



Reflections on the pattern of the Gospel, through Acts and for us today as individuals and church. 21st June 2020

The Gospel is comfort, isn't it. Jesus says, e.g. in the Beatitudes: Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted. Or again, in the closing words of Matthew c11: Come to me all you are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. And in the precious words: Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these. And Paul writes in Romans, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, adding later: I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. And John in his gospel and 1st letter writes: God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whosoever believes in Him, shall not perish but have eternal life. And how great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! Comfort. Comfort.

We have in the week read that the church appointed 7 men known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom to organise the fair charitable distribution of food to both the Grecian widows and the Jewish widows in the church. One of these 7 was Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, who in Christ Jesus did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. His ministry comforted God's people.

On a sideways thought I was reminded this week of the anniversary of the battle of Waterloo on the 18th June. This was a battle between allied forces led by Wellington and French forces led by Napoleon. It was a battle known to be coming so a system was devised to share the battle's outcome with Britain. A signal would be flashed across the channel from church tops in Belgium which could then be passed on, from Church top to Church top throughout Britain. The message was expected to be: Wellington Defeated Napoleon. The battle came and the victory was won, and the message was signalled. But as it went out a fog rose up in the channel, and the message was cut short, reading: Wellington Defeated. For hours there was fear at what would follow. More war. More soldiers dying and families bereaved. More tyranny, more pain, more suffering. Only when the fog lifted was the complete message seen: Wellington Defeated Napoleon. The comfort of the Good News is only fully revealed by the Good Friday cross. The suffering death of

Christ, defeating death for us. We need the full gospel message if we are come into ultimate blessing. The Gospel is comfort through the cross.

To read the gospels is to see them threaded through with the necessity of the cross. For example in Mark c8, which is both the literary and divine centre of the gospel, Jesus began to teach his disciples that He must suffer, be rejected, and be killed, and after three days rise again. The comfort of the promise of our eternal resurrection life only flows to us through the cross.

Peter however could not face that idea. And amazingly Mark tells us that Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke Him. But Jesus would have none of it, saying: Get thee behind me, Satan! Rebuking Peter, rejecting comfort, and going on to say, to Peter and to us: If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and the gospel will save it. Comfort and cross cannot be separated.

The cross is a metaphor. Though sadly for many, too many of our brothers and sisters, ever since Stephen it has been a reality – activated in false accusations, seeking a condemning verdict and a legalised execution. Yet, even for us as a metaphor we are called, as Paul writes in Romans, in view of God’s mercy – that is in view of our comfort in Christ – to offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. As Christians we are no longer to live according to our old sinful nature, that is our first birth fallen human nature, for if we live according to the sinful nature we will die - that doesn’t just mean we will physically die but that we will not enter eternal life – yet if by the Spirit we put death the misdeeds of the body we will live. It’s in living by the Holy Spirit, doing as the Holy Spirit desires that we will not be condemned, that we will not be separated from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Let’s return to Stephen. He was just going about life, doing in Christ what he could in his giftings, bringing the comfort of the gospel to many and what happens? Opposition. Rejection. Those who resisted the Holy Spirit and murdered the Righteous One, that is Christ Jesus, rise up to murder Stephen. Yet standing true to Jesus, Stephen who is about to die, sees his ultimate comfort: Look, he said, I see the heavens open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. Dying he saw life.

A long time ago, not as long ago as Waterloo, there were only a few television channels, and there was no means to time-shift them. You had to watch what you wanted to watch when it was televised. People had to make choices about what they did when. Then the video recorder was invented You could now do some-

thing and watch the tv programme later. This eased many a household conflict. But the gospel doesn’t offer such ease. We can’t take the comfort and put off the conflict that comes with denying ourselves. As we follow Jesus the choice of the cross or the world constantly rises before us. Our natural hearts call for comfort, with Peter we re-act against the suffering of the cross. Yet like Peter, like Stephen, and like so many others may the comfort of the cross embrace our hearts, and overcome our fears.

A cross realised comfort that is not just for individuals but also for the church. For see what happens after this. Paul, then known as Saul, organises a great persecution against the church, scattering her people from their homes, but those who were scattered preached the word wherever they went. And the Good News they shared, as in the preaching and healing of Philip brought great joy, wonderful comfort to many.

May we as Christians and Church have the courage to take up our cross, to put following Christ and seeking the Kingdom of God first in all we are and all we do. As Paul says: By the Spirit we cry Abba, Father. The Spirit Himself testifying with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are God’s children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in His glory.

Glory, praise and honour to the Lord our God who enables us through our trials to bring the year of the Lord’s favour to many who are suffering in the dominion of darkness. And through our cross bound service let us be filled with hope, for the comfort we will receive. May the greet us in paradise saying: well done, good and faithful servants! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness. Amen.

Nick

[please note that the words written and the words spoken may vary]