THE GOOD NEIGHBOUR. . . connecting to God.

A short story by Veronica Heley

Big Leo got on well with Zoom. He made use of it for church services and to take part in meetings; also when he when he contacted his family and friends. Usually he presented a cheerful face to the camera, but not so one day when he contacted his old friend, Bruce.

Bruce, bald and brown, was a semi-retired accountant who had also accepted Zoom as an essential part of his life. Today he pushed aside the tax return he’d been working on, took one look at Leo and said, ‘What’s up? Ah, I get it. Lent has begun and Dora wants you to go on a diet.’

Leo grunted. ‘She tries it on every year. She knows I won’t eat rabbit food. I tell her, if she won’t give me chips and hot chocolate, then I’ll get them elsewhere. And don’t you dare say I could do with losing a few pounds!’

In this second lockdown Leo had stopped going out to help his neighbours and it showed. Bruce thought - but didn’t say - that Leo could well do with losing some weight. ‘Dora has a point, you know.’

Leo huffed a bit. ‘It’s not my fault. I’ve nowhere to go, nothing to do.’ He forgot his own troubles to scrutinise his friend’s face. ‘You all right?’

Bruce held back a sigh. ‘A white night.’

Leo understood. Bruce’s loving wife, Sally, had Long Covid and wasn’t picking up as well as she might. They were all very worried about her.

Leo said, ‘How’s Sally?’

Bruce managed a smile. ‘She’s gone out to the greenhouse to sow some tomato seeds. It’s a strange old year, isn’t it? Normally by now she’d be planning how to decorate the church for Easter—’

‘And Dora would be organising the church’s Easter Fayre.’

Bruce indicated the papers before him. ‘Some things never change. I’m still working on my neighbour’s tax return. Every year, he’s behind with it.’ Bruce was the only one of the four who still had work to do though if it was for friends and neighbours he rarely charged for it. He said, ‘So, what’s Dora giving up for Lent?’

‘I wish she’d give up nagging me. She’s a real Martha; busy, busy all day. Wearing herself out.’

Bruce didn’t say that Dora nagged because she loved Leo. What he did say was, ‘I’ve been thinking about Lent. It’s clear Sally mustn’t even think of fasting—’

‘And you’re skin and bones anyway.’

For some time now, Bruce had been wondering about fasting for Lent. Did it only mean cutting out a favourite food? Surely it meant following Jesus into the wilderness? We give something up so as to make time and space for taking a good look at ourselves, to listen to what God is saying to us, and to strengthen ourselves for what is to come. It might not be about cutting down on food. It might be about taking on something new.

Leo was still talking. ‘Dora’s life is built around doing things for other people. Someone’s got a birthday coming up? She’ll bake them a cake. Someone’s poorly and can’t face cooking supper? She’ll be round with a casserole. She’s got some task on every day. She’s too busy to stop and think. She doesn’t *listen* to me when I tell her she should slow down. She doesn’t *listen* to anything I say.’

Bruce mused, ‘Listening is a discipline in itself. How often do we really listen to what other people say? I suppose Lent is one time when we *should* make more time to listen to God . . . but do we? I really don’t know.’

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Dora didn’t like Zoom. As far as she was concerned, it was fiddly, you had to remember what to do and when. What’s more, you had to have tidied yourself and the kitchen before you switched on. Likely as not, the screen would freeze just as you got started, or you could only see the top of people’s heads. It wasted time, and time was what she hadn’t got.

Reception in their retirement flat was patchy, which was why Leo was zooming in the kitchen. She waited impatiently for him to finish his call so that she could get on with her next job.

Her ever-lengthening list of Things to Do started with Spring Cleaning. She’d been brought up to wash curtains in Lent but perhaps she could skip that this year. She made a note to ring a friend who’d moved into a residential home and was feeling lonely.

She wanted to start on the shepherd’s pie she was planning for their son’s family’s supper. He was working hard from home, trying to keep the business afloat while their daughter-in-law volunteered at a Covid vaccination centre and wouldn’t be home in time to cook them a good meal.

