

Pentecost 5 2024 All Souls **PERSEVERANCE IN HARDSHIP** dtw

This sermon could be seen as 'Part 2' to the one I preached 2 Sundays ago on Personal Trial.

Today, we are given a comprehensive description by Paul to the new Christians of Corinth of his great hardship and sufferings for the Gospel. Towards the end of his lengthy list of tribulations he writes, *We are treated as impostors, and yet are true, as unknown, and yet are well known, as dying, and see-we are alive: as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich: as having nothing, and yet possessing everything (2Cor 6.8b-10)*

In his later letter to the Philippians, in prison again for the penultimate time before house arrest, he would remain on-script writing, *Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, let us press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus' (Phil 3.13b-14)*

What an amazing transformation had taken place inside this man since the years when he was a proud Pharisee hunting and persecuting Christians. Now he had become the hunted, the persecuted, and all because of Christ and the goal of the prize of the heavenly call. He goes on in his second letter to Timothy to say, 'From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing. Do you and I have that same longing in our journey of faith? No doubt many of us have experienced struggle, hardship, suffering, yet longing too, in our daily lives and in our Christian walk. We reflected about that 2 weeks ago. It is my sincere endeavour and prayer that this great longing would so invigorate the life of God's church that we, like Paul, might be transformed in mission to a hurting and waiting world. We can only do that in the strength and power of the cross of Christ, relying deeply on the Spirit, by faith with thanksgiving.

Yes, the road of faith can often be very rocky. It was par for the course for Paul. Let me share a story of a more recent disciple of faith, from the early 90's when I was rector of Applecross, Perth. I was given this framed piece of calligraphy by a man called Brian which is a quotation, again from Paul to the Philippians: *That I may know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings.* (3.10) Brian was a man of devout faith who suffered from severe depression. His faith and devotion to Christ suffering, crucified and risen was the only thing that seemed to make sense of his own experiences of life. He could truly relate to Paul's 'thorn in the flesh' which kept both Paul and Brian, believe me, 'from being too elated' (2Cor 12.7) 'When I am weak, then I am strong' Paul went on to observe. (2Cor 12.10) Such was Brian's hope as well. We laboured long in love together to keep that hope alive. This hope brings renewal and purpose to human lives, which otherwise might be overbearingly hope-less.

Right now, I find this reassuring in these times where it seems that war, terrorism, innocent suffering, and untimely death have taken centre stage in our world. I want to reclaim the focus of my faith. I want to be reminded that just one small candle in a huge dark cavern creates enough light for me to find my way. I want to remember that if the burden out there is getting harder, that the yoke of Christ is easy and his burden is light. I want to cling, all the more, to those words that Paul wrote, for Ukraine, for Gaza and Israel, for flood victims, for fire victims and for all of us. I want

to get into the boat with Jesus who, in today's Gospel, calmed not just the storm, but his overwhelmed, troubled, fearful disciples. (Mk 4)

In dark hours of innocent suffering, we need to be reminded also that the Gospel of Christian hope is about the summary execution of innocent Love and the glorious resurrection of indestructible Love. I want to contend that more acts of terror mean, for the serious Christian, more acts of love. We have a gospel to proclaim, good news for all the earth. It doesn't become less relevant; it becomes more *urgent*. Indeed, we need to love more extravagantly and desperately than ever, and let our light shine in the darkness of this broken world.

Our Church is born of a Vision and Mission of Love. The National Council of Churches in Australia compiled this definition of Mission: *Mission is the creating, reconciling and transforming action of God flowing from the Community of Love found in the Trinity, made known to all humanity in the person of Jesus and entrusted to the continuing witness of the People of God in the power of the Spirit.*

In a progressively fragmented society, Christians have something unique and all the more exciting to engage the world. Someone once offered the challenge, "If you were arrested for being a Christian, would they have enough evidence to convict you?" I'd like to think that the contagious evidence of unconditional love would be one of our convictions. Let us all 'press on' in this hope that the great mix of people we meet day by day may also come, like Paul, to seek the 'prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus'. Amen.