

SERMON, 4 JULY 2021 – 2 COR 12.2-10, MARK 6.1-13

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last Wednesday, at the 10 am communion at St Edmund's (a service you are very welcome to attend), we celebrated the Feast of Peter and Paul. We were actually a day late, their feast day is on 29 June, but it gave us an opportunity to think about the two great men of the first few years of the Christian church. I asked the congregation whether they'd feel happier meeting Peter or Paul? I think we all decided that we would feel more comfortable having a drink with Peter the Fisherman than we would with Paul – which is quite odd, because I have nothing in common with a fisherman (and would struggle to make conversation about fish), I have far more in common with Paul, the rabbi who studied with the academics of his time, the man who worked with groups of Christians all his life, the man who wrote letters – I wonder what he would make of my daily facebook posts?

But really, Peter comes across as an easier person – Paul always seems harder work. In this bit from 2 Corinthians he is telling us about someone who has had a heavenly vision – and that frightens most of us, we're not quite sure what to make of it. Some sort of near death experience? There are many documented cases of where people have a vision of heaven, paradise, call it what you will – and how much it is a vision of something that exists, somewhere you went, and how much it is all in the mind – and whether it is actually caused by your brain struggling to cope as your body closes down, opinion is divided. I am reminded by the bit we use every Pentecost about “young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams” – and I'm getting to the dreamy time of life! Paul isn't quite sure what to make of it either – and that comforts me. Even the great Apostle Paul didn't understand everything that was going on around him.

Paul tells us that he has struggled with a thorn in the flesh, some sort of physical illness, disability, something that comes across as painful. We don't know what it was, or what the cause was – but when you read his story through the book of Acts, the number of times he was beaten, stoned, the sheer physicality of his life, it wouldn't be at all surprising if his body had been broken, damaged, by the treatment he had received. Dr Luke spends a lot of time with him, you can imagine the close relationship between doctor and patient, between older apostle and younger disciple.

Over the years many of us have to cope with a thorn in the flesh, or we have cope with those we love having the thorn. And it's not easy. Paul feels it is a “messenger of Satan”, I'm not sure I find that a helpful image, though there are times when it feels a personal attack by the powers of darkness. Julie has been

told that if she prays hard against it, the power of Satan will be defeated and she will be able to throw her crutches away – and, while I am well aware that pray heals, and sometimes it can heal physically, it hasn't happened yet.

I hear of the abuse of disabled people, the statistics of the number who have died because of Covid, and it does feel like the power of evil is extremely strong. That our Society, our government, our health service have, at the best, been so busy that disabled people have been ignored, at the worst have consciously decided that limited resources will be directed at “normal people”.

The BBC reported last week on the subject, and told the story of Raya. A 43 year old who uses a ventilator. She was told by her specialist doctors that if she caught Covid-19, she should not go to hospital because the level of care she would need could not be guaranteed, and was warned that it was unlikely that she would be considered for life support. "It made me feel alone and isolated. If I did end up in hospital and I was really sick - who was going to fight for me?" From March 2020 to May 2021, Raya did not leave her house for fear of catching Covid. "As a disabled person, I feel like the weakest link in society. And now, because of Covid-19, no-one knows what to do with the weakest link. "I don't think my life will ever return to what it was before March 2020."

https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-57652173?fbclid=IwAR2H0oUDuXtBlJDPxWb4WvLO-jqoDg_YXGSrnOsOEcKvXsiIGzV8QpaM_5o

She is one of thousands in this country alone where, to be frank, evil has won. Where the lack of resources, and there is a lack in normal times, let alone in a pandemic – where the lack of resources, and (more importantly) the mind-set of our Society, condemns people to a far harsher existence than is necessary. It frightens me that the new health secretary said last week that “my task is to help return the economic and cultural life that makes this country so great”. He added the rider “while of course protecting life and our NHS” but I would suggest that evil, the power of Satan, will only be defeated when we put protecting life first, standing with disabled people, being there to fight the thorn in the flesh together – all of that should be much higher up the agenda than the economic and cultural life of this country, especially for the Health Secretary.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jun/30/sajid-javid-lockdown-nhs-matt-hancock>

Nikki Fox, the BBC's disability correspondent commented that “All the people we have spent time with over the past few months have shared their own, heart-

breaking stories. Considering everything they have had thrown at them this past year, they have managed to get through it the best they can, almost entirely on their own. But what really hit me is that none of them kept a "who had it worse during Covid" scorecard. Yes, they all pretty much described themselves in one way or another as "the forgotten ones", but they were all incredibly measured and understanding of the fact that the pandemic has touched us all in very different ways, disabled or not."

It is amazing how the human spirit finds strength in adversity – in today's Zoom service (which you can of course watch on youtube anytime), Julie is telling the story of the Italian Chapel on Orkney. A group of Italian prisoners of war, condemned to living in 13 Nissen huts on a windswept Orkney island – usually about as far from the sun-drenched beaches of Italy as you can get – these PoWs, found the vision and the strength to build a place of worship, a work of art, a place of faith. Their vision was encouraged by a camp commandant who cared for the men in his custody – and 80 years later it is still an inspiration place of faith and peace. God gives us many victories over the power of Satan – and how interesting I typed that phrase when earlier I said that "messenger of Satan" is not helpful!

In all of this, how we cope with pain and suffering makes a huge difference to the outcome. We know the need to be positive – even when it's hard – and we seek to support and strengthen one another. A reminder that we are here for each other, and faith is something that needs to be shared. Remember that if any of you are ever ill, or if we know people who are, we are here to pray, to take communion, to listen. Don't always succeed, but we'll try. Never hesitate to get in touch.

And, of course, that need to be positive needs to run through everything. Last weekend and today are the two weekends when the Church of England normally has its ordination services. In this diocese alone, 15 new deacons and 8 new priests were ordained last weekend. The misery in me says "how are we going to afford to pay them", the misery in me looks at their happy smiling faces on twitter and thinks "that won't last", the misery in me looks at (some of their) youth and decides I am a dinosaur and it's time to retire – but the person of faith thinks "Alleluia".

A couple of years after our Gareth had had his heart transplant, we went down to Great Ormond Street for clinic. We went the night before, and went to see "Spamalot" at the theatre. It's a musical based on Monty Python and the Holy Grail and starts with lepers. They are dying and being carted off – and one of them has a great musical piece which starts "I am not dead yet, I can do a little dance." It was hilarious, and at the interval, Gareth disappeared to the

merchandise stand. The following morning, he got dressed for clinic, and put on his new teeshirt – with the slogan “I’m not dead yet”. Fortunately his consultant and the team had the measure of my son, and thought it was very appropriate.

Well, with all the talk about the decline of the Church of England, I wish I had had the guts to turn up at the ordination services last weekend wearing my “not dead yet” teeshirt – because our church, our faith, is not dead. We are not good at seeing God at work, all of us who have been part of the church for decades sometimes look at it in the same way the people of Nazareth looked at Jesus in our gospel reading. Nothing exciting is going to happen, because it’s normal – he’s one of us, we know who his parents were, we know his brothers and sisters – the church has stood for a thousand years (or two hundred years), it’s part of the scenery, so what.

“We’re not dead yet” – and we bring the gospel, the good news, of life in all its fullness. That’s what we proclaim. May God give us strength, and the joy, to be his people and share his love. Amen.