As for her granddaughters! If they weren’t doing schoolwork, they’d be on their smartphones or out with their friends in the park, which they ought not to be, but who was going to stop them, and they not wearing face masks and not bothering about social distancing. There were so many things to worry about, Dora didn’t know how she could manage to carry on, she really didn’t, what with Leo refusing to diet and all.

She was not going to cry. She told herself that the long winter and the lockdown took its toll of even the strongest of people.

Leo was still on zoom in the kitchen. She could hear him talking to Bruce. She was anxious about so many of her friends, whom she hadn’t seen for ever. They’d had had their first jab, but when would the second be coming?

It was frustrating not to be able to get on with her jobs. She sank back in her big chair and rested . . . just till Leo had finished on zoom. She closed her eyes and let her mind empty . . .

Half asleep, she heard the word ‘listen’ repeated several times. And then she thought she heard a voice saying, ‘*Martha*, *Martha*! *Be still and know that I am God.’*

She jerked awake. What nonsense! Her name wasn’t Martha, and she hadn’t time to be still and listen. Leo had finished his call, which meant she could get on with the next thing on her list. Now, what was it?

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Bruce asked Sally if she fancied going for a walk. The sun was shining, the willow trees were showing pink shoots and spring flowers were opening up in the gardens.

Sally made an excuse, as usual. ‘Not this morning. I thought I might sow some seeds in the greenhouse. The weather’s been awful and it seems as if spring will never come, but the miniature daffodils are out and the first of the grape hyacinths.’

She used a stick to help her get out to the greenhouse. Once there, she sat on a stool and allowed herself a tear or two. But not many. Bruce would notice if she wept.

Bruce had never cared that she didn’t cook and shop for him as other wives did. He’d encouraged her to use her talent for growing things and for decorating the church, But, since she’d had Covid and the church had been shut, it seemed that her occupation had gone.

The seeds waited to be sown but she hadn’t the energy to do it.

She prayed, ‘Dear Lord, I’m struggling to be grateful for my life. Things seemed to going so well when the vaccinations started and we saw the first moves out of lockdown but now . . . the future seems far away and I’m still too tired to do anything. I feel so helpless, such a burden on others. I’ve asked you time and again for healing, but . . .’

She stopped herself from complaining to Him. She had to believe He knew what was best for her. He had his own agenda, and hers was unimportant.

Reaching out to Jesus did help. She closed her eyes and thought about what He’d sacrificed for love of us. If he could lay down his life for her, then surely she should be able to rest in that love, whatever happened to her?

*Trust and obey*.

The sun broke through the clouds overhead and she relaxed, feeling the warmth. She smiled, thinking that there was still something she could do, and that was to praise Him for His goodness and His love, for the sun and the moon and the stars above; for the kindness of strangers, and for the love of her own dear husband. She would even pray for the neighbour Bruce was helping, the one whose tax affairs were in such a mess.

Sally reached out for the packs of seeds. They were a promise that things would get better. Surely she’d soon have enough strength to sow the tomato seeds? She shuffled them; oh, the brilliance of the Gardeners’ Delight, the beauty of the Golden Sunrise and the lusciousness of the big beefeaters, Marmande! Perhaps she’d feel strong enough to sow the seeds tomorrow.

The church was shut, and watching the services on Zoom gave her a headache, but she could always pray.

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Bruce pushed the paperwork away from him and rubbed his eyes. He was tired of clearing up other people’s messes. He was tired, full stop. What he would give to be out on the seashore with the tide going out and a mile of empty sand to walk on . . . or on a green hillside with the sun shining and a breeze blowing away the dark thoughts that crowded in on him at times.

He started. Was that Sally calling for help?

No. He wondered, as he frequently did nowadays, what would happen if she got worse. She would have to go into respite care to be properly looked after, which would give him the freedom to get on a plane to somewhere . . . anywhere . . . anywhere that would accept a tourist . . .

But no. He shuddered at the thought of leaving her behind.

