

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 4th July 2021
The Fifth Sunday after Trinity

Collect

Almighty God,
send down upon your Church
the riches of your Spirit,
and kindle in all who minister the gospel
your countless gifts of grace;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows— was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

Mark 6:1-13

[Jesus] left that place and came to his home town, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, ‘Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?’ And they took offence at him. Then Jesus said to them, ‘Prophets are not without honour, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house.’ And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, ‘Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.’ So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

Sermon

I wonder when you last filled out a job application form. Do you remember that, in the course of listing the jobs that you have held in the past, there is always a box entitled “reason for leaving”. I was reminded of this in the course of a conversation with a friend. She is a musician and holds a range of part time positions at any given time, and mentioned to me that there is one particular role that she never puts on her CV because she doesn’t know what to write in that “reason for leaving” box. She never enjoyed the role and that is why she’s leaving.

As we chatted, I was reminded of my own experiences of filling out such forms. Unlike her, I was not able to simply leave a role out because I would have been asked to explain the resultant gap in my work record. But I did become adept at giving plausible reasons about the positive nature of my decisions to move from one job to another. Usually this was not difficult – in my own mind I always had a sense of positive progression, and only applied for jobs that excited me. Yet it is also fair to say that our motivations are not always positive. Perhaps we are frustrated with a lack of opportunities to progress; feel unappreciated; or the role simply isn’t what we expected. Yet we all know, too, that we might be hampering our chances of getting a job if we put as the “reason for leaving” a previous one that we thought our boss was an idiot – or something equivalent.

While each one of us will have a personal sense of whether we are a “glass half full” or “glass half empty” person, there is something about our culture that is dominated by a relentless positivity. We are, of course, quite right to want to celebrate success. It tends to be true that we are motivated more by being encouraged and supported than by being criticised.

And yet our lives are not relentlessly positive. Whichever way we look at things, there is tragedy and sadness alongside joy and delight in each of our lives. The balance may be different, and we will all experience hardship differently, but none of us is untouched by the darker side of life.

One of the things that I appreciate about this morning’s readings is that they remind us of the more challenging side of life. They remind us – as if we needed it – that faith is no guarantee against hardship and pain. For the most part we don’t choose to dwell on these aspects of life – it is hard enough that there are times when we have to live them. I wonder, though, if it is worth taking just a little time to explore what the scriptures have to offer when times are tough.

Our first reading is taken from St. Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians. There has been fierce debate about exactly what Paul was talking about when he described the thorn in his flesh. Yet what is not in doubt is his willingness to face the hardships in his life. Throughout the Acts of the Apostles, alongside extraordinary stories of proclaiming the gospel and bringing people to faith, we see that the early church faced persecution and imprisonment – and Paul himself was arrested, held captive and imprisoned. More than that, though, as we read St. Paul’s letters there is a real sense of the anguish that he experienced personally as he tried to encourage the early Christian communities to follow Christ rather than straying from the path of faith.

While we know about Paul’s dramatic conversion, we can really only guess at the personal challenges he faced as a follower of Christ – the times that he felt inadequate to the task. His determined conviction that our salvation is based on God’s grace alone is testimony to his understanding of human weakness – which he is at pains to point out in this morning’s reading. And listen to the final verses of the reading: “So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that

the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” Paul was convinced that it is in our weakness that the strength of God becomes the clearest. It is earlier in this same letter that he speaks of us as clay jars – and as others have gone on to suggest, it is through our cracks that the light of God can shine. And I wonder whether you can recognise this, too. That while we may all prefer to write something positive as a “reason for leaving” any given role, and to describe ourselves as constantly progressing, actually where you have had to face something challenging and painful, somehow you have come to know God’s love and grace more deeply. I am not trying to suggest that God sends pain in order to draw us closer. It is more that, given pain is a part of our life experience, there can be times when we grow in faith as a result of such trials. When our own strength is weakened, we realise that God’s continues to hold us.

The gospel reading opens up other aspects of life’s challenges. First we hear about Jesus himself discovering that, even though all of the evidence pointed to his connection with God, as he healed people, cast out demons, and taught about God’s love, nevertheless he faced rejection, not just anywhere, but in his own home town. If you ever feel discouraged because friends or family can’t understand your faith, it’s helpful to remember that it is a path that Jesus himself walked. He faced not only misunderstanding but rejection, which is surely a reminder that discipleship is not easy. We need to remember the good news that we proclaim, because faith is no guarantee of an easy life.

The second part of the gospel reading continues that theme. Jesus himself faced rejection, yet he still sent his disciples out to proclaim the good news. He still believed that the message of God’s love and healing for all mankind was too important to keep to himself. He knew that he was putting the disciples in harm’s way – not because he wanted to, but because life has its hardships as well as its joys. Yet he was not deterred from sending them. More than that, though, the manner of their sending meant that they would be reminded constantly of their need for – their reliance on – God. They were not to take creature comforts, but rather to go just as they were.

I wonder whether it is in the response that Jesus suggested to his disciples when they face rejection that we might begin to understand something about the transformative power of faith. As Jesus commissions his disciples, he refuses to pretend that they will have an easy time – he knows that they will not. Yet he knows, too, that God’s love for them will continue, no matter what they face. His advice is simple, yet clear. If they are accepted, stay. If they are rejected, go. I wonder whether that is actually quite a good way to look at life. To focus our attention on the signs of God’s presence and God’s love, rather than allowing ourselves to be dispirited by the signs of God and God’s love being rejected.

And, paradoxically, I wonder whether it is when we experience life’s challenges that we are sometimes best able to see those signs of God’s presence and love. In the kind words that sustain us; in the warm gestures that prevent us from going under; in the recognition that there is so much more to life than our own success.

This week’s readings encourage us to embrace life as it really is. With its pain and anguish as well as its joy and happiness. To dare to see beneath the façade, and recognise that by letting Christ into our lives there is a transformation that reaches deep into our souls.

Amen