

Maundy Thursday 2010

Meditation 1 The upper room

In our meditation tonight, we are going to join those 12 ordinary men and one extraordinary man sitting in the upper room celebrating the annual ritual Passover feast.

A customary experience for Jews but profoundly exceptional on this night. But tonight we are not concentrating on that feast, nor for the moment on the feast we will partake of later.

Rather let us put ourselves in the minds of the disciples sitting around that table, trying to share the feeling that this did not seem to be an ordinary Passover meal.

What must they have been thinking?

In many ways the Passover feast in its familiar ritual was comforting but since the last celebration of the Passover, they were aware that their lives have changed in ways they could never have imagined.

And now they must have had a feeling that there was going to be an even more dramatic change and not necessarily for the good.

They felt the threat of the powers ranged against them and they were worried.

Jesus's past words must have come to the fore in their minds.

Recorded in John 10: he said to them *"I am the good Shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. I know my sheep in my sheep know me just as the Father knows me and I know the father-and I lay down my life for the sheep."*

And then perhaps the conundrum in chapter 12 when Jesus said *"the hour has come for the son of man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, lest a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life."*

And then in Ch 14 *"do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my father's house in many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going."*

So much to understand and so much to think about as they sat around that table.

And so much to understand and to think about as we sit around this table.

Meditation 2 Unworthy – must we try harder to be good enough?

I think we can be sure that none of the disciples sitting around that table fully understood the events that were taking place. They were simple men.

They had listened to Jesus' teaching and preaching during the past months.

They perhaps had an inkling of the immediate significance of the events as they were unfolding, and that they were going to lose the familiar closeness and companionship of their master.

Within their confusion I believe we would also see signs of human anxiety in those around us at that table.

And this anxiety would not be confined to their physical safety and well-being, although that would be sorely tested in the next few hours. I believe they will be anxious about whether they were "good enough" to fulfil the role Jesus had shown them that God had for them. They would be very aware that they were ordinary simple men and I believe every one of them, like ourselves, would not consider themselves worthy of the task entrusted to them. And the natural, human reaction to a new and demanding task would be the conviction that they had to try harder, work harder, resist sin better in order that they should be of use to God.

And isn't that very thought in our minds as we come to Easter? We are not worthy of the sacrifice.

We do not work hard enough in the church or in the community. We do not resist temptation well enough. We do not share the gospel easily with those we meet.

And with those thoughts of inadequacy, we come probably to one of the most crucial doctrines that the cross of Jesus brings to us, that of justification by faith alone.

This is the idea that however good or bad we claim we are or we really are; however active or inactive we are in "good works", these matters are entirely irrelevant in relation to our final salvation.

It is our faith in the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that triggers the outpouring of God's grace that preserves our souls for eternity.

Martin Luther's story is well known. He was a passionate, impetuous, demanding, sensitive and pessimistic man who had never been able to find inner peace.

He could not overcome his sense of inadequacy and guilt despite all his good works, prayers, penances and alms.

The crucial moment in his life came when his adviser suggested that he might read the book of Romans again. In this epistle Luther discovered a bombshell - the truth is that God had forgiven him, not because of all his good works in Germany but because of Christ's work on Calvary. I think sometimes we have to remind ourselves of exactly the same fact.

Meditation 3 Justification by Faith

In The first four chapters of Romans, Paul has focused on the power of the good news of Jesus Christ to change people whose lives have no purpose other than selfish self interest; Then Paul turns in the beginning of Romans five to look at the theme of "assurance"-the certainty that our justification will lead to that extraordinary continuation of ourselves into a final salvation -that we may enter that continued and living dimension where we will finally understand fully who God is, what he has done in creation and that in his grace he will allow us to live with him forever.

Perhaps we can consider this passage under the title that Andrew Murray used-"the blessings of justification" and the "hoped-for final salvation."

And a central theme is in verse 10 which we can paraphrase:

for if, while we rejected God, ignored his rules and lived our lives as we wanted to live, he still set aside our sins by sacrificing his most precious son, how much more of his goodness will he give us when we love him and believe in him.

Let us look at this passage in a little more detail.

In verse one: Therefore since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

We learn the crucial fact that whatever we are, whatever we have done in the past, if we believe, God has given us the free gift of peace with him.

Justification is not something we do or the result of something that we do, it is something God does.

