

29 March 2020. Sermon from Rev Tony Rindl of St. Mary's Church, Watford.

I begin with a reading from St Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 5 beginning at verse 1.

"Therefore since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, who he has given us. You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation."

This is the word of the Lord.

Now may I speak to you in the name of the living God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Today the 29th March should have been a wonderful occasion in the church with a Baptism of a young girl, and the subject of the sermon was to be on faithfulness. Sadly, because all forms of worship have now been suspended for the time being, the baptism will have to wait for another day. But we can still reflect on the importance of faithfulness. As Christians we see baptism as the beginning of our journey of faith. Jesus told his followers that to enter the kingdom of heaven we must be born again of water and the spirit. The symbolism of baptism is really dramatic whether it is the pouring of water over the baby's head, or when an adult is submerged under water. It is to signify the end of an old way of living, and the beginning of a new way with Christ, and as Christians we believe God has given us his Holy Spirit as a sign and seal of this new birth. How do we know that we have received the gift of the Holy Spirit? Well, by faith; we believe and trust in the promises of Jesus, that we, when asked will receive. Now for some of you there is a clear and definite experience of receiving the Holy Spirit. Perhaps a tingly sensation, or feeling very much loved and at peace with God. Or perhaps feeling drenched in light or warmth. For others the receiving of the Holy Spirit is a much more gentle experience. Much more subtle. The evidence for the presence of the Holy Spirit can often be manifested in what we call the gifts of the Holy Spirit, such as the ability to speak in tongues, to be able to prophecy or to have the gift of wisdom or knowledge; what we might call supernatural gifts that God gives to build up and encourage people, namely the church. The other discernible evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit are what we call the fruits of the Spirit. Saint Paul lists these fruits of the Spirit in his letter to the Galatians as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. In our reading for today from St Paul's letter to the Romans we read "and we boast in the glory of God, not only so, but we also boast in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance character, and character hope. And hope does not put us to shame because God's love has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."

I don't know about you, but I am rather encouraged by what St Paul writes here. We are no doubt living in extraordinary times, something most of us have never

experienced before. No doubt at one level or another we are all suffering, the freedom of life we have always taken for granted has been put on hold. But Paul clearly states “we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance character, character hope.”

It means that it doesn't matter how scary and how difficult the next few weeks might be; there is still a wonderful opportunity for us to develop character. And to be messengers and beacons of hope in this uncertain world. The character we would wish to develop is a Christ-like character which have the hallmarks of those fruits of the spirit; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. An understanding of the original Greek in this passage and the precise words that Paul uses, suggests that he is likening them to the way a coin is minted, to the head of the Emperor or King or Queen. So in developing character it would be like placing the face of Jesus on our lives. And thus reflecting in our lives the hope that Jesus brings.

Today, we are going to focus on one of those fruits of the Spirit, namely faithfulness. And in doing so, we are going to reflect not only on our own faithfulness but perhaps more importantly on the faithfulness of God.

At our baptism we make solemn vows to God, or our parents or godparents make those vows on our behalf. I for one, am very grateful to my parents and to my godparents for keeping those promises they made at my baptism when I was a little baby. I know my parents and godparents took seriously the promises they made when they responded to these words “Parents and Godparents, the church receives this child with joy, today we are trusting in his growth in faith. Will you pray for him? Draw him by your example into the community of faith, and walk with him in the way of Christ?”

I'm very grateful to my parents for taking me to church as a child every Sunday, and indeed for teaching me the faith by the way they lived their lives and by their example. Indeed, I would go as far as to say that my late father was teaching me up 'til the day he died. The faith that he showed as he was dying. And that was combined with all the conversations and sharing of insights of passages of scripture over the years.

I'm also convinced that my godmother prayed for me every day of her life until she died in her 90's, four or so years ago. She never told me that she prayed, I just knew by instinct that she did. I know that she attended my Confirmation service, she was also there for my ordination when I was licensed and installed as a new vicar, including here at St Marys seven years ago. She was there for all those key moments in my life. And then the last time I saw my godmother was when I visited her in hospital shortly before she died. And by that time, she was ill and could barely speak, but in the time I spent with her I thanked her for praying for me everyday and this was confirmed when her face just lit up when I said these things.

