

## Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> September 2024

I've always like black labradors. We don't have a dog but if we did then that would be my canine friend of choice.

The conversation has come round again recently. There are a number of reasons for this; both of our children are now leaving home and I'd like the company; my 50+ year old body needs more exercise and finally, the utopian view I have of walking with a black lab gently lapping along by my side is one that makes me smile. Man's Best Friend and all that.

This conversation however was short. Mrs F is none to keen on a black labrador as dog of choice, wonders if I've considered that dogs need walked in the pouring rain as well as sunshine days and, points out that the justifiable question of 'how will Charlie the Cat like it?' (Personally, I think Charlie will do just fine and as long as he stands his ground to an animal many times his size...he'll cope!) She did add that 'dogs with floppy ears are her preference IF we get one'. I thought it unwise to point out that floppy ears are a great characteristic of a labrador. A battle for another day methinks.

In recent months though my thoughts around a black dog have not centred on the four-legged variety that play fetch on the beach, but on the alias that it is for depression.

It was Winston Churchill, who battled with depression all his life and referred to those times as his 'black dog'. The phrase has been used to be the title for a great book called *I had a black dog* which gives great helpful insights in coping with depression with brilliant visual illustrations.

The struggle I had recently was so overwhelming that I ended up taking some time off work. After 37 working years, it was very hard to admit to not coping with my mental health and I was concerned that it would be like opening Pandora's Box in how I would feel and how others would judge me.

The judgement didn't come I'm pleased to say. In the weeks that have passed, I'm trying to put steps in place that will be long term solutions. In addition to professional support, my faith is a key part of the recovery process, and I've realised that there are many people in the Bible who struggle with their mental health when actually they've been wrongly perceived and proclaimed as super saints. They're not.

I've been struck lately by the very familiar Psalm 23. I heard it thousands of times of the years at funerals I conducted and it's very easy to become over familiar with the text as to lose the meaning.

David (not immune to depression in his own life) writes at one point: *Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me.*

Dark valleys can be lonely and frightening places, and it is right to be aware of those feelings, particularly with mental health, and name them.

I've realised that I may be fearful of depression and its symptoms, but I can also say that I'm not afraid because I've proved and continue to prove that the 'you' in this psalm is a Father God who draws close in the midst of depression. He doesn't necessarily remove it but His presence in the darkness can shine light, signpost hope and bring peace.

Maybe one day I'll have a black labrador contentedly sat by my feet or catching a

stick on Alnmouth beach. I'd like that. But I know a Best Friend that is better than any dog, one who I can't see but walks beside me whatever the weather.