It is not something we earn, but it is a gift which God provides to all who believe in him.

But like any gift we have to recognise it as a gift and receive it.

Paid In Full

A young man was getting ready to graduate from college. For many months he had admired a beautiful sports car in a dealer's showroom, and knowing his father could well afford it, he told him that was all he wanted.

As Graduation Day approached, the young man awaited signs that his father had purchased the car. Finally, on the morning of his graduation, his father called him into his private study. His father told him how proud he was to have such a fine son, and told him how much he loved him. He handed his son a beautifully wrapped gift box.

Curious, and somewhat disappointed, the young man opened the box and found a lovely, leather-bound Bible, with the young man's name embossed in gold. Angry, he rose his voice to his father and said "with all your money, you give me a Bible?" and stormed out of the house.

Many years passed and the young man was very successful in business. He had a beautiful home and wonderful family, but realized his father was very old, and thought perhaps he should go to him. He had not seen him since that graduation day.

Before he could make arrangements, he received a telegram telling him his father had passed away, and willed all of his possessions to his son. He needed to come home immediately and take care of things.

When he arrived at his father's house, a sudden feeling of sadness and regret filled his heart. He began to search through his father's important papers and saw the still gift-wrapped Bible, just as he had left it years ago. With tears, he opened the Bible and began to turn the pages. His father had carefully underlined a verse, Matt.7:11, "And if ye, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Heavenly Father which is in Heaven, give to those who ask Him?"

As he read those words, a car key dropped from the back of the Bible. It had a tag with the dealer's name, the same dealer who had the sports car he had desired. On the tag was the date of his graduation, and the words PAID IN FULL.

How many times do we miss God's blessings because we can't see past our own desires?

What then does our justification by faith give us? It gives us peace with God.

God is not telling us that he is giving each one of us as individuals a portion of peace which surrounds us like a little cloud and insulates us from the lack of peace round about us.

No! By God's grace, we gain entrance into that peace which surrounds God, the cloud of witnesses which I spoke of last time I was here and all that good and unsullied part of his creation. Do you see the difference?

Isaiah in chapter 32 tries to describe this peace:

the fruit of righteousness will be peace; the effect of righteousness will be quietness and confidence forever. My people will live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest.

You and I need a lot more of that peace in our lives.

And in verse two we gain not only peace but "access by faith into the grace in which we now stand".

The grace is really the free kindness that envelops us. God did not have to pour out his grace on us. God could have existed like those pagan gods at the top of mountains ignoring the people round about us.

But out of his own free will and not because he had to, God acts in grace ---and the pinnacle of that grace is his intervention in our lives by the life death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In verse 3 We then move on to the difficult subject of suffering and the results of it in our lives.

I think the first thing to say is that suffering is a normal part of life and even more so part of a consistent Christian life.

Jesus promised us that "in this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33). This does not mean we should be looking to create trouble or create suffering for ourselves in the misguided belief that this suffering in itself glorifies God. But how we react can bring glory to God.

We live in a world that has failed its creator.

We believe that were we still in that state of grace that was the garden of Eden, there would never have been suffering, disease and distress.

But we don't live in that garden, we live in a world dominated by evil and failure and for that reason we should in no way expect to escape the suffering that is part of our human nature.

When we cry -- why me? We need to cry--why not me!

But accepting that suffering is part of the human experience we must realise first that it may come from the hostile acts of those who work against our faith. And we must accept that.

There are so many dramatic examples in history of those who have suffered physically and mentally at the hands of those who would attack us for our faith.

Secondly, we have to accept that God sometimes uses suffering to accomplish his purposes. This may be difficult to accept.

E.G. In the case of Job, God allowed Satan to cause him suffering to demonstrate his unfailing love for God.

However difficult it is, we have to accept that throughout scriptural history God has sometimes made use of suffering as a means of testing faith and then enabling and reinforcing commitment.

However equally, we need to get away from the idea that our suffering ill health or personal trouble is necessarily is a punishment.

There are far too many Christians who feel guilty about the troubles bought on by depression and physical or mental illness of other sorts.

The text says "let us rejoice in our sufferings"-many theologians would substitute the words "let us have peace in our sufferings" but also let us accept with confidence (v 3) that suffering produces perseverance which hones our character and that character produces hope.