My friends I can't think of a more perfect example of faithfulness than that of my godmother praying for me every day. There must have been times when I as an errant teenager would have tempted her to give up on me. But she persevered and

I'm glad that she was given the grace to see my faith come alive, and to see me following my calling to be ordained. I am also glad that I had the opportunity to say thank you to her, and recognise what she had done for me. Of course, at baptism we don't just make these promises to God, we are also entering into a contract with God. And whereas our faithfulness may be limited and full of human weakness, God's faithfulness is without fault and is completely solid. We might say rock solid.

When Jesus himself was baptised in the River Jordan he was immediately sent into the wilderness and was tempted by the devil for 40 days and for 40 nights. And yet he was able to withstand the temptation because he remained faithful, utterly faithful to God's word. He was able to resist the tempter by saying "it is written, man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." And again he resisted the devil by saying "It is also written do not put the Lord your God to the test" and then finally when the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in their splendour and said to him "all this I give to you if you bow down and worship me." Jesus replied "away from me Satan, for it is written, worship the Lord your God and serve him only" and then as the Bible says the devil left him and the angels came and attended to Jesus.

Our reading from Romans today begins "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Now for many Christians especially amongst protestant and evangelicals this is one of those key verses from the reformation that concludes that salvation comes through faith in Christ. Grace alone, not through our own merits, not through anything that we have done, but in coming to God in faith seeking forgiveness and a new life in Christ. Hence the importance and the symbolism of baptism.

But perhaps we should take that one step further and say that rather than it be our faith that saves us, it is the faithfulness of Jesus that saves.

Today in the church's calendar it is Passion Sunday, two weeks before Easter Sunday. And as Good Friday and Easter approaches we are mindful of Jesus' love for the Father, his obedience to the will of the Father which will take him to calvary and to the cross. St Paul captures this very eloquently in the following verses from his letter to the Philippians where speaking about Jesus he writes, "who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage. Rather he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness, and being found in appearance as a man. He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross."

The faithfulness of Jesus takes him to Jerusalem. It takes him to the Garden of Gethsemane where a very human response would have been to quit. And indeed Jesus agonises over what he must do, but in the end Jesus surrenders to the will of the Father. He trusts God. He is obedient to God and is faithful to his calling to be the Messiah, the Christ. On the cross Jesus dies for our sins. His blood poured out so that we can be reconciled to God; to be in a new covenantal relationship with God, filled with his blood. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews stresses the importance of this when he writes, "therefore He (that is Jesus) is able to save completely those that come to God through him, because he always lives to

intercede for them. Surely a High Priest truly meets our need, one who is holy, blameless, pure. Set apart from sinners, exalted above in the heavens. Unlike the other High Priests he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself.”

So are we justified by our faith or the faithfulness of Jesus. I know which I am more ready to trust. The faithfulness of Jesus as proven in the ultimate and perfect sacrifice made on the cross. And since God raised Jesus from the dead, so Jesus’ faithfulness is vindicated once and for all. Our hope is as much based on the faithfulness of Jesus on the cross as it is in the resurrection. The empty grave, of course, fills us with great hope that we do not live for this world alone but we live for Christ and for the world to come. But it is because of Jesus’ faithfulness dying for us on the cross that we can hope in a world where there is no more sickness, where there is no more tears, no more pain, no more death but life and life in all its fulness.

So Paul concludes our reading for today with these words “Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.”

Many Christians challenge others by asking the question “are you saved?” I think the answer to that question is “I am being saved”. Our baptism begins our journey of faith. Every day we are making new discoveries and like the followers of Christ who have gone before us, we will know the ups and downs of life. And our faith no doubt to a greater or lesser extent mirrors those life’s experiences. Certainly in many respects there is a direct correlation. And so we turn again to that key verse in our reading today “and we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, that has been given to us.”

