

HOPE-FILLED: THE SEASON OF STIRRINGS



I have often heard the months of February and March described as really depressing, especially as in recent years they have frequently borne the worst weather conditions. When the sun is shining, and birds are singing, it's easy to feel the joy of a new season on its way, but when we are storm lashed and rain sodden, or when the world is just plain cold, grey and puddly, it can be a bit more challenging. Summer can seem a long way off, and the temptation then is to indulge in our very British habit of grumbling about the weather.

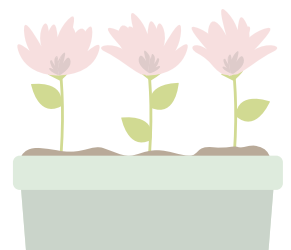
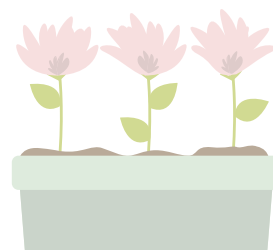
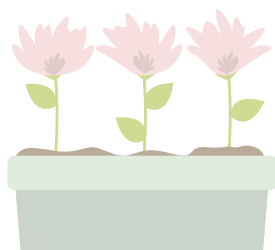
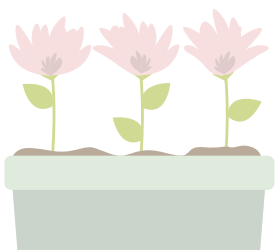
No doubt our ancestors complained too, but for them February heralded the start of a brand new period in the annual cycle. It ushered in the season of 'Stirrings', when the earth starts to awaken, and winter slowly dissolves into spring. Tied as they were to the annual cycle, to our forefathers this phase spelled hope: the signs of emergent life meant the deprivations of winter were finally coming to an end; the strength of the sun was mounting, and the land would again bear fruit. And it was all a cause for celebration.

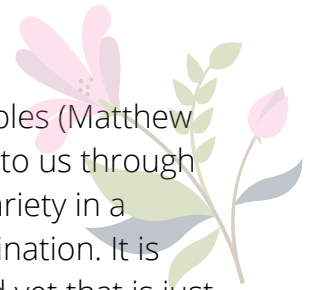
And so it can be with us, even in our modern industrialised world. The next three months instead of prolonging 'winter blues', can instead be instruments of hope. We can find things to challenge, inspire and celebrate in this season, even before the joys of full-blown spring. It just depends on our perspective, and on our willingness to take time: time to see and reflect, and time to encounter the Lord who reveals Himself in His creation.

Perhaps the following suggestions can help us into that experience:

Revel in the natural world

Although it may be a while before we feel that spring has truly arrived, we can still get in tune with the awakening world around us. Let's take time out in creation and notice the stirrings in nature: the bulbs pushing through the undergrowth, budding trees, returning birds, and the lengthening days. The earth is filled with signs of the promise of new life, if we have eyes to see. And there are many books, websites and television programmes to help inform our observations.





And just as Jesus used the 'lilies of the field' to illustrate a point to his disciples (Matthew 6:28), if we have listening ears when we're out and about, so He will speak to us through the things we see. It is also the time for planting seeds: Why not plant a variety in a window box, tub or garden, and study and wonder at the process of germination. It is amazing that the potential for a mighty oak is written into a tiny acorn. And yet that is just the capacity our Father has placed in us, visualising His children as 'oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of His splendour' (Isaiah 61:3). Now that's something to ponder!

Learn from the season:

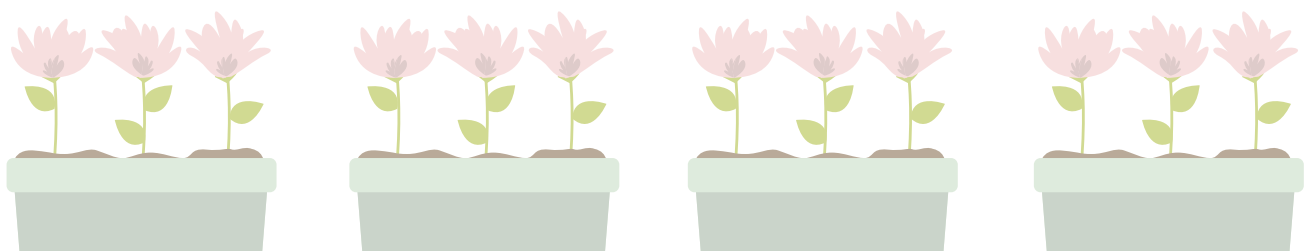
The art of keeping in step with a particular season is learned through observation, reflection and application. Right now it appears that the earth is undergoing a 'deep clean': the landscape made fresh by the rains and melting snow; trees, hedge-rows and woodland floors in their spartan austerity, and fields newly ploughed.

These early months of the year have traditionally been the time to follow suit on the home front: time to clean out cupboards, wash curtains and clear away accumulated heaps. It's also a perfect time to have a personal spring clean, to ask the Lord to shine His light on the cobwebs in our inner selves: a good time to forgive, and be forgiven; a time to get to grip with addictions and long standing issues, a time to clear out attitudes and irritations.

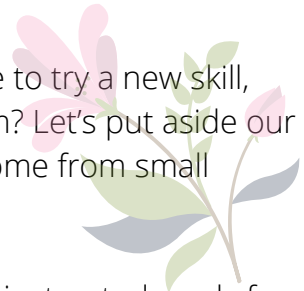
Sometimes the natural world can seem almost stark in its simplicity in early spring. Maybe it can influence us to declutter our lives, reducing the encumbrances, the extra 'stuff' that weighs us down and reduces our effectiveness. This is a good moment to re-evaluate priorities and ditch some of the involvements which push us towards breakdown, heeding the voice of the Lord who calls to us to come aside and get some rest (Mark 6:31). Christians can be particularly susceptible to the tyranny of others' expectations, however, Jesus made it clear that 'His yoke is easy and His burden light'.

Embrace new beginnings:

Of course this season is particularly about new beginnings: as winter fades, and spring advances, the evidence is all around us. The bleating of first lambs, scurrying ducklings to the river, bulb shoots pushing upwards, and tiny buds unfurling.



And there can be a new dawn in our lives too. Perhaps this is the time to try a new skill, launch a new career, or take steps towards fulfilling a long-held dream? Let's put aside our fears, and take heart from the evidence around us - great wonders come from small beginnings.



Traditionally the period before Easter was the time for converts to be instructed ready for baptism. How about spending time re-discovering the powerful spiritual truths wrapped up in baptism, the starting block for the Christian walk; or perhaps respond for the very first time to the Lord's invitation to know Him personally in your everyday life?

Celebrate the present:

Celebration needs to be an everyday affair, not just limited to 'high days and holidays'. And there's plenty to celebrate in this season of stirrings; spring bulbs on the table, a 'snowdrop or daffodil 'festival' at a country park, late afternoon walks in the increasing sunlight, or the sharing of seasonal food. Our lives are showered with blessings, so let's overflow with thanksgiving.

And of course this time of the year is when we remember the most significant events in the history of the world: Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. *Let's celebrate with special food, family time, and worship with the people of God;* but let's also carve out time in our busy diaries to meditate on the truths they represent, truths which have transformational power, truths which can set us free. Let's be stirred like the environment around us to a new flowering of the life of God in and through us.

This time of the year with its lengthening days and blossoming hedgerows, is wonderful, full of hope and expectation. Let's be in step with it, and look with anticipation at the months to come. But also on the grey days, the gloomy days, let's throw off end-of-winter blues, look around us and find things to celebrate. Let's savour the moment we are in - we'll never have it again.

