

THE HOPE OF GLORY

Romans 8.12-25, Matthew 13.24-30

Trinity 9, 2008

If you have been following the readings from Matthew's gospel for the last few Sundays you will have realised that, one and all, they are about what the Church calls 'mission'.

Last Sunday you'll remember that we were talking about the Parable of the Sower in which a farmer goes out to sow corn in the hope of producing a great harvest. This, we said, was how it has been from the very beginning in the Church of Jesus Christ. Christ's followers have gone out, just like the farmer in the parable, and they have sown the seed which represents God's word in the world - much of it, we noted, was lost 'for one reason or another' (Linneman) but some seed germinated and bore fruit - some a hundred, some sixty, and some thirty.

Much of what I was saying concerned the actions of the farmer - "Once there was a man who went out to sow corn," - and I was making the point (and not for the first time!) that 'sowing corn' was something that most churches and church members are not very good at. We are geared up, to use the jargon of the modern Church for "maintenance" rather than "mission." We have spent decades waiting for people to come to us while at the same time we have done nothing to encourage the process of 'belonging' which, in almost every single case, precedes 'believing'.

We are not the only ones with this problem. In conversation with an Episcopalian in the United States last week he told me that much the same was happening in the churches in the USA. He said that the Episcopal Church in the United States of America in particular had been operating with a mission policy akin to a man who took his aquarium down to the beach in the hope that the fish would jump out of the sea and into his aquarium! It ain't going to happen. Jesus himself told us: "I will make you fishers of people" for a reason. Fish have to be 'caught' they do not jump into the boat off their own bat.

Today's story in the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares (Weeds) as it is called is not a parable about 'seed sowing' which we hope will lead to 'fruitful growth', but is a parable about 'who' may 'belong' in the Christian Church. It's about 'belonging.'

The situation in the Church in the beginning was this. There were people who had heard God's word being preached and had responded positively to it. They had been baptized, they had 'joined the Church', they had very simply become followers of Jesus. At the same time there were people in the Church that were causing trouble. Some of them did not lead very good lives. Some of them were not Christians at all and were given the Christian Community a 'bad name.' The question was, what to do about such people? Would it not make good sense to get rid of such people, to send them packing, to ask them to leave? But people like the gospel Matthew rejected such an understanding of Church membership. He pointed out that Jesus in life had welcomed everyone. That he didn't lay down rules and regulations as to who could and who couldn't belong. In fact many of his followers were notorious 'sinners' and

were far from the religion practised by the Jews at the time of Jesus. Among the wheat in the farmer's field there were people who could be described as being rather 'weedy' - but that didn't matter, only at the end of time would it matter and maybe not even then. And so the Church today should welcome everyone, we should exclude no one, we should count people in and, in so-doing declare "the all-embracing inclusivity" of the K of G.

To bring all of this up to date perhaps we do not truly represent the Church of Jesus Christ by insisting as we sometimes do that in order to belong to a church or in order to be blessed by the church there are certain rules and regulations, certain procedures to be observed before any of this can happen. These things are part of the life of the Church today because people in the past either got it wrong or had an unhealthy obsession with organisation.

People will say, 'but if there is no organisation then church life would be chaotic!?' To which someone might reply with one eye fixed on Jesus - 'so what?'

Last Sunday someone said to me after the service, 'Its all very well talking about mission but we need to remember the very real needs of the members of the congregation.' And that's true enough and week by week we try and remember all those who are in need in our prayers which are mainly prayers for and about 'other people.'

Having said this, the reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans this morning provides us with an opportunity to talk and not simply to pray about what someone once called "God and the fact of suffering." (JS Stewart)

Paul says: "I consider that what we suffer at this present time cannot be compared at all with the glory that is going to be revealed to us."(Romans 8.18)

The apostle Paul knew all about what it means to suffer.' When he says (verse 18) that he considers what we suffer at this present time cannot be compared with the glory that is going to be revealed, he is speaking from the heart and from personal experience. This is important. There is nothing worse, nothing less appropriate, than someone who knows nothing about suffering to pontificate about it to those who are in the midst of suffering themselves. We might mean well when we say, "Cheer up!" or "Things could be worse!" or some other well-meant platitude, but it does no good and can do greater harm. Better to say nothing in such circumstances than to say the wrong thing!

But Paul knew what it was to suffer! In his Second Letter to the Corinthians he talks about experiencing 'a sharp physical pain' which he has asked in prayer 3 times to have taken away, but always, he says, he was told, "My grace is all you need." (2 Corinthians 12.7-9)

In that same letter to the Corinthians Church he says (in one of my favourite passages!) that as an apostle his life has been filled with suffering of different kinds from start to finish. He talks with real feeling about enduring troubles, hardships, difficulties. About having been beaten, imprisoned and mobbed. He has been overworked and has had to go without sleep and food. He has been disgraced, insulted, treated as a liar. He has been

saddened, punished and brought to the brink of poverty. All because he was 'God's servant.'
(2 Corinthians 6.3-10)

A little later in the same letter he is even more specific: "Five times I was given the 39 lashes by the Jews; three times I was whipped by the Romans; once I was stoned. I have been in three shipwrecks, and once I spent 24 hours in the water. In my many travels I have been in danger from floods and robbers. There has been work and toil; often I have gone without sleep; I have been hungry and thirsty; I have often been without sleep, shelter or clothing. And, not to mention other things, every day I am under the pressure of my concern for all the churches." (2 Corinthians 11.24-29)

In saying this, we can understand that life was not easy for the apostle we call Paul and neither was it always easy for the followers of Jesus in the various churches to whom he writes. Rather like Christ himself, "we do not know, we cannot tell, what pains they had to bear!" But we know enough of their battles, first with the Jews and then also with the Romans which climaxed in the imprisonment and the killing of thousands of Christians under successive Roman Emperors, - we know that these people, in a word, suffered!