Today we may well be suffering, as we live under the cloud of coronavirus. But our faith and what the scriptures say, dare us to trust in God and to persevere. What might that look like for you? Can we use the time of confinement and almost imprisonment, not to constrain us but to liberate us. No doubt being at home there are many jobs that we have that we have been putting off around the house and garden, that can now be done, as most of us are discovering that we have more time. But does that mean more time in God in prayer and quiet times and reading the Bible. Are there other ways of being creative, perhaps in the way we pray. Unfortunately I am one of those who have been determined to be at greater risk, and have been strongly advised not to leave my home for 12 weeks. Do I still go out for a walk or do I exercise at home. Well I’m fortunate to have a large garden and I’ve calculated, and of course we have more time to do such calculations, I’ve calculated that if I were to walk up and down my garden 80 times that would be 3 miles, 4,800

metres, with the garden being approximately 30 metres in length. And then I thought, what if on every lap I commit to praying for every household at St Mary's. So that's my offering, as to how I might persevere under these heavy restrictions. And as I persevere might that not develop my overall character so that it becomes more Christ-like. And perhaps in some small way may reflect more keenly the hallmarks of Christ's character, namely love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Like you I have no idea when this present situation will end, but surely it will pass. And ultimately the thing that will get us through is that we trust in the faithfulness of Christ. And indeed for ourselves to be faithful to what we believe. And in whatever way we can, for us to persevere. That will look different for each one of us, all of us with our different personalities and different experiences and different gifting. But nevertheless may that lead to developing in all of us a more Christ-like character that draws us closer to God and offers hope. Each of us will need to develop a new routine in these coming weeks. And we do well to be mindful of the importance of our faith, and to spend more time with God. And when this all passes maybe what we have learnt through our experiences can be put to good effect. Maybe we become a more responsible caring community; caring for our neighbours, caring for our environment.

May what we are going through strengthen our faith and our hope in God. So I ask you choose wisely how you spend your time over the coming weeks and months. And who knows as we draw closer to God as a result, who knows how transformative that might be. Perhaps on this Passion Sunday, as we look forward to our Easter celebration, let us also reflect on the faithfulness of Christ, and respond and seek to be faithful as we can be. Let us be resourceful in these times, let us be imaginative. Let us persevere in prayer and acts of kindness to our neighbour, and in doing so may this draw us closer to God, may his Holy Spirit be at work in each one of us as we trust in the faithfulness of Christ. And so doing may our lives bear more of the characteristics of Christ, namely the fruits of the Spirit; the joy, the peace, the patience, the kindness, the goodness, the gentleness, and self-control, as well as the faithfulness. And there minted on our lives and our characters the face of Christ bringing hope to others.

Amen.

If I can ask you now to join with me in prayer;

Keep us good Lord under the shadow of your mercy, in this time of uncertainty and distress. Sustain and support the anxious and fearful, and lift up all who are brought low that we may rejoice in your comfort, knowing that nothing can separate us from your love. In Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Lord Jesus Christ you taught us to love our neighbour and to care for those in need as if we were caring for you. In this time of anxiety give us strength to comfort the fearful, to tend the sick, and to assure the isolated of our love, of your love, for your name's sake. Amen.

God of compassion be close to those who are ill, afraid or in isolation. In their loneliness be their consolation. In their anxiety be their hope. In their darkness be their light. Through him who suffered alone on the cross but reigns with you in glory, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

And so we pray for those who are ill. Merciful God we entrust to your tender care those who are ill or in pain, knowing that whenever danger threatens, your everlasting arms are there to hold them safe. Comfort and heal them and restore them to health and strength, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

And so we pray also for the hospital staff and medical researchers. Gracious God give skill, sympathy and resilience to all who are caring for the sick, and your wisdom to all those searching for a cure. Strengthen them with your Spirit that through their work many will be restored to health, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

And so we pray for the Christian community. We are not people of fear, we are people of courage. We are not people who protect our own safety, we are people who protect our neighbours safety. We are not people of greed, we are people of generosity. We are your people God, giving and loving wherever we are, whatever the cost, for as long as it takes, where ever you call us. Amen.

And so trusting in the compassion of God, please join with me as we say together;

Our Father in Heaven,

Hallowed be Your Name,

Your Kingdom come,

Your will be done,

on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread,

Forgive us our sins,

as we forgive those who sin against us,

Lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil,

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are Yours now and forever. Amen.

And now may the peace which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his son Jesus Christ our Lord.

And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be with you this day and with all those you love. Amen.