

Reflection for Sunday 15th November: Proverbs 4:1-6,20-27 – ‘Homemade SELF-CARE’

This year Alise grew sunflowers right outside my study window. Part of our response to lockdown this year was to try different things to keep our spirits up. I’ve started writing daily inspirations and got my record player going again with a vengeance. Alise has been growing things. We both love sunflowers, and it was a joy to see them snaking up the wall right by my desk.

One of the world most famous paintings in Sunflowers by Vincent van Gogh – in fact he painted several versions, all of which are worth tens of millions of pounds. I love his work, and used to have a picture of his Sunflowers on my bedroom wall. But I must admit that even Vincent’s sunflowers are no match for the real thing, which I enjoyed every day, for free, from my study window.

It’s often said that something is only worth what someone is prepared to pay for it. Which begs the question: what is truly valuable in life? What is worth the investment?

Today’s reading makes a simple point, which goes to the heart of the question. The conceit of the passage is that of an old man passing wise advice to his children, and his summary of how to live life well is this: **‘Above all, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.’**

Self-care is an increasingly popular theme nowadays. But what is it? Sadly, it’s often confused with self-indulgence – treat yourself to this or that. But at its heart, self-care is about maintaining wellbeing, a healthy outlook on life. It’s about those priceless intangibles like hope and joy and peace. In other words, it’s not primarily about our material or physical circumstances, it’s about our inner life, our *heart*. And the wise old teacher pictures our hearts like a spring. If we look after it, its replenishing water will cultivate the rest of our lives and keep our whole selves healthy.

Never has this advice been more important than in this season. With so many things disrupted, some of what we used to rely on for our wellbeing has been reduced or even taken away. And let’s be realistic, we will need to be in survival mode at some level. We can’t completely replace some of what we’ve lost in other ways.

That said, there are ways we can guard our heart at this time – which will help us to take care of ourselves. And here in this passage, the author gives us 3 simple tips:

First, it’s about what you feed yourself with. ‘Get wisdom,’ the author urges us, ‘and she will protect you.’ Wisdom is more than knowledge, it’s the stuff that really matters in life. And there are ways we can put that into practice at the moment. Firstly there are so many good resources we can access online – inspirations, services of every type. Find a good diet of what works for you, and try to stick to it, and try to get some sort of good nourishment daily.

I would also take time to reflect on what really inspires you, and to think of creative ways you might be able to practise it. It’s tempting to say ‘I can’t’ but there might be a slightly alternative way that you *can*. Not as good, but better than nothing. Improvise – it’ll be good for your heart.

Second, it's also about what we're free from. The passage refers to the things we talk about – our mouths are a good reflection of our hearts. Generally I find that it's hard *not* to do something. It usually works much better if I *replace* whatever it is I didn't want to do. So can I suggest actively choosing to send someone an encouragement each day. That'll make their day, but you'll probably find it comes back to you too.

Thinking a bit more laterally about this whole issue of what we free ourselves from, I would also suggest limiting your news intake to once a day. There is so little good news, endlessly gorging on it throughout the day will kill your sense of well-being. I'm not saying ignore it, just limit it. Once a day is plenty to know what's going on without it dominating your headspace.

So feeding, freeing, and **finally fixing your gaze**. 'Fix your gaze directly before you,' encourages the writer, and that's great advice for us at the moment. And I'm going to suggest we need bifocals at the moment. I hear a lot of people saying: 'When this is all over...' and that's good, we need to fix our gaze on the reality that, one way or another, we will get through this season.

But just a slight note of caution. Beware loading too much onto some ideal future of sunlit uplands. Think about a walk: if you keep looking only at the destination, it never seems to get any closer. Instead, when we walk, we look up sometimes, but 90% of the time, our focus is on the next few steps. And we need that approach now. Take each day at a time, fix your gaze on living well today, and when you get up tomorrow, fix your gaze on living well the next day, and so on. If you only look up every so often, you'll realise that a few weeks have gone, and our destination is much closer.

Self-care has never been more vital. And today's passage gives us some great practical advice for surviving this season. In the end it comes down to what's inside – here in our hearts. Guard your hearts, for they are the wellspring of life. And by God's grace, we will overcome. Amen.