*Dear Lord God, forgive me. Leo has reminded me I ought to listen to you more. I will try. I will.*

The room was silent around him. There wasn’t much traffic outside in their quiet road. The second hand of his watch slid round. He stretched out his legs under the table.

Then he sighed, and picked up the paperwork again. He’d been given a job to do and he’d better get on with it, or his neighbour was going to be in real trouble. In an hour’s time he’d cobble some lunch together, and while Sally took a nap, he’d take a walk around the block. And then back to work. There was a zoom prayer meeting that evening which he planned to attend.

He thought that he was destined to have an unremarkable lifetime of service, day after day, week after week, with no let up. Well, if this was what he was supposed to be doing, he’d better get on with it.

To start with, if he didn’t sort out this tax mess, his neighbour was going to suffer.

And, perhaps there was something more he could do to make Sally’s life easier?

*Dear Lord, show me the way . . .*

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Big Leo woke up to find Dora’s bed was empty. He could hear her clattering around in the kitchen. He smiled. Rabbit food for her, but a full English breakfast for him.

He sat on the bed to put on his socks.

And failed. He couldn’t get his arms to reach down to his toes. He tried again. And again. Putting his shoes and socks on had recently become something of a chore, but he’d always managed it, till now.

This was ridiculous. He hadn’t put on that much weight, had he?

Dora put her head round the door to see what was keeping him. She started to laugh.

Leo didn’t think it was that funny. He said, ‘Help me get them on!’

‘It would serve you right if I refused to do so.’ She pulled up a chair, and put his socks on. Then sat back and looked him over.

She said, ‘The next thing you’ll be having is a heart attack, and I’ve never looked good in black. How many people are allowed to attend a funeral nowadays? Seven or eight? That will be our son and daughter-in-law, plus the two girls. And me. Who else do you think I should invite? Bruce and Sally, don’t you think?’

Leo struggled to fasten the buttons on his shirt. ‘It’s not funny!’

‘If I don’t laugh, I’ll cry. You should get off your backside and see what you can do for our neighbours for a change. We’ve both had our second jab so you can get out and about again now. What about mending that dripping tap for our friend upstairs for a start?’

Leo didn’t know if he were angrier with Dora for laughing, or himself for not facing up the fact that he’d become a lazy slob. So, he had a choice; to sit in a chair, eat what he liked and die early; or get moving, eat rabbit food and go on living.

Dora had been a dear, good wife to him through bad times and good. She accepted him just as he was, faults and all. He didn’t deserve her. He said, ‘All right, all right. I give in. Now, can you help me on with my shoes, too?’

He remembered all the years when he’d refused to diet, and made fun of people who did. Would Bruce laugh when he heard Leo had agreed to go on a diet? No, probably not. He was a kindly man. But he might remark that God worked in mysterious ways, getting Leo to fast during Lent even when he didn’t want to do so. Bruce might even say that God has a sense of humour.

Leo said, ‘If I knock off some weight in Lent, do you think I might have a full English breakfast on Easter morning?’

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Bruce finished his neighbour’s tax return only to be landed with the mess someone else had made of their book-keeping.

Sally left Bruce struggling with his new task and made her way slowly out into the garden. The camellia was in full, deep pink, blowsy bloom. How fortunate she was to see such a splendour in their garden. She paused, leaning on her stick, to praise God.

She’d found she was praising the Lord often nowadays. The despair of the early days of her convalescence had left her. She was weak still, yes. But the more she found to praise, the less her weakness troubled her.

She decided to pick some sprays of forsythia to take indoors. The yellow flowers of spring were a promise of the riches to come. She reached for the bush and nearly fell over.

Recovering, she tried to laugh at herself and failed. If she’d actually fallen, she’d probably have ended up in hospital and then . . . no, it didn’t bear thinking about. She inched her way into the greenhouse and onto her stool. She was breathing hard. She wouldn’t tell Bruce she’d nearly fallen. He had enough to worry about as it was.

