Sermon for Trinity 1 at Annscroft and on Zoom

Sunday 6th June 2021 by Rev’d Emma Phillips

Mark 3:20-35 and 2 Corinthians 4:13 – 5:1

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our  hearts be pleasing in your sight,

O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen

Paul writes to the Corinthians: ‘So we do not lose heart’. Today God says that to us! But to start off with, I hope you have plenty to praise God for – starting with the glorious sunshine we have had, over a half term holiday week, no less! Many of us have enjoyed meeting up with family and friends we have not seen for ages, even giving and receiving our first hugs, how wonderful! We have been able to shop, travel and eat out, depending on how confident we have been feeling. We have undoubtedly been blessed – but that does not take away the weary flat feeling that many of us are experiencing just now. Our optimism has taken a serious knock, and it’s not bouncing back just yet. We may look at the government’s plans for completely reopening society with some scepticism, in the light of new increases in infection rates, even if they don’t go alongside increased hospital admission. Any holiday plans feel very uncertain, what with Portugal coming off the green list at such short notice. Life is improving but...

Oh, we are only too aware that Covid has not gone away! As we sit in church with masks on, unable to sing, or join in remotely by Zoom or just read sermons via email, we are still very restricted. It is easy to feel that our lives are being controlled by forces we can have no influence on. The horizon for many of us is still very short term, planning very limited. Many of us are weary and struggling to look forward too far. Everyday life is still hard work, with restrictions to contend with, and fun things still cancelled or in very different forms from normal. In the context of all this, Paul’s words ‘we do not lose heart’ are particularly relevant.

Paul was writing to the people of the church in Corinth in response to their queries about his leadership. They wondered how he could be doing God’s work if so many things went wrong in his life. If God was on his side, surely he should be gloriously successful? We may have faced the same questions. We may well have wondered ourselves whether we are doing something wrong if God has failed to protect us from the pain and suffering of life. Are we not being good enough Christians? If we are sick or in trouble, does that mean there is something wrong with our faith?

Paul counters these very important questions with a radical shift in perspective. He tells his congregation in Corinth that the trials of his life serve to strengthen his ministry. Out of his weakness comes their growth. From his suffering, more people come to know Christ. It is the way we live when bad things come our way that is distinctive and a witness to others, not some sort of red carpet that guarantees us a pain free route through life! And in this perspective, Paul says, our troubles are just trifles compared to the glory that is to come.

Now it is very easy to read what Paul says as a direction to concentrate solely on the spiritual. When he tells us in Verse 1 of Chapter 5 that we should look forward to our eternal heavenly home, we can assume that his focus is on earning a reward in heaven by putting up with whatever suffering we go though now. We can read his words as implying that this world is just a transitory illusion that we will shrug off when we die and go onto the spiritual realities of heaven. But this would be to make Paul a Stoic, adopting beliefs that were common in the Greek world around him! We know that’s not what he thought! The Stoics taught that our physical experiences are just a distraction - we should be working towards an attitude of complete indifference. When this state of detachment was reached, the body could be shed like a shell. Paul comes from the Jewish belief that the physical world is good, and included in God’s plan of renewal. He insists that faith and hope draw us on, transforming us and inviting us to live as the body of Christ. There is no indifference to the world around us in Paul’s teaching!

Here, he is contrasting the temporary with the eternal – not the physical with the spiritual, nor the pure with the sinful. He says that now we have two aspects – the external, which is bumped around everyday by our circumstances, and the internal, which is our reborn selves, living in Christ. One way to think of it is to consider your inner self as built on the rock of faith, steady even in a crisis. You might still get upset or angry or tired, but somewhere inside you find strength from God to carry on. This is the invisible part that Paul is talking about, the eternal part. It is endlessly renewed, not by our own effort, but by our faith in Jesus.

Now the afflictions that we are going through might not seem slight and momentary right now, but viewed as external circumstances rather than central to our identity in Christ, they change proportions. When something hard hits us, it does not change the reality that we are precious children of God. We do not need to be knocked sideways by failure or regret – we are still held in the palm of God’s hand, even if we become aware that we have seriously messed up and hurt others. God’s forgiveness makes us new and enables us to start again. In grief or in pain, God’s love is still there for us, giving us strength beyond our own resources. These are the unseen things that sustain us, in the face of visible but temporary setbacks.

Paul is not really discussing the fate of our bodies after death in this teaching – verse 1 of Chapter 5 is a continuation of the thinking we have been exploring, not the beginning of a new idea. He is telling us that not even death can threaten our relationship with God. We can be confident that when we die, when our earthly bodies are dismantled like tents we no longer need, that we will continue to dwell in the heavenly reality that we already possess now. Paul is not suggesting that our souls are going to be wafted up into the clouds, but reminding us that our inner identity in Christ is permanent. Nothing need worry us – not even death!

I am sure that even Paul got down when things were hard. He certainly got angry and frustrated; we can read that in his letters. None of us are immune to the battering that life has given us recently. But we are different from those who do not know Jesus! As Paul said in the passage just before the one we have today, ‘we have this treasure in jars of clay, so that it may be clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us’ (4:7) We do not need to go on courses to learn coping strategies, or read self help books – we have the  Holy Spirit dwelling within us! So do not lose heart – put your trust in God day by day, and glimpse the eternal weight of glory beyond all measure! Amen