

LENT 2 FAITH & WORKS 8th March 2020

The sabbatical I've just had is the first in over 25 years of ministry. Sabbaticals weren't part of church life in Ireland; they were very much the exception rather than the rule. And I have to say it was both restful and a breath of fresh air to step back a bit, to reflect and do a kind of mental and spiritual spring-clean, without the pressure of constant demands so to think about what's really important.

I have resisted spending the morning showing you photos though maybe that would have been your choice! While we were away we went to church! Ted sweet talked his way into a closed cathedral in Auckland. It was a Monday. It turned out the gentleman who let us in was the organist, he had trained in Liverpool cathedral and knew David Holroyd!

We sat through a 45 minute sermon in Sydney Cathedral. And I thought isn't that a new idea I could bring back!!

The sermon was telling us that we – not the 2 of us personally! - that we all were so bad that God needs to discipline us. The picture of God that we were presented with was of the parent disciplining a child saying, 'This hurts me more than it hurts you!' The preacher was none other than the Dean. It was also the first time I have had a major urge to stop a preacher and ask for clarification about their view of God.

The following Sunday we were in Singapore Cathedral where the message was about God's presence with us in the troubles of life – a presence of comfort, support, strength and guidance, God as infinite love. A God who says when we are struggling that 'This hurts me because it hurts you.'

Two views of God. Two very different understandings of our Christian faith. One, an emphasis on sin pulling us down and we getting what we deserve. The other, an emphasis on God's grace lifting us up and setting us free.

The same tension between these two views are reflected in today's epistle. But Paul is clear which one is right and which one is wrong. He urges his readers – and us – to accept that the Christian faith is based on grace and not on law. He says that we will never be able to draw close to God by our own efforts, by being good and keeping all the laws and commandments of the Bible, for as humans we are inherently weak.

He takes the example of Abraham. He says God's promise to Abraham was not made because Abraham had meticulously performed all the demands of the law. Rather, it was given to Abraham because he trusted in God, was open to God and offered himself to be used in God's service.

Paul calls that attitude "faith". Later he describes God's attitude to us as "grace" – which means something unmerited and undeserved.

As one great Bible teacher once wrote, "The supreme discovery of the Christian life is that we do not need to torture ourselves with a losing battle to earn God's love – all we need to do is to accept the love that God offers." (Wm Barclay).

Martyn Percy, the Dean of Christ Church Oxford, said at the Festival of Preaching last September that even the church hasn't really coped with the concept of the over-abundance of God's love, or the fact that God has one weakness – his heart is too soft.

Still in many people's minds, the church's teaching is all about sin and hell.

Much of our forms of service come from a time when there was a great emphasis on sin and damnation. Think of the gloom and terror of Michelangelo's Last Judgement as saints ascend to eternal glory and sinners descend to eternal punishment. And our unconscious response is 'I'd better try harder and be good or the same might happen to me.'

If we are in a place of great vulnerability those words in scripture of being a sinner can jump out rather than the many words of about God's love and forgiveness.

I'm often conscious of the sin-laden nature of much of our liturgy and hymns which makes us into guilty law-breakers rather than those who rejoice in the freedom of God's love and leave church with a spring in their step and in anticipation and excitement of living for God.

Yes, as humans we are all imperfect and we live in a world that is imperfect. But the message of Jesus was, and is, in spite of this God loves us and accepts us. He forgives us and sets us free and assures us that we are his children.

It has been said that God loves us – sometimes with a love that makes him sad, and sometimes with a love that makes him glad. But in either case with a love that will not let us go.

The message of Jesus and the New Testament is that we find our hope not in what we try to do but in what God has done and offered to us.

In today's Gospel, Jesus calls it being 'born again'. Now that is a term that has been abused over the years. Where I grew up on a Saturday in town what we called 'bible bashers' would stand with a megaphone calling us to repent and be born again. It has been used as a term of reference for whether you or in or out of some exclusive religious club. You had to make the right decision and if not you were doomed.

Judaism taught that to earn God's love and favour you had to keep the law. Jesus introduced a new approach of God's grace and love freely given.

The central teaching of today's Epistle and Gospel is that our relationship with God depends not on how good we might be but on accepting God's love.

And that Good News is hard for many to accept.

We know so well the words of John 3:16 – they are sometimes seen at large gatherings like football matches (it is safe to talk about football again!) but have we taken them to heart – that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."

And there is more, in the next verse, "Indeed, God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him".

Does that mean that what we do has no consequence? Was St. Augustine right when he said, "Love God and do what you like!" No and Yes, in the sense that knowing we are loved by God we will then live our lives in response to that love. Because God loves us and we love him in return, our lives are shaped not by self-indulgence but in doing what pleases God.

We need to live in such a way that reflects the love of God for all. That's what Jesus means by being born again and what is meant by being justified by faith.

The Sydney sermon sent us out as miserable sinners deserving to be punished. The Singapore sermon sent us out as happy children of a loving God, ready to celebrate in Raffles Hotel.

But which of the two do you think more closely reflects today's readings?

A sabbatical helps you to see the wood from the trees! But you might be glad that unlike Sydney Cathedral you are not getting another 35 minutes of a sermon this morning!