

Study following Sunday March 7th

Prepare: Think about power and what it can achieve.

Praise: Spend time thanking God for Christ's saving work on the cross.

Passage: Read 1 Corinthians 1.18-25

Ponder: Paul begins this section of his letter to the Corinthian church with a comparison between foolishness and power (vs 18) exposed by the cross. It seems Paul is concerned at the wielding of power by those within the church and so he seeks to help the Corinthians understand that God's power is about power *for* enabling something, rather than a power *over* something or someone. In this case the power of God is for salvation, rather than controlling power over salvation.

- Think for a moment about the distinction between power over.. and power for..

A contrast is then made between those who are perishing and those who are being saved. Paul does say that the Corinthians are 'being saved' - in the present continuous tense. So the Corinthians can be assured of their salvation if they have put their trust in Jesus, but that salvation will not be complete until the end of this age. Thistelton points to a comparison with those being rescued from a sinking ship - they have *been saved* from their stricken ship, they are *being saved* whilst in the lifeboat, and they will *be saved* when their feet reach dry land. Paul seems to be trying to bring the Corinthians back from a sense of entitlement to a recognition of God's grace and mercy.

- How might we avoid taking our connection to God and his gift to us for granted?

Paul then quotes from the prophet Isaiah:

- See Isaiah 29.13-6 for Paul's quote and its Old Testament context.

We see that God is going to turn things upside-down for Isaiah's listeners. The sense for Israel in the Old Testament, and Corinth in the New, is that earthly wisdom and knowledge, and the ability to communicate it, is being prized more highly than any relationship with God. As God says through Isaiah - 'their hearts are far from me'.

Paul states that some will demand miraculous circumstantial signs and others will seek a wisdom that leads them to succeed. What he wants the Corinthians to understand is that Christ crucified is both a miracle sign and the wisdom that will lead to life.

Paul ramps up the contrast between worldly wisdom and the Gospel, a Gospel that tells of Christ crucified. The word translated to 'stumbling block' is the Greek word '*skandalon*' (for which we get our word 'scandal') which can also mean a trap or an affront. This claim of a Crucified Messiah has lost some of its edge today, but in the first century it would be an extremely challenging image. The Messiah was a hero leader figure, who wins a great victory for God and his people. Crucifixion, on the other hand, was a cruel, vulgar and shameful way to die, it was not spoken about in polite society because of the stigma. The Gospel then, was potentially a grossly offensive image to those who were not of a Christian faith, and yet Paul is writing to a Church. Perhaps Paul is mindful that the Corinthians have moved the uncomfortable cross from the central point of faith and allowed other things to be the focus. This can be a danger for us too, and one worth focussing on during Lent: - What do we, as individuals, families or communities focus on in our connection with God?

- What can we do to ensure Christ's cross is at the centre of our faith?

Pray: Pray for Christians to take a closer look at the uncomfortable cross. Help us appreciate the shame and the cost paid for us by God in order to restore us into a right relationship with him.

Study following Sunday March 14th

Prepare: Think about what brings you the most comfort.

Praise: Spend time thanking God for his compassion and mercy, shown through the Old Testament to the Israelites and on through the Gospels and Acts of the apostles.

Passage: Read 2 Corinthians 1.3-7

Ponder: Paul begins this passage with a Jewish blessing of God, those who attended the synagogue at the time would pray 'Blessed are You, O Lord our God and God of our fathers.' Paul 'Christianises' this prayer by changing the ending to say 'Father of our Lord Jesus Christ'. This reminds us that, for all his evangelising of the Gentiles, Paul is a Jewish Christian believer at heart. Barnett (1988) leads us into three helpful themes that come through our passage.