And such suffering, we must imagine based on our own experiences, must have brought them to the point of abandoning not only their Christian faith - which would have been bad enough - but also their Christian hope which would have been even worse!

We live in different times - thank God! Not since the atrocities of the Nazi regime or perhaps during the conflict in Bosnia have we seen such suffering in Europe.

But always there are those in our midst who are suffering in other ways no less real. Suffering includes not only physical pain and torture but troubles, disappointments, bereavements, and frustrations.

To take but one modern example, last week on TV in what is called a 'bio-pic', the tragic life of the actor Kenneth Williams was portrayed ending with his death in his modest London flat, having taken an overdose of barbiturates.

The night before he took his own life he had written in his diary - "What's the point?" What was the point of being a well-known actor? "I suppose I made a few people laugh," he had written. But his life had been without love, he had lived with pain and discomfort for many years because of a bowel disorder and he had developed a painful ulcer in his stomach. "What's the point?" There are many people today who for a variety of reasons are asking themselves, "What's the point?" Do we, as Christians, have an answer?

And what of those who are doomed to die in parts of Africa before they have lived? Can we even begin to imagine the horror of living in some parts of Africa and the suffering that poverty, lack of shelter or clean water, a shortage of basic foods not to mention the outbreaks of genocidal war brings to thousands of human beings??

How are we to cope with such suffering on such a scale? What difference does our Christian

faith make in such situations?

There are, thank God, several answers we can give as Christians in the face of such suffering, many of them based on the sufferings of Christ himself upon the cross.

Some people have seen such suffering as being an opportunity to come closer to God. So it was that the Scottish Divine, Ralph Erskine could say as he lay on his bed racked with pain that he had come to know more of God since he came to his bed of sickness than he had done all of his life. A strange idea, really, which owes much to a passage in Hebrews in which the writer says that Christ 'was made perfect through suffering' - the older translations talk about 'Christ learning through suffering.' (Hebrews 2.10) Whatever that phrase means it certainly does not mean that for us suffering is an opportunity to be grasped!

We are surely on surer ground as Christians in relationship to those who suffer to think about Christ's suffering upon the cross and to remember that God is in this 'thing' we call suffering with us. This is what the theologians have been at pains to point out again and again over the Christian centuries. That this man we call 'Christ' was actually one of us. That he suffered as we suffer and in the end he suffered most terribly in that Roman form of cruelty and torture we call 'crucifixion.' But they also tell us that the person we call the Christ was also God - as Paul says, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." And just because 'God was in Christ' God knows the pain and the suffering, the disappointments and the frustrations that we have to bear!

It's at this point that the Christian mystics take over and talk about God coming to us in our sufferings. That because of Christ God knows how we feel and does not leave us alone to soldier on as best we can.

"What is the Christian answer to the mystery of suffering? Not an explanation but a reinforcing presence. Christ to stand beside you through the darkness." (JS Stewart "God and the Fact of Suffering")

And true as this must be it is not, in the end, what the apostle Paul is saying in his Letter to the Romans. Paul who himself suffered and who was writing to those who were suffering for their Christian faith says,

"I consider that what we suffer at this present time cannot be compared at all with the glory that is going to be revealed to us." Or as a more modern translation puts it, "I don't think there's any comparison between the present hard times and the coming good times."

You see Paul, as a Christian, was someone who always had his eyes fixed on the horizon. Like so many followers of Jesus at the time he believed that just around the corner Christ would come again into the world and his 'second coming' would herald the dawn of a new age in which there would be no more crying, no more pain, no more death, because the old things will have disappeared. (Revelation 21.4) as the writer of the Revelation says. But that's to minimise Paul's vision for the future. Paul believes that the present world even the best that the present world has to offer, pales into insignificance in comparison with the new age that

Christ's coming will usher in. It will be an age in which all will finally be revealed and all questions answered - presumably also the question that people ask about the fact of suffering - wrongs will be put to right (God will judge and he will separate the wheat from the weeds) and then we shall all live together in perfect harmony together with Christ and all those who follow him. "Since we are his children we will possess the blessings he keeps for his people." (Romans 8.17)

Of course Paul had to revise the date of Christ's coming again several times in his own lifetime. But the Church clings on stubbornly to the belief of sharing in Christ's glory in the fullness of time.

Its difficult to imagine, I know. But then if you had asked someone 50 years ago to imagine a time when our black and white TV sets would be replaced with glorious colour far less High Definition colour, they would not have believed that such a thing was possible! Some day, perhaps.

This was how Paul as an apostle coped with his 'present sufferings'

And is it true what Paul says? Interestingly, the younger post-modern generation are not interested as we were once interested in 'the truth'. What people want to know today is, does it work? The only way to answer that is to develop that close relationship Paul had with Christ himself! It is when we can finally call God "Abba" , as Paul did, that we know that it works.