

‘Now is the time....’

Reading: 2 Corinthians 6: 1 - 13

Christian ministry and leadership can often be very demanding and challenging. And we have an example of this in our reading this morning from 2nd Corinthians. The Apostle Paul is writing to the Church in Corinth because he’s deeply concerned about them. But it’s not an easy situation he’s having to deal with, as these believers in Corinth are not really opening their hearts to him. But then, like any caring pastor, he sometimes has to say some quite hard things to the churches he feels responsible for, if he senses something is not quite right with them or they are drifting off course.

And that’s what was happening here in Corinth and that’s why in the opening verse of our reading Paul says this: ‘As God’s fellow-workers. We urge you not to receive God’s grace in vain.’ Now I don’t think, what Paul is saying here comes across very well in the NIV translation. But I think it becomes a lot clearer if we look at how the Message version of the Bible translates it. This is what it says:

‘Companions as we are in this work with you, we beg you, please don’t squander one bit of this marvellous life God has given us.’

And so we see that Paul is pleading with the Corinthians not to squander, or throw away, this wonderful gift of life God has given us in Jesus. And these words are just as relevant for us today as for them back then. And they very much remind me of a book that caught my attention a number of years ago called ‘Don’t Waste your life’ by the American theologian and Baptist Pastor, John Piper. And the book is quite challenging – even the title. And it continues to prompt me to ask myself, if I’m making the most of this wonderful gift of grace we have in the Lord Jesus Christ.

‘Don’t waste your life’ says Piper or as the Apostle Paul puts it ‘Don’t squander this marvellous life.’ Tom Wright in his commentary on this passage puts it like this ‘*You’ve accepted God’s grace; don’t let it go for nothing! Make the most of it!*

And so why is Paul writing this way to these believers in Corinth. Well it seems that things were not quite right in Corinth. They’ve gone off the boil somewhat and become complacent – that passion for Jesus they once had no longer seems to be there anymore. The trouble was that they were drifting. And part of the problem seems to be that some very persuasive false teachers had sadly infiltrated the church and were leading the people astray with their false values and emphases. And it’s causing Paul a great deal of distress as it was through him that they had come to know Jesus in the first place.

You can really feel for Paul. The Corinthians originally had a passion for Jesus and now they were in danger of throwing it all away. They’re drifting and the trouble with drifting is that if you drift too far you are in danger of drowning.

This is what it says in the New Testament book of Hebrews: ‘We must pay more careful attention... to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.’

And in this morning’s reading Paul is urging the Corinthians to return to the truth of the gospel and away from this subtle distortion of it being proclaimed by these false teachers. He’s longing for them to restore that loving intimate relationship they once had with the Lord Jesus.

‘Now is the time of God’s favour’ he says ‘now is the day of salvation.’ In other words – ‘don’t put it off come back now before it is too late.’

And you know, sometimes we can start well in our relationship as a new Christian but then at times we get distracted by other things that get in the way and become more important to us. And then sadly, before we know it, we find ourselves drifting and the vitality of the relationship that we once had with the Lord has now gone and God seems a million miles away.

You know, it could be that the recent periods of lockdown we've been through - with all the isolation and lack of fellowship with other Christians could have been a cause of drifting away for some - and that precious relationship we once had with the Lord is not there anymore.

And it's not usually something that happens overnight. It tends to be something that happens incrementally – just small steps that take us away from God bit by bit. We begin to stop reading the Bible, we stop praying, we stop meeting together and we begin to engage in things we wouldn't have dreamt of doing before. Maybe like the people in Corinth we get distracted into going along false paths. But before long we find ourselves far away from God and other things have taken his place.

And it's nothing new. It's something we often see in the Old Testament in God's ancient people and their relationship with the true and living God. One moment they're faithful and the next they're drifting and chasing after the false gods of the nations around them but God is always longing to draw them back to himself.

And we see this very much highlighted in the story of Hosea in the Old Testament. I don't know if you are familiar with the story but it's an acted out parable of the relationship between God and his ancient rebellious people, the Hebrew nation who had been unfaithful to him and been chasing after other god's and engaging in idolatry. In other words letting other things take the place of God in their lives.

In fact it's a love story in which God instructs the prophet, Hosea to marry a woman who God knows is going to be unfaithful to him. And so Hosea marries a girl called Gomer. The girl however is very shallow and has a bad reputation. She's not very nice to Hosea and treats him very badly. But he loves her and they have a son together but after that she has two more children who are apparently not his and then she leaves him for someone else.

And in leaving Gomer succeeds in not only in making a fool of Hosea but also of herself as her new lover turns out to be as useless and heartless as she is. However, she makes no move to come home. And it's Hosea who has go looking for her, searching everywhere for her in the highways and byways; "Gomer where are you?"

And when Hosea eventually finds her he not only has to win her back but buy her back by scraping together what he can as God had said to him "Go again and love her Hosea just as I, the Lord, love my people although they go chasing after other gods."

And today despite all our waywardness God is always longing to draw us back to himself. And I see in this story of Hosea an echo of how God so loved us that he came into this world in Jesus and gave himself as a ransom for us on the cross so that we could be brought into a living relationship with him. And even if we may have drifted away from him he is always longing for us to come back home to him.

And if we have drifted, it's like in the story of Hosea; he longs for us to come back to him. And it reminds me of Jesus telling a similar story in the gospels about a lost and drifting son. It's a familiar story and perhaps one of Jesus' best known. And it's about a young man who begs his father for his share of his inheritance. Although it deeply saddens him, his father is

very generous and grants the request. The son takes it, leaves home for some far off place and squanders all he's been given.

In the meantime his father has a deep longing and aching in his heart for his boy to come back home. In fact, he has been standing at his front gate for months every day, maybe even years, making a fool of himself in front of his neighbours and waiting. And he's constantly scanning the horizon, hoping against hope, to see the familiar silhouette of his son coming down the road. And you can imagine his neighbours saying to him: "stop wasting your time, the way he treated you, the boy doesn't deserve your love." But his Dad never gave up. This was his son.

And then one day, in the distance, he sees a figure; maybe it's his imagination. But the figure is coming closer; could it be him; could it? And the Bible says this: 'while he was a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms round him and kissed him.'

And in that Middle Eastern culture of the day, men didn't run. It was undignified for a man to run, especially for a man of this man's social standing. But he ran. This was his boy coming home. And not only does he embrace the boy but he arranges for a massive party to be thrown in his honour.

And for us too, our Heavenly Father is just waiting, just longing and aching for us to turn to him. To take those first steps back towards him. And as he sees us moving towards him he runs out to meet us and embrace us and welcome us home.

'As we draw near to God he draws near to us' says James.

We can't escape the love and nearness of God; he's just waiting for us to respond to it. Let's not throw away all we have in him. Let's not put it off 'Now is the time of God's favour. Now is the day of salvation.'

Philip Newell (Reader)

Sermon preached at a service of Morning Worship at St Laurence's, Scalby on Sunday 20th June 2021