

Bodily Hope

Date: 26 July 2020, 7th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's online

Series: God's Power in Our Weakness

Texts: Isaiah 25:6-9; 2 Corinthians 5:1-10

What is your experience of life in your body like?

Yesterday I had a video call with my parents. Mum was in her bed at the nursing home, Dad was battling with the technology. This week I've spoken with some among you grieving the death of a parent. I've spoken with some who are in more or less constant pain. Some of you lament your body slowing down as you age. Some of you experience disability. I can still remember the awkwardness of being a teenager with all the intense physical and emotional changes going on. Some feel a sense of alienation from their own body. And of course we're all aware that we are vulnerable to Covid-19. Life in our bodies is a complicated and frustrating experience.

The apostle Paul was no stranger to the frustrations and frailties of bodily life. In 2 Corinthians he recounts his experiences, what happened to his body. But he also shows how the events of Jesus' death and bodily resurrection shape how he approaches life in the body, and how we might too. He shows us how to make sense of bodily life in the present, with all its challenges. He points to our hope for the future and how we might live in the present. We need that, whether you're a Christian or not. And that is what our text, 2 Corinthians 5:1-10 is all about.

We'll look at 2 points: Bodily hope, and Living Now.

Bodily Hope (1-5)

Have a read with me, 2 Corinthians 5:1

Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.

I have to say there is some irony in preaching from this passage on our first day back in the St George's building. St George's may be more than a tent, but has definitely been falling apart. We love its beauty but it is definitely not an eternal house. My kids have drawn some great pictures of the human hands that have been working on it for the last 18 months. Even as we come back to church in this building, hand sanitiser, elbow bumps, 1.5m distancing all remind us of the fragility of our bodies.

In this verse, Paul is not talking about a building, but our bodies. He uses the picture of a tent and contrasts this with a house. You live in a tent or a house. We live now in our bodies. As a tent is to a house, so is our current body to the new body that God has promised us in Jesus. In Philippians, Paul says that God will transform our lowly bodies that they will be Jesus' glorious body.¹

¹ Philippians 3:21

Notice that this promised future life is bodily life. Sometimes we think that Christian hope is of the soul, freed of its body, going to heaven when you die. But actually the New Testament has a far richer and grander hope than this. It is a physical hope. Yes, all those who die in Christ are safe with him now in heaven. But they and we await the resurrection of our bodies and the renewal of all things.

In verse 2 Paul changes the picture to clothing.

2 Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, 3 because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. 4 For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.

The picture of the life God has promised is not the 'naked' soul, freed from the clothing of its body. It's more that our current bodies are a bit shabby and tattered, and we long to put on the resplendent robes of glory. It's going from dumpster fashion to catwalk fashion. The future heavenly dwelling, the future body that God has for us, is more real, more substantive, more glorious than our present body. You know that one I'm talking about. That body with the wrinkles, the poor eyesight, the acne, the athlete's foot, the limbs that don't work like the used to, the brain that's a little foggy, that gets tired and crabby and sick, the face that stares back at you in the mirror.

Is that your experience of bodily life - groaning, and burdened? I've touched on aging and the sense of frustration and alienation that can bring. Sickness or disability can give a sense of alienation from our own body. Body image, eating disorders, sexuality, gender, can make our bodies complicated and bewildering and agonising. Growing up it can take us years to feel comfortable in our own skin, and some people never do. Or maybe you just make an uneasy truce with your body - despite your differences you have to live together.

The Bible here is not anti-body, as some would have it. Rather it is realistic about our bodily life and helps us make sense of our experience. We groan and are burdened. Sometimes we're terrified that we might be left naked. If people really knew what was going on inside, what I've done ... We're ashamed and terrified of being exposed. We may even rage against God and blame him for the mess of our bodily existence.

Listen again to God's word, verse 5.

5 Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

What is the very purpose for which God has made us?

It is that we may be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life! That is God's purpose for you. Life. Immortality. Glory. Back in 3.18 we see it is being transformed more and more into the likeness of Christ with ever increasing glory.

