find peace. And underneath - the everlasting arms.

Did John, did Jesus, did Moses, have a palace like Hampton Court in mind when these words were written down? We don't know. And did that palace have a maze? That we don't know either.

But when it comes to imagining what "everlasting arms" may look and feel like, I find the image of the maze, with the person in the watchtower, a very helpful one. It is an image of peace, confidence and trust that is not static and receptive, but active. An image that I think may be much closer to what both Moses and Jesus may have been on about than the static, receptive, consumptive way we have, more traditionally, been taught to understand it.

Feeling relaxed, at peace and confident in the maze has everything to do with being aware of the person in the tower. Whilst you're in the maze having fun, they are a reassuring presence in the background. A presence you may or may not be aware of all the time. A presence you can check at intervals by looking up, or point others towards if they need the reassurance. Only when a crisis occurs, when you need to find your way quickly, or when you are lost, when you are tired or confused, does the presence of this person really kick in. The everlasting arms are always there, and you can feel around for them sometimes when all is well, just to make sure they are still there. But it is only when a crisis occurs, or when you suddenly feel really happy about being in the maze and being looked after, that you will be able to truly value the presence and support of those arms.

It is that image of ongoing, quiet and mostly unnoticed support that pops into my conscious mind every time I need it, and brings memories of other times when God was near and I felt safe, supported, guided and comforted.

Memories of scripture and the stories of other people I know that tell of that presence, that peace, that place, that feeling of finding the everlasting arms underneath; of discovering that I live in God's eternal

dwelling place, with Jesus showing the way, being the way, and offering the truth that is able to guide and nurture us through that maze, through the different phases of our lives; sharing our journey with different people, at different times, and sometimes alone. Happy, excited, but also, sometimes, lost, confused and lonely.

Both the images, of the eternal dwelling place, and the everlasting arms, are not only, and not even most importantly, images of where we end up after we die. Instead, they are images of how we, in our life now, can proceed confidently and in peace through life. We can proceed secure in the knowledge that those arms are underneath us, no matter what the future will hold, with God's love and care providing a roof over our head and walls to keep the enemy out. He furnishes our lives with blessings suited to each and every one of us individually, so we can find our way at our own pace, in our own way, following Christ, sharing the way. We can be confident that even when we can't see or feel God's guiding presence, somewhere, underneath, are still those everlasting arms, making sure we never fall from God's loving care. Even if we don't know it, even if we can't believe it, even when we feel wholly lost and desperate, even when we die - underneath are the everlasting arms, holding, accepting, loving, forgiving, healing, fulfilling. Amen.