

Dorset South & West Circuit - Written Service for Sunday 6 June 2021 – ‘Do not lose heart’ - by Revd David Cuckson

Opening Sentences

‘Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning.’ (*Psalm 130:1-2, 5-6*)

Come in weakness; find strength.

Come in sickness; find health.

Come in chains; find freedom.

Come in confusion; find peace.

Come in sorrow; find joy.

Come in doubt; find faith.

Come in despair; find courage.

Come unready, Come alone; Find Christ.

HYMN Singing the Faith 625 (Jan Berry)

1. Deep in the darkness a starlight is gleaming,
Calling us out from the safety of home.
God of the questions, the mystery of dreaming,
lighten our journey into the unknown.

2. Out of the darkness the voices are crying,
terror and fear screaming loud in the night.
God of the hurting, of innocence dying,
fire us with anger to struggle for right.

3. Still in the darkness we search for your
healing,
hoping for meaning to comfort our fear.
God of the silence, of unspoken feeling,
teach us the wisdom to make your truth clear.

4. On through the darkness we follow your
leading,
searching for joy and a refuge to stay.
God of our longing, the bliss we are seeking,
journey with us to the brightness of day.

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

On our own we know that we are weak and timid; but your promises, coming to us from Christ, give strength and courage.

He has named the devil, put him in his place, and exposed the final weakness of evil.

He has said, ‘Yes, there is truth; there is grace; there is goodness.’

He has made us see where we stand, and what we must do, and we are surprised at the quiet strength within, which gives us the courage that does not fail.

We give you thanks, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

And as we turn our thoughts to words of Scripture, we pray for understanding what has been done for our redemption, so that Christ may live in our hearts by faith, and be proclaimed in our lives by love. Amen.

2 Corinthians 4:13 – 5:1 (NRSVA)

‘Just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture – I believed and so I spoke – we also believe and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.’

Reflection

Paul had a very special relationship with the church at Corinth. He was responsible for founding the Christian community there before continuing his missionary journeys. But after he left there were problems, disagreements between members of the church, and Paul felt obliged to intervene. He wrote to the church as a whole, and, in fact, there were several letters going back and forth. We do not have all of the correspondence in our Bible, and what we call 2 Corinthians may well include extracts from more than one letter. What we have now are presumably the bits that folk treasured, words that could be relevant to a wider audience and which clearly came from Paul’s heart. So what we have here differs from, say, the Letter to Romans, which is more of a treatise, setting out Paul’s theology in a logical manner. This is Paul’s personal response to the situation in Corinth as he sees it and as he was told about it in the letters to him setting out their problems, their issues and their worries.

Paul emphasises that he is writing from personal conviction – ‘we ... believe and so we speak’. He sounds slightly on the defensive, justifying what he has said previously and what is contained in this letter. Perhaps he was feeling that he may not always have approached pastoral matters in the best way, or that he may have said things that provoked an over-sensitive reaction. But the key consideration for Paul is not his own feelings but rather, always, the welfare of others – in this case, the good of the church community in Corinth. And this is a model for all of us. It begins with the conviction that we too have ‘the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture’, that in our dealings with others we acknowledge them as, no less than ourselves, those for whom Christ died and with whom we can share in the love of God. And this can lead us on to value their concerns as no less important, perhaps even more important, than our own, so that we can adopt Paul’s words to the Corinthians, ‘everything is for your sake’. What a transformation of society that can achieve, truly something that is ‘to the glory of God’.

This sounds an impossible dream. But here we find Paul, facing as he was issues of dissension within the church community at Corinth, not losing heart. This confidence is rooted in his conviction that there is more to life than day to day experiences. He refers, almost disparagingly, to ‘this slight momentary affliction’. The first readers of his letter probably had a good idea of what Paul had in mind. We can only guess. Was it a physical ailment affecting him? Or was it the effect of difficulties with or within the church? Or was it the suffering of persecution from those opposed to his mission, strict Jews or followers of the state, pagan, religions? Whatever it was, it was not such as would stop him facing the future with hope and confidence.

I guess that we can all relate to this from our own experiences. This would probably be true at any time, but many things are likely to be uppermost in our minds at the present time which are linked,

or highlighted, by having to deal with the coronavirus pandemic. Life has been more limited, to a greater or lesser extent. Contact with close members of our families has had to be curtailed, possibly confined to relationships conducted over the telephone or internet. Some will have had to cope with illness in difficult circumstances, or even the loss of one or more loved ones where the normal processes of farewell and grieving have been made impossible. Even factors that in the overall scheme of things must be regarded as minor can still impact adversely on our lives – not being able to join worship in church, for example, and having to rely on recorded or written services (like this one) is a ‘second best’ option. But, with Paul, we can live through all these and can still, through our faith, find the means still to look forward, looking not just at the things that can be seen but also at the things that cannot be seen, the reality that is eternal.

This reality is difficult to describe. Paul uses the imagery of an earthly tent and a building from God. The earthly tent is that which we can see and touch, but the building from God is ‘not made with hands’, spiritual but no less real for that. This is something that can be experienced by following the way of Christ. This is the spirit of faith which enabled Paul to have ultimate confidence that he could face whatever came his way and not lose heart. Even if all else fails, in the end, in the final analysis, our earthly tent no longer matters, because through our faith in Christ we still have a building from God, we have contact with the eternal, we can experience what Paul describes as ‘glory beyond measure’.

Paul promised that ‘everything is for your sake’ – can the concerns of others really become more important to us than our own? Can we, like Paul, face the future with hope and confidence? Can we find our home within the building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens?

In our weakness we can find strength. In our sickness we can find health. In chains we can find freedom. In confusion we can find peace. In sorrow we can find joy. In doubt we can find faith. In despair we can find courage. Amen

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we need courage. Everyday crises are enough for us, and hidden fears threaten to undermine us. We find ourselves praying that certain tests should not come our way, and hope to escape many questions. We settle for a superficial routine, and pretend that the deeper issues do not exist. Yet, we are not content to live in this fool’s paradise. We pray for the courage to be ourselves in your presence, so that by your grace we may become the people you would have us be, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

And so now let us pray for those others for whom we are called to care, those who are close to us, those known to us who are in need, those in the wider world no less in need but whose names are unknown to us at the present time:-

those who are lost, who simply do not know what they believe, that they may find a sure foundation for their lives;

the anxious, who begin to despair even of life itself, that they may find meaning;

those who are brought to the test, who feel tensions which rack the mind, that they may come to take one step in obedience and trust;

the sick, who are held back from the life they would like to live, that they may find hope and perfect healing;

all people, who must live out their lives facing challenge as it comes, that they may come to experience courage in facing their troubles and may finish the course.

And let us offer all these prayers in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and for ever. Amen

HYMN Singing the Faith 679 (*Brian Wren*)

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| 1. Come build the Church – not heaps of stone
in safe, immobile, measured walls,
but friends of Jesus, Spirit-blown,
and fit to travel where he calls. | 3. Exposed upon the open ground
to screams of war in East and West,
our ears will catch a deeper sound:
the weeping of the world's oppressed. |
| 2. Come, occupy with glad dissent
where death and evil fence the ground,
and pitch a Resurrection-Tent
where peace is lived, and love is found. | 4. In wearied face, or frightened child,
in all they know, and need to say,
the living Christ shall stand revealed.
Come, let us follow and obey! |

The Blessing

As we seek to follow Christ and to serve him we do so in the confidence that the blessing of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit will be with us and those we love throughout the coming days. Amen.

[Prayers taken and adapted from 'More Contemporary Prayers' published by SCM Press Ltd]