She closed her eyes. Told herself to praise God. At first she couldn’t. And then she could. *‘Where I am weak, I rest in your strength. In sickness and in health. Whatever you have planned for me, I accept.’*

Her breathing slowed and she opened her eyes.

She saw that Bruce had filled some seed trays with compost for her, ready for her to sow her seeds. He’d even found some labels for her. What a good man he was!

She picked up the first packet and tore it open, smiling. If all went well, she’d have enough tomato plants to give away, over and above those she’d keep for their own use.

She found herself first humming, and then singing the words of an old hymn. Her singing voice was croaky from disuse, but she didn’t think God would mind.

‘All people that on earth do dwell,

Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice . . .’

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Dora dragged herself home from the supermarket and decided to rest a while before she put things away.

Leo had been on Zoom while she was out, and had left his laptop just where she needed to dump her shopping. He’d put a note for her by the kettle. He’d gone to fix a sticking door for a neighbour. That was good, wasn’t it? He was getting out and about much more lately, and yes, he was looking all the trimmer for it.

She wished she didn’t feel so tired. Well, Easter was only a week away now and after that . . . well, nothing was going to change was it? The daily drudgery of cooking and cleaning went on.

In the bible, Jesus had worked miracles and been cruelly done to death and had risen again, Alleluia and all that. But how did that relate to real life?

Almost, she managed a laugh, thinking that she was a real Martha nowadays, more worried about dust than devotion.

She sat down for a minute and closed her eyes. She seemed to hear someone talking . . . on the phone? Perhaps. Someone was saying, *‘If God is your Father, then why haven’t you been in touch lately? However busy you are, make time to call home.’*

That made her smile.

Well, why not sit and pray for a bit? There was just enough time before lunch.

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Easter Day.

Three of the four watched the service from their churches on Zoom. For Leo, the message was clear; Christ had risen, and we should love our neighbour as we love ourselves. Leo thought so many people needed a helping hand and, now he’d shed a few pounds, he was better able to do it. That’s what he was; a helping hand. Glory, Alleluia.

Dora watched with Leo. Now the lunch was cooking in the oven, she sat down to rest for a while. The message she’d received from the service was that she should spend more time rejoicing that Christ had risen, Alleluia. She was getting closer to Him nowadays, because she was getting in touch more often. The strange thing was that however much time she spent with Him, the work still got done.

She’d looked up the Martha and Mary story. It amused her to think she was becoming more like Mary, who listened to what He said, and less like Martha, who worried about the washing up.

Sally woke early and, before Bruce was up, she listened to a service on her portable radio. The hymns were golden oldies. Now, sitting on her stool in the greenhouse, she sang away as she pricked out the tomato seedlings, firming them into individual small pots. Yesterday she’d gone for a short walk with Bruce. Today she hoped to do the same thing again.

*Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, Let the earth hear his voice.*

Bruce put his never-ending paperwork aside to zoom in on the service from church. He rejoiced that Sally was finally getting better. God was good. He looked out of the window to check that she was all right.

He saw she was singing to herself, and wondered what hymn she’d chosen. His own favourite was:

*I know that my Redeemer lives,*

*What joy the blessed assurance gives!*

The sun went behind a cloud, but he knew it was still there even though he couldn’t see it, and that it would return.

ZOOMING IN . . . Connecting to God.

Bruce, the semi-retired accountant had just finished a business call on zoom, when his old friend Leo rang in a state.

‘You got a minute, Bruce? I need to let off steam. My lovely wife, Dora is nagging me night and day to go on a diet. All right, I admit I could do with losing a few pounds but it’s not my fault. Covid has taken all the fun out of life. I’ve nowhere to go, nothing to do so of course I’ve put on weight. Oh. Sorry, I should have asked first; ‘How’s Sally?’

Bruce’s loving wife, Sally, had Long Covid and wasn’t picking up as well as she might. He said, ‘She’s all right. And Dora only nags because she’s worried about you.’

