

Boasting in Hope

Date: 16 August 2020, 10th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's

Series: 2020 Pulse Check

Texts: Psalm 23; Romans 5:1-11

Crisis and Opportunity

I don't know about you but it feels like we are living in a moment of great crisis and change. The international order that has prevailed since the Second World War is unravelling. A tiny microbe has shut down entire countries and economies. Our way of life has been severely disrupted. Who knows what the future will look like. Tasmania may be one of the safest places on earth when it comes to coronavirus, but be assured, these changes will affect us.

How do you feel about the crisis and change that we are facing? Maybe you feel scared. What will happen to you and those you love? Worried - where is our society headed? It may be hard to muster any sense of optimism, as we look at the numbers of deaths and job losses. Crises are, I suggest, a crucible moment. Ore is placed under the fire. The impurities float to the surface and can be discarded for the pure gold.

I want to suggest that what we are going through could be seen as a spiritual crisis and as a crucible moment. The gods that our culture has worshipped and that have structured our lives are being put in the furnace and shown to be false and therefore failing. Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. Let's take them in reverse order. Happiness in our culture has atrophied to pleasure. We seek pleasure and run from pain like the plague. Well, the plague is catching us. Liberty. The country with the greatest freedoms on earth is disintegrating because people are standing on their own liberties with no regard for their neighbours. I'm thankful that in Australia by and large we still have a sense of neighbourliness to follow public health directives. Life. There's an grim irony that the first state to legislate euthanasia is now desperately trying to stem the spread of the virus in aged care homes. Beneath these are the gods of Money and Power. But we're realising that life does not consist in the abundance of possessions, and actually we can put our greed on hold in order to protect life. Money cannot ultimately secure and preserve our lives. Politics cannot bring in the peace and life, the *shalom* of the Kingdom of God.

We have pushed death and it's handmaid suffering out of sight and sought to escape it's cold fingers through pleasure but it's grim presence confronts us every day and we are terrified. How can we face death? How can we endure the inevitable suffering that is coming our way? The gods of our age have not prepared us for these realities.

The West has abandoned its spiritual heritage, and has bought a lie. But the gods of the West stand unmasked, and helpless. And so their worshippers stumble hopeless and afraid. In Jesus words, harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. When the old gods are shown to be false and failing the door opens for us to see the glory of the true and living God who is mighty to save. Our crisis is a moment of great opportunity - for ourselves, and for the church, to hold out again the light of Hope in Christ.

So for the remainder of our time I want to look at the Hope we find in Jesus and how we might hold it's light for our neighbours.

Hope

Have a look with me at our reading from Romans 5.

There are 2 very simple things that I want to point out here.

- We can have hope because through Jesus we have peace with God
- Because of that hope we can face suffering

Let's consider each in turn.

If death were the end and there was nothing, chances are that we would not fear it. But as ancient philosopher Epicurus says, "What men fear is not the fact that death is annihilation but that it is not." That there might be something after death eats away at us. What if there is a God. What if I will meet him after I die? What if the deeds I have done will be laid bare? In his novel *The Trial*, Franz Kafka imagines a man who is charged with a crime but never told what it is. He spends the whole novel trying to find the judge to have his case tried and a verdict given. The question Kafka raises is that without a final verdict on our lives does what we do and therefore who we are have any meaning? The only thing worse than a day of judgment would be no judgment at all.

In speaking to the philosophers in Athens the apostle Paul says, "God has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this by raising him from the dead."¹ We fear that we will fall on the wrong side of that judgment. But the wonderful news of the gospel is this:

at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. 7
Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. 8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Paul continues, and notice the past and future tenses in these verses.

Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! 10 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! 11 Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

There will be a day of judgment when God will bring justice in his wrath. But we can peace with God now. That is because Jesus died for us on the cross. Through his death we are reconciled to God. The reason for this is that God's coming judgment at the end of history has fallen upon Jesus in the middle of history. The guilty verdict we all deserve was pronounced upon him in his death. His resurrection was God's vindication of his obedience. As we trust in Jesus, that's what faith is, we receive that vindication. This is the great exchange - Jesus' dies our death so that we receive his life. He stands in our place as guilty,

¹ Acts 17.31

we receive his standing before God as righteous. And this is why Paul begins - "since we have been justified through faith we have peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ." This is the verdict that gives meaning to our lives that Kafka longed for.

And Paul adds, this is by grace. It's not something we earn. It's not like we can somehow twist God's arms to overlook the things we've broken and the people we've damaged. Rather, we're put right with God through Jesus' death and this is a gift.

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.

This is the great hope that Jesus offers us. Peace with God here and now, and glory with him in the future. Glory there is shorthand for the resurrection from the dead, the day when God makes all things new, the union of all things with God, the day when we will see him face to face. This is a hope that overcomes our twin fears in the face of death - the dissolution of love and those we love, and the fear of punishment. Hope is the great gift that we hold out to our neighbours. Paul says, we boast in it. Boasting here is not a puffing up of the self - rather it's like the kid who has just discovered a new toy and has to show it to anyone and everyone who will listen.

This hope also gives us the resources to endure suffering in the present. Suffering in our secular culture is meaningless and thwarts our attempts to make meaning in life. When suffering comes, we don't know what to do with it, except perhaps escape through the pleasure - TV, alcohol, sex, drugs, a holiday. While in no way justifying suffering, Paul shows how through Jesus God can use suffering to grow us. Jesus gives us the resources to be able to bear up under suffering.

3 Not only so, but we also boast in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; 4 perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5 And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

This attitude to suffering can give us courage to face not only our own, but also to enter into the suffering of others, to walk with others in love. And what's more, we do so in the mighty power of the Holy Spirit. He is God's presence with us, assuring us of his love even in the midst of suffering. This is the second great gift of hope that we hold out to our neighbours - not only the hope of glory, but also a path through suffering in the present.

Do you know this peace with God through JESUS? Are you trusting him, even in your suffering? The idols of our culture are ones that we are tempted to trust in too. The covid crisis is a great opportunity for us to renew our faith, to place our hope again in Christ and to press deeper into the God who holds us in our suffering. Psalm 23 is a great reminder of that - if you have the Good Shepherd, you lack nothing. He will refresh your soul. His rod and staff will comfort you.

Methods

We'll spend some more time next week looking at how we can press deeper into God. But I just wanted to finish with some thoughts on how we might communicate this hope to our neighbours.

As we were separated and confined to our houses one of the things I learned a lot about was communication. I've worked hard at keeping us connected to each other through various means of communication - phone calls, Zoom, Facebook, emails, letters. The hope of Christ was spread through the ancient world by use of the best methods of the time - letters, roads and preaching. The New Testament is a product of that, lots of letters, sent by the apostles, transported by road. And wherever they went, preaching.

Covid has made us so much more aware of possibilities for communication through online means. The Guardian reported a study from April that found that 1/4 of Britons had watched or listened to a religious service since lockdown began, and 1 in 20 had begun to pray.² Other surveys have found that people joining online services are not going to the ones with the slickest production, but those from a church they have a personal connection with. The online presence is not a substitute for in person, flesh and blood relationships and experience, but rather an extension of it.

The church's online presence is a huge front door for our spiritually hungry neighbours. We've been delighted to welcome new friends to St George's who have joined us through our rudimentary online presence.

All of this means that we need to invest in our online presence. Concretely that means I have been working on maintaining our website and Facebook page. We've also worked at continuing the Zoom option for our 10am service. But going forward we need to plan for a permanent online option for our church services, and that will require an infrastructure investment. We're not going to totally reinvent church. The traditions that we inhabit beautifully convey the unchanging gospel of Jesus. But we do need to incorporate these new means of communication so that we can hold out the hope of Christ to our friends and neighbours.

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/03/british-public-turn-to-prayer-as-one-in-four-tune-in-to-religious-services>