Firstly, that Christ's sufferings carry over to us, it was just as Jesus predicted:

- see Mark 14.27, and also Zechariah 13.7-9

Paul, as Saul, knew what it was to inflict suffering on Christians, but on the road to Damascus he was given a whole new understanding, not just of the person of Jesus, but of Jesus' solidarity with his followers, as Paul hears the voice say 'Paul why do you persecute *me*' (Acts 9.4). Our passage is awash with terms for 'troubles', 'sufferings', and 'comfort needed', so that it contains around seventeen words that directly or indirectly reference suffering. The Greek term translated 'troubles' has in it the idea of 'pressure', it is this pressure that brings about suffering. The pressure Paul is under derives from his Gospel sharing ministry, as he seeks to challenge idols and idolatry.

- Think for a moment how you may have suffered because of the Gospel, this may have been physical or perhaps more akin to the pressure Paul felt as his behaviour was seen to be at odds with the prevailing culture.

Secondly, Paul speaks of the 'Father of compassion' who is the 'God of all comfort'. Isaiah reminds us that this comfort can also be likened to that of a mother,

- see Isaiah 66.13, and also Isaiah 40.1 for more on comfort.

Paul writes to a city with distinct Greek influences, the Greek deity did not possess any knowable qualities and was indifferent to human suffering and pain. In contrast Paul explains that the Christian God is the 'God of all comfort' and that he is active in bringing comfort. It may be that you have heard others think of the Christian God as one who is indifferent, distant and aloof, but for Paul, God is a source of comfort and mercy received through a connection through Christ.

- How close or distant do you see God? Think about the connection we have to God through Jesus, a connection that provides reconciliation, comfort and compassion.

Thirdly, we are taught by Paul that not only do we share in the sufferings of Christ and one another, but we are able to give and receive our Godly comfort too. We may be reminded of the words from John 'We love because he first loved us' (1 John 4.19). This comfort we receive from God, and pass on to others, may begin as a ministry of presence, being present as a listening ear to someone who is expressing their feelings and struggles. Paul encourages us to endure suffering patiently, and that patience will help us to stand alongside others as a comforting presence. Equally we may be the recipients of comfort from another who is a fellow follower of Christ.

Pray: Pray for those who are suffering persecution and threats to their life because of their faith. Pray for a deepening of the mutual bonds between Christians from all denominations, that we may be a source of comfort and hope to one another.

Study following Sunday March 21st

Prepare: Think about how you approach God in prayer.

Praise: Spend time thanking God for the connection we have to him through Jesus Christ who was fully God and fully human.

Passage: Read Hebrews 5.5-10

Ponder: The writer to the Hebrews was thought to be Paul for many centuries, but then some noticeable differences in style and themes led scholars to believe otherwise. The letter is in harmony with the rest of the Bible, but now is thought to possibly be authored by one of Paul's associates, perhaps Barnabas or Apollos. The focus on the temple shows no indication of an awareness of the destruction of the temple in AD70 so the letter was almost certainly written before that date.

Clearly, although many Hebrews did believe in Jesus there remained many who were not persuaded during Jesus' life on earth and so the author seeks to show why Christ is the sufficient and sustaining, mediator and revealer of God's grace beyond anyone and anything appearing in the Old Testament.

- Read Hebrews 5.1-4 for the beginning of the author's discussion relating to Aaron.
- See also Exodus 28.1 for the moment Aaron is chosen by God to be priest,
- And also Numbers 18.1 and 18.7 for confirmation of how exclusive this call was.
- How do you think the priests were thought of by ordinary Hebrews?

In verse 5 the author confirms that Christ was chosen by God for the task of priestly duty, just as Aaron was. This confirms the sense of a servant-hearted and humble Messiah, appointed to a role as the 'Son of God' as suggested in Psalm 2. In verse 6 the author introduces his readers to a new order of priests, not the order of Aaron who every priest in the temple can trace their line from, but to a mysterious character called 'Melchizedek'.

- Read Genesis 14:18-20 to see Melchizedek's appearance.