‘I know, I know. I just wish she’d give it a break. She’s built her life around doing things for other people. Someone’s got a birthday coming up? She’ll bake them a cake. Someone’s poorly and can’t face cooking supper? She’ll be round with a casserole. She doesn’t *listen* to me when I tell her she should slow down.’

Bruce mused, ‘Listening is a discipline in itself. How often do we really listen to what other people say? I suppose we ought to make more time to listen to God, too. But do we? I don’t think we do.’

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Leo’s wife Dora didn’t like Zoom. As far as she was concerned, it was fiddly to operate and you had to tidy yourself up before you switched on. Likely as not, the screen would freeze just as you got started, or you could only see the top of people’s heads. It wasted time, and time was what she hadn’t got. What’s more, the only good connection in their flat for phone or zoom was in the kitchen so when Leo was making a call, she couldn’t get on with her jobs.

Top of her ever-lengthening list of Things to Do was the shepherd’s pie for their son’s family’s supper. He was working from home, trying to keep the business afloat. His wife volunteered at a Food bank and wouldn’t be home in time to cook the family a good meal.

As for her granddaughters! If they weren’t doing schoolwork, they’d be on their smartphones or out with their friends in the park, which they ought not to be, but who was going to stop them, and they not wearing face masks and not bothering about social distancing. There were so many things to worry about, Dora didn’t know how she could manage to carry on, she really didn’t, what with Leo refusing to diet and all.

She was not going to cry. She told herself that the long winter and poor summer had taken its toll of even the strongest of people. She sank back in her big chair and rested . . . just till Leo had finished his phone call. She closed her eyes and let her mind empty . . .

Half asleep, she heard the word ‘listen’ repeated several times. And then she thought she heard a voice saying, ‘*Martha*, *Martha*! *Be still and know that I am God.’*

She jerked awake. What nonsense! Her name wasn’t Martha, and she hadn’t time to be still and listen. Leo had finished his call, which meant she could get on with the next thing on her list. Now, what was it?

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Bruce asked his wife Sally if she fancied going for a walk. The sun was shining for a change and it would be good to get out and about.

Sally excused herself, as usual. ‘Not this morning. I thought I might order some bulbs for next spring.’

She used her stick to help her get out to the greenhouse. Once there, she sat on a stool and allowed herself a tear or two. But not many. Bruce would notice if she wept.

The bulb catalogue remained unopened.

She prayed, ‘Dear Lord, I’m struggling to be grateful for my life. I feel so helpless, such a burden on others. I’ve asked you time and again for healing, but . . .’

She stopped herself from complaining to Him. She had to believe He knew what was best for her. He had his own agenda, and hers was unimportant.

Reaching out to Jesus did help. She closed her eyes and thought about what He’d sacrificed for love of us. If he could lay down his life for her, then surely she should be able to rest in that love, whatever happened to her? For Sally, talking to God was like picking up a phone and talking to a friend.

The sun broke through the clouds overhead and she relaxed, feeling the warmth. She smiled, thinking that there was still something she could do, and that was to praise Him for His goodness and His love, for the sun and the moon and the stars above; for the kindness of strangers, and for the love of her own dear husband. She would even pray for the neighbour Bruce was helping, the one whose tax affairs were in such a mess.

Sally looked at the bulb catalogue. Here was a promise that things would get better. Perhaps she’d feel strong enough to order the bulbs tomorrow.

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Bruce pushed the paperwork away and rubbed his eyes. He was tired of clearing up other people’s messes. He was tired, full stop. What he would give to be out on the seashore with the tide going out and a mile of empty sand to walk on, and a breeze blowing away the dark thoughts that crowded in on him at times!

The room was silent around him. There wasn’t much traffic outside in their quiet road. The second hand of his watch slid round. He stretched out his legs under the table.

*Dear Lord God, Leo has reminded me I ought to listen to you more. Sometimes I forget you are steering me through life. What is it you want me to do next?*

He made himself be quiet, and listen.

