**Sermon: 27th February 2022 Sunday before Lent**

**by The Rev’d Colin Hurford**

Exodus 35.29-35

Luke 9.28-36

This is a very personal sermon which may only help two or three of you but it seemed right, just before Lent begins, to think about these issues.  It was triggered off by a phrase from the Gospel reading, a phrase about which I have preached many times, “This is my son, my chosen. Listen to him.”   And I have spoken about listening to Jesus - first by taking to heart his words recorded in the Gospels especially listening to the lessons read out in our services and second listening to the promptings he puts into our minds particularly during times of payer but also sometimes quite out of the blue.  But what if He does not seem to speak to us at all - times when we desperately try to find a way forward and we hear nothing.

What do we do when we pray hard for something, yet Jesus seems to be distant perhaps even not there? Perhaps we start to doubt - is Jesus, is God, really there?  Is my belief all in vain?  Are the words we so often sing or say just empty words?  Last week we sang the very well known hymn

“Be still for the presence of the Lord the holy one is here” with the last verse “Be still for the power of the Lord is moving in this place - no work too hard for him .. “Is it really true?  Or another favourite hymn “Seek ye first the kingdom of God” with the words “Ask and ye shall receive, Seek and ye shall find ..”  We ask and we don’t receive, we seek and we do not find. Or perhaps a more traditional hymn “Love divine all loves excelling”. Does God really love us when we go through these extremely dark times?  I was watching a morning programme on the TV and there was a lady who was very disabled speaking - I wish I had got her name.  She is a baroness and has been campaigning for the disabled for many years.  And one of the things she said were words to this effect - “At one time I nearly lost my faith in God.”

Sadly, I haven’t an answer to those in that kind of situation but I can, perhaps, give a few pointers.  The first is that without God, there is no purpose at all in life.  Without God, any dark time, any suffering is completely in vain.  It is God who gives purpose to life and to the hard times.  It is God who has shown us that we are destined to eternal life.  God will make some sense of it all even if we cannot see it.  So stick to belief in God.

The second is that, and I am speaking to Christians now, we took the decision to believe in God and to follow Jesus.  Let us all hold fast to that decision come what may.  It is a bit like marriage vows where we promise in front of witnesses “for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health.”  So stick to the promise we have made.

Thirdly, there is a mysterious reference in the letter of St. Paul to the Colossians where he talks about “fulfilling the sufferings of Christ”.  It is a perplexing passage but to put it very simply, in some way we can put our suffering into the hands of Jesus and he will use it to help fulfil his purposes.  How, we don’t know, but I am sure that it is true.

And finally, and this may not be true for every Christian who suffers but certainly is true for me.  When the Jews suffered - and they suffered many times when they were defeated in battle and their country was over-run - they complained bitterly to God.  The first part of psalm 77 (easy to remember, 7 days in the week, psalm 77) is really telling God off.  “Has God forgotten to be gracious?”. “Has his steadfast love ceased for ever?”  But always the Jews remembered what God had done for them in the past, “I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; I will remember your wonders of old.”  This held them firm to faith in God come what may.  In the same way, if we have experienced God’s love in the past, then we can be sure He is still with us and will make something good out of the situation.

Sadly some people may not have experienced anything like this - I remember speaking with a really lovely person, a very faithful Christian who had gone through great sorrow, and she said “You know, I have never had any experience of God.”  I am sure she will be on the front row, as it were, in the kingdom.  But I am very fortunate in that I have had very clear experiences of God answering prayers - once after a period of depression which lasted for some years.  And I also have had experience of God speaking to me.  During a prayer time God put into my mind a certain course of action.  I wasn’t too pleased about it but when I eventually acted a very difficult situation changed completely in a very positive way.  If we have had such experiences, then we can be sure that God is still with us and is working in our lives even though our experience tries to tell us he is not.

At the end of this service, we shall sing the hymn, “Colours of Day”.  The last lines seem very appropriate - “the sun disappears .. but Jesus is with us”.  In times of darkness, Jesus is still with us even though we may not be aware of it.

Amen.

Revd Colin Hurford