This is the climax of what Paul is saying. The Greek word that Paul uses to describe trouble literally means "pressure". All sorts of things may press down on the Christian; poverty, unemployment, sorrow, persecution, unpopularity and loneliness.

Paul is saying that this pressure produces fortitude. And again the word fortitude means more than just putting up with everything. It means a positive attitude which overcomes the trials and tribulations of life. Two men could face the same challenge in very different ways: one could despair and the other can use it to stimulate them to take action.

And that fortitude produces character, again the Greek word is of the metal that passes through the refining fire to get rid of all the impurities.

And the hope that we end up with after facing challenges doesn't disappoint us.

Whenever the subject of suffering is raised and people say "How can God allow people to suffer in this way,"?

Whilst we may accept that we cannot always understand, we must turn to the ultimate suffering and sacrifice of Christ on our behalf. That suffering reached its culmination on the cross, but was also vividly present in the Garden of Gethsemane when He struggled with the enormity of the path God wanted Him to follow.

From time to time in the annals of war, we hear stories of people laying down their lives for their comrades. And this may be a conscious act such as a man throwing himself on a grenade or sometimes the bravery under fire of a soldier going to aid an injured comrade.

But these sacrifices are based on the love for a friend and comrade and on the discipline of the soldier to work for the good of those around him.

But would a soldier lay down his life for a sworn enemy?

Can you imagine a prisoner in a concentration camp dying to save the life of one of the guards that has been torturing him?

I suspect there are many fewer examples of someone laying down their life for someone who has attacked them, threatened them or made their life a misery.

But Jesus sacrificed himself for the good, the righteous but in contrast also the distasteful and worst sinner you could ever imagine.

He sacrificed himself for the soldiers who nailed him to the cross.

He sacrificed himself for the people who cried "crucify him, crucify him".

He sacrificed himself for the weak minded Pilate and the legally obsessed high priest, Caiaphas.

He sacrificed himself for the boys who killed Jamie Bulger just as much as for Mother Teresa.

There is no separation between the sheep and the goats at this stage – Jesus sacrificed himself for all humankind who have lived, who live now and who will live in the future. And he did it freely out of both obedience to His heavenly father and for love.

A Christian Prison

Near the city of Sao Jose dos Campos, Brazil, is a remarkable facility. Twenty years ago the Brazilian government turned a prison over to two Christians. The institution was renamed Humaita, and the plan was to run it on Christian principles. With the exception of two full-time staff, all the work is done by inmates. Families outside the prison adopt an inmate to work with during and after his term. Chuck Colson visited the prison and made this report:

'When I visited Humaita I found the inmates smiling- particularly the murderer who held the keys, opened the gates and let me in. Wherever I walked I saw men at peace. I saw clean living areas, people working industriously. The walls were decorated with Biblical sayings from Psalms and Proverbs...My guide escorted me to the notorious prison cell once used for torture. Today, he told me, that block houses only a single inmate. As we reached the end of a long concrete corridor and he put the key in the lock, he paused and asked, "Are you sure you want to go in?"

"Of course," I replied impatiently, "I've been in isolation cells all over the world." Slowly he swung open the massive door, and I saw the prisoner in that punishment cell: a crucifix, beautifully carved by the Humaita inmates-the prisoner Jesus, hanging on a cross.

"He's doing time for the rest of us," my guide said softly."

--Max Lucado

"While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. "And God did not do this by demanding allegiance; or by demanding sacrificial rituals or good works but by a free gift that he offers us for nothing more than faith.

So as we sit with our Lord and the disciples at this table this Thursday evening, let us put aside for a moment the thoughts we have of striving harder, doing good works, resisting sin to make ourselves worthy of the sacrifice that follows. But let us glorify God that all he asks us is faith in him and he will do the rest!

And if we accept that free gift of grace then the Holy Spirit will be there to help us do better, work harder and lead better lives. He will help us to strive harder; he will help us to follow that narrow way.

And we can do that out of love for Jesus rather than seeing it as a bargain for eternal life.

So as we partake of this simple yet profound meal, let us examine ourselves, let us realise again that whatever we do we are unworthy yet because God's invitation still stands, we come and bring our faltering faith and receive the free gifts of --- salvation from our sins ----
- and of eternal life.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord

Amen

Prayer

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked come to Thee for dress,
Helpless look to Thee for grace;
Foul I to the fountain fly,
Wash me Saviour or I die.