If you trust in Jesus, then that is what God is at work in you to do by the power of his Holy Spirit. That glory is your future, and the same Spirit who is at work in you now is the deposit guaranteeing what is to come. The word translated deposit in Greek is *arrabwn*. It's a picture taken from the marketplace. A person would make an *arrabwn* or the first

installment of a payment. It secured legal possession by the person making the payment and obliged them to make the remaining payments. If you trust in Jesus, God has given you his Holy Spirit. You belong to him. He will bring you to glory. Is that your hope?

Living Now (6-10)

This hope teaches us how to live in the present. Have a look with me, verse 6.

Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. 7 We live by faith, not by sight. 8 We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

The secure future, guaranteed by the Holy Spirit himself, gives us confidence for the present. Whatever we experience; suffering, sickness, difficulty, and on the other hand, all the good things of life, we are never really at home in our weak and frail bodies. Our true home is with the Lord Jesus. That home is secure. Christ is with us in the present by the Holy Spirit, and he will bring us there. Indeed the only path to that glory is through suffering, even as it was for Christ.

Of course these things are not seen, except with the eye of faith. This is one of the great challenges of Christianity - to walk by faith and not by sight. The caricature of faith is that it is blind. That faith is opposed to reason and in spite of all evidence to the contrary. The counter of course is a supreme confidence in reason and one's own ability to impartially examine all the evidence and reach the necessary conclusion. Life however is much more complex. To be human is to live amidst uncertainty. The lurking fear for the confident rationalist is that maybe his unbelief is not true. Faith is a forbidden fruit threatening the closed world of hard materialism. For the Christian, faith has its reasons. I'm happy to lend you books on the historical evidence for Jesus. At the same time faith goes beyond cold rationalism. The word itself means "take one's stand on something, [to] believe in something." In his *Introduction to Christianity*, former Pope Benedict writes, "faith in God [is] a holding on to God through which man gains a firm foothold for his life."² In the end, faith is not pulling yourself up by your own intellectual bootstraps, but receiving the gift of God's love in Christ, and finding in him the solid ground from which to explore the world and oneself.

The loss of faith and the hope of glory I suggest has led to the existential anxiety that grips Western culture. We no longer know how to deal with suffering. We're at war over what it is to be human. Without the hope of the resurrection of the body, the frustrations and alienation of bodily existence have to be totally answered here and now. We attempt to change the world - society, and our very bodies to overcome that alienation. Covid-19 has reminded us that we are in fact finite. There is a limit to what science and politics can accomplish. Yes we work for justice now. But the world needs to be healed and remade from the outside, and us too. In these verses Paul offers the path for us to take while we await that day. We place our hope and confidence in the God who raises the dead. Verse 9 tells us how to approach our present bodily existence in all its frailties and ambiguities:

² Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, Ignatius Press, 2004: 69

9 So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. 10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

The day of the resurrection of our bodies is also the day of judgment. It's what we confess each week in the creed - *Jesus will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.* Judgment too is our hope, or at least it ought to be. Because it is when Christ will bring true and complete justice to this hurting world. Yes, we too will be judged. Our deeds will be exposed. What we have done to advance Christ's kingdom of truth and justice and love will be seen. But Paul is confident. In the power of the Spirit we can hope to *please God* through what we do in our bodies. You, even you, in your fragile and frustrating body, can please God, as you love your neighbour, as you offer your body to God in worship, as you live in obedience to Christ.

There is a great comfort and joy to be meeting back in person. I am so pleased to see you. But we are still in the tent of these frail bodies. Our true home is with the Lord. We long for glory. Today, I invite you to place your trust and hope in Jesus and his promises. Maybe for the hundredth time, maybe for the first time. Make the words of confession your own. Hear Jesus' words of forgiveness to you. Receive his pledge of love in communion, be nourished at his table, commit yourself again to offer your body, weak and frail, in worship to him in the mighty power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.