Then he sighed, and picked up the paperwork again. He thought that he was destined to have an unremarkable lifetime of service, day after day, week after week, with no let up. Well, if this was what he was supposed to be doing, he’d better get on with it.

Because, if he didn’t sort out this tax mess, his neighbour was going to suffer.

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Big Leo woke up to find Dora’s bed was empty. He could hear her clattering around in the kitchen. Ah-ha! Rabbit food for her, but a full English breakfast for him.

He sat on the bed to put on his socks. And failed. He couldn’t get his arms to reach down to his toes. He tried again. Putting his shoes and socks on had recently become something of a chore, but he’d always managed it till now.

This was ridiculous. He hadn’t put on that much weight, had he?

Dora put her head round the door to see what was keeping him, and started to laugh.

Leo said, ‘Don’t just stand there. Help me!’

She said, ‘The next thing you’ll be having is a heart attack, and I’ve never looked good in black. You should get off your backside and see what you can do for our neighbours for a change. What about mending that dripping tap for our friend upstairs for a start?’

Leo didn’t know if he were angrier with Dora for laughing, or himself for not facing up the fact that he’d become a lazy slob. He said, ‘All right. I give in. I’ll go on a diet.’ Then he said, ‘If I knock off some weight do you think I might have a full English breakfast once a month?’

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Bruce finished his neighbour’s tax return only to be landed with the mess someone else had made of their book-keeping.

Sally made her way slowly out into the garden. The roses were in their second flush of colour; deep pink, blowsy blooms. She paused, leaning on her stick, to praise God.

She found she was praising the Lord often nowadays. The despair of the early days of her convalescence had left her. She was weak still, yes. But the more she found to praise, the less her weakness troubled her.

*Where I am weak, I rest in your strength. In sickness and in health. Whatever you have planned for me, I accept.*

She saw that Bruce had placed a biro beside the catalogue, so that she could mark up what bulbs she wanted. What a good man he was!

She found herself first humming, and then singing the words of an old hymn. Her singing voice was croaky from disuse, but she didn’t think God would mind.

‘All people that on earth do dwell,

Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice . . .’

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Dora dragged herself home from the supermarket and decided to rest a while before she put things away.

Leo had been on Zoom while she was out, and had left his laptop just where she needed to dump her shopping. He’d left a note for her by the kettle to say he was out dealing with a sticking door for a neighbour. He was getting out and about much more lately, and yes, he was looking all the trimmer for it.

She wished she didn’t feel so tired. Whatever else happened, the daily drudgery of cooking and cleaning went on.

She sat down for a minute and closed her eyes. She seemed to hear someone talking . . . on the phone? Perhaps. Someone was saying, *‘If God is your Father, then why haven’t you been in touch lately? However busy you are, make time to call home.’*

The fancy struck her that it was her own personal zoom call to God. That made her smile. Well, why not sit and pray for a bit? There was just enough time before lunch.

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On Sunday Leo abandoned Zoom while he and Dora went to church. For Leo, the message was clear; Christ had said we should love our neighbour as we love ourselves. He knew so many people who needed a helping hand and, now he’d shed a few pounds, he was better able to do it. That’s what he was; a helping hand. Glory, Alleluia.

Dora reminded herself that the joint was cooking in the oven and if the sermon was boring, she could take time off to have her own private zoom meeting with God. The strange thing was that however much time she spent with Him, the work still got done.

Sally woke early and, before Bruce was up, listened to a service on her portable radio. Yesterday she’d gone for a short walk with Bruce. Today she hoped to do the same thing again. Now, sitting on her stool in the greenhouse, she filled out her order for spring bulbs and sang, *Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, Let the earth hear his voice.*

Bruce planned to zoom in on the service at church later but before he did so, he checked that she was all right, out in the greenhouse. Which she was. Praise be.

He thought how good it was that we could keep in touch with God in so many ways, through zoom, by attending services, through the insights passed on by friends and – best of all – by direct line to God. In good times and in bad.

The sun went behind a cloud, but he knew it was still out there even though he couldn’t see it for the time being. He knew that it would return.