The author wants to relate Christ's priestly role to that of the apparent timelessness of Melchizedek, who had no forerunner or successor, but paved the way for the 'Great High Priest' - Christ. In Chapter 5 verse 1 the author explains that the High Priest is chosen from one of the people - someone who is thoroughly one of them. In verses 7-9 the author emphasises that Jesus, too, is thoroughly at one with humanity. Here is a reminder of Christ's humanity alongside his eternal divinity. He is both/and, both God and human, and therefore is the perfect mediator between God and humankind. It seems that it is in his suffering and submission to God's will that he shows us the way.

- In what way might suffering lead us to God?
- How do you feel about submitting to God's will as shown through Christ?

Christ is said to learn obedience, not because of a former life of obedience, but that he had to obey his Father in enduring a profoundly disturbing experience. As France puts it 'it is through that suffering of death, deeply feared but then obediently accepted, that he has become 'perfect', fully equipped to be the saviour of those whose life is likewise characterised by loud cries and tears and the fear of death'.

This obedience leads him to be the 'source of eternal salvation for all who obey him'

- Have you ever felt that your obedience to following Jesus has led to more suffering?

Pray: Pray that we all recognise how Jesus Christ suffered for us, in order to become the source of eternal salvation. Pray we can recognise Jesus in his humanity and divinity, and seek to obey him.

Study following Sunday March 28th

Prepare: Think about traditions you remember linking with Holy Week and Easter.

Praise: Spend time thanking God for his steadfast love.

Passage: Read Psalm 118 verses 1,2, 19-29. (or the whole Psalm if you have time)

Ponder: Between the shortest Psalm (117) and the longest Psalm (119), in the Bible, we find the wonderful Psalm 118, a glorious thanksgiving of praise. This Psalm is beloved by many and was apparently Martin Luther's favourite psalm.

- Do you have a favourite Psalm?

Psalm 118 is quoted by all the Gospel writers in their retelling of the Palm Sunday account. This Psalm offers a thanksgiving for deliverance and a rejoicing over all that God has done. It is thought that it may refer to a rejoicing of the Jews who returned from the exile and rebuilt the temple. In context, on Palm Sunday the pilgrims are approaching Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Passover. Passover is one of the three main festivals when Jews were called to gather together in Jerusalem, around the temple to celebrate together.

- See Mark 11.1-11

As we approach Easter in a time where we are not able to sing together, or gather in large numbers, due to the Covid19 Pandemic restrictions, we may recall past years when we could process around the church waving our palm crosses and singing a hymn.

- Perhaps you recall different traditions on Palm Sunday?

In our own times of restrictions and endurance perhaps we can appreciate something of the dynamic of celebrating God's goodness and great deeds in a situation of struggle. That dynamic was certainly true for those pilgrims in Israel 2000 years ago as they continued being under the oppressive rule of Rome, along with their puppet King Herod. This praise through the storm theme has led this passage to be seen as pointing forward to God's salvation given in the crucifixion and resurrection.

- Think about how easy you find it to continue praising God for his goodness when you are suffering and struggling with life.

- Does it help you to recall past blessings as the Psalm writer is doing?

Celebrating God's good deeds to us is one thing, but this Psalm goes further and encourages us to celebrate God's goodness and love, a love that endures forever. These are timeless characteristics that the Psalm writer wants us to recognise to enable us to say each morning, no matter what we may be facing, 'this is the very day of the Lord that brings gladness and joy' (verse 24, TPT)

This Psalm is part of a group of praise Psalms (Psalms 113-118) known for their 'Hallelujah's and, as such, are called the 'Hallel' Psalms. These Psalms were especially used during the festival of Passover as a celebration and remembrance of God's steadfast love shown in him protecting the people and leading them out of Egypt towards the promised land. It is quite possible that this is the Psalm that Jesus and the disciples sang at the end of the last supper, before Jesus leads them out to the Garden to pray - see Mark 14 verse 26 and Matthew 26 verse 30. It is sobering to think of the last words Jesus sings, before moving towards the awful test and trial of Good Friday, are 'for His mercy endures forever'.

Pray: Pray that today we would each get sense of God's love for us shown through the events that first Holy Week and Easter. Pray for all Christians everywhere who are preparing to celebrate Easter in difficult situations.