



Kirknewton and East Calder Parish Church of Scotland

Scottish Charity No. SC006973

Reading 2 Corinthians 5.

Sermon: 14 June 2009

Scholars generally agree that this letter was a later reply from Paul that he wrote to the believers in the harbour city of Corinth. They agree that we might not have all the letters that Paul sent to the congregation in Corinth. They also labelled this letter the “letter of tears” because Paul makes a very personal and intimate appeal on the believers to forgive the person that has caused friction. He also mentions in chapter 2 of this letter that he is writing it with “great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears”. The situation in Corinth was quite tense since there was fierce opposition to Paul’s ministry. The congregation was also divided on various matters and Paul had to make sure they understand the message of God’s reconciliation with humanity through Christ clearly.

Our reading this morning follows the chapter on the vulnerability of human beings which Paul compared to clay pots that can easily break. He said to the congregation in Corinth that although they are like clay pots that can easily break – in Christ Jesus through faith alone they can not be crushed, nor abandoned nor destroyed. The power of God surpasses all their suffering. They must not lose hope and fix their eyes on the temporal things like life itself but focus on the things that is unseen and eternal like the kingdom of God.

In chapter 5 he again uses a very descriptive and powerful metaphor to describe the true destiny of believers. He says that life is temporal. It is similar to spending some time in a tent. It is striking because he himself was a tentmaker and the people that he was living with while in Corinth, Aquila and Priscilla were also both tentmakers. He says everyone knows that a tent is only temporal like life itself. Everyone has at least a permanent building somewhere to go to. In this case he means the heavenly dwelling with God. He emphasizes that there is life after death.

It is a powerful metaphor because it describes exactly how we sometimes feel on earth. It is like spending time in a tent. In “dreech”¹ weather it is not fun and games in a tent. When it is extremely hot it is also not the ideal place to be in. But we manage because most of the times it is temporal. If it is cold and wet you just have an extra layer of clothes and a raincoat. We manage because we know there is permanent home somewhere after the ordeal. There is a place awaiting us with central heating and double glazed windows with an electric kettle close at hand to make coffee or tea.

Paul says it is exactly how life is. It is not always easy. Sometimes it can be pretty bad and miserable. Sometimes it can make people lose hope. But as people of faith we should know life is only temporal. God prepared a new life for us in Jesus Christ.

¹ It is a Scottish expression to describe wet, windy, cold weather conditions.

Jesus Christ broke down all the barriers that existed between God and us. He even overpowered death. Everyone that believes in him already received the promise of God's everlasting kingdom in heaven. Paul says although it is a very scary thought that this temporal life will end – there is a beginning and God who made this possible will himself help us to cross over through His Holy Spirit. But believers must have only one goal and that is to please God with a life that is full of his love, hope and faith. Everyone that believes in the redemption of Christ received a new life full of hope. God already reconciled Himself with the believers through the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. Everyone that has faith is the ambassadors of God's mercy, reconciliation, and hope in the world. People of faith should represent the new life in Christ in everything they do and say.

This text is really a very good way to describe how scared we sometimes are of death but it also provides us with a sense of trust and rest that God will be there when life ends for us. I think death is a scary thought because it seems so final although Paul stresses the opposite.

This text once helped a colleague of mine in South Africa to handle a delicate matter. She was a hospital chaplain and was called to assist a teenager mom whose wee boy was on life support in the trauma unit after he had fallen into a swimming pool. The teenager mom was devastated and could not understand what was going on with her wee boy. The many life supporting machines and atmosphere of the trauma unit made her anxious and scared. So my colleague was rushed in to support her.

She sat down with her in the hallway of the hospital. Then she used this metaphor of Paul to help the mom to understand what was going on. She said that her wee boy was playing in a tent while God was in the caravan the whole time watching him. But his life in this tent was not easy. Then the mom interrupted and said yes – his life was not always easy. Sometimes she had difficulty to feed him and clothe him. She did not have the support of her parents because when she fell pregnant they abandoned her. It was only a few friends that helped her to make ends meet...

The minister then said but although his life on earth was sad God knew all about it and he decided to help him. God decided to take him into the caravan where there is neither sadness nor suffering. Then the young moms face brightened up.

Now I know what I going on she screamed. My son is too small to walk up the steps into the caravan...that is why he is struggling to breathe!

The minister then said that it is true that he is struggling because he cannot walk yet but when the time comes, God will help him too to climb the steps. Actually God will come out of the caravan sometime soon when he thinks the time is right and carry him into his caravan, into his everlasting kingdom. The mom gave only a sigh of relief and said that she understands now that God wants him more than she does and she will pray that God will carry him into his arms just as she did many times.

I think this story is a story of all of us. We can be so rational sometimes about everything and miss the real intention of life. We can easily forget that this life is only temporal. We can so easily forget that we received the new life in Christ Jesus. We are not permanent citizens of this world but citizens of the everlasting kingdom of

God. We can so easily be caught up in the distresses of present day living and forget that we received the new life in Christ. And yes when we think of this life as an only option we can forget what life is all about. Life is not only for living – it is life dedicated to the glory of God. We did not receive life only to fulfil our ambitions and selfish needs but to please God. This life is not our end but only the beginning of a journey to be forever with God.

We are the ambassadors of this everlasting kingdom. It is so important that we present to our world this new life in Christ in such a way that it is welcoming and appealing to all. We have to be witnesses of this everlasting Kingdom wherever we go. We have to proclaim it with joy and exclamation. Our lives must resemble this hope in the way we suffer, despair, laugh, and joke, live, eat, blether, drive, work, argue, and disagree!

Yes we are the ambassadors of God's kingdom issued with an entry visa through the redemption and reconciliation of Christ. And as foreigners to this life on earth, we should carry this visa with us everywhere we go!

May God help us that we never forget this!

Amen

Readings for the week

2 Corinthians 5:6-17 (from Rootsontheweb.com)

It is never easy for a congregation to follow a passage from Paul. Here, moreover, we have parts of two separate arguments: a new section begins at verse 11, on the new life in Christ, one of reconciliation with God and humankind. In chapters 1—7 of the letter, Paul is defending his role as an apostle. The Corinthian community have been upset by doctrinal and moral problems, and also by Paul's dealings with them. Translations hide some of the many problems of interpretation in our passage. This much, however, is clear: despite the failures of the Corinthians and his own conflict with them, Paul takes courage from the promise of new life in Christ, Only this life, based on honest self-knowledge and free from self-seeking, can provide a lasting basis for peace.

Other readings: Ezekiel 17:22-24; Psalm 92:1-4, 12-15; Mark 4:26-34