

Puy de Serre Trinity 6 2017

When I left Sheffield to go to theological college in Durham in 1982 my neighbour gave us a picture. It still hangs on our wall at home today. It shows a path leading up into mountains and in the foreground there is a walker, carrying a large rucksack and climbing steadily upwards. There is a caption with the promise, taken from our OT reading this morning – I shall be with you wherever you go. We have found that to be true ever since.

Picture Jacob the liar and the deceiver. His brother in his hurt and anger is planning to kill him as soon as his father is dead. He and his mother have hatched a plan to allow him to escape to safety. He is to find a wife from his uncle's family in Haran – another stab at the unfortunate Esau whose marriage to Philistine women has caused his parents much distress. So he sets out, apparently with his family's blessing but in reality fleeing for his life.

Yet God goes with him and reveals himself to him in this remarkable vision we call Jacob's ladder, promising the land to his descendants who will grow in numbers to occupy it and become a means of blessing to all the families of the earth. God will go with Jacob wherever he may go, will bring him safely back to fulfil his promises.

Jacob recognises the presence of God and sets up the stone he had laid his head on as a votive pillar to him, but he is still cautious as we read later, wanting reassurance. 'If God will be with me and will watch over me, and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely then the Lord will be my God and this stone shall be the Lord's house and I will give Him a tenth of all that He gives me.'

Many struggles lie ahead of him, not least getting a taste of his own medicine from the wily Laban who exploits and deceives him, and his epic struggle as he wrestles with God at the ford of the Jabok from which he will emerge, physically damaged, but with a new identity.

He is far from being perfect and will repeat the mistakes made by his parents in showing favouritism to one of his wives, Rachel and two of his sons, Joseph and Benjamin, but God works in him and through him, in spite of his failings.

What is our experience of God and how do we receive it? Our readings from Romans over the last few weeks have shown us that we are saved by God's grace, justified by faith through our Lord Jesus Christ who died for us whilst we were still sinners and have peace with God who pours His love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Romans 5 1-5)

So we cannot earn God's love by being good, only be made aware of it by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit reveals God and His love for us in Jesus throughout our lives. This happens in different ways for different people. For some, like Saul, it can be a dramatic revelation, for others and I include myself in their number, it can take longer. No matter how it may start, it is an ongoing and life transforming process. We are born again into Christ, through our baptism, dying with Him and being raised to new life here on earth until we ourselves die and share in His resurrection. We are set free from the power, which Paul calls the slavery of sin – not that we cease to be sinners, but we know that in Christ we are promised forgiveness, whenever we repent – to become disciples, followers of Jesus whom we willingly acknowledge as our Lord and Master. The Holy Spirit gives us gifts to help us and grows fruit in us to make us more like Jesus. So, though we may struggle with sin and always fall short of God's standards of love for Him and for our neighbour, as summed up by the 10 Commandments, there is no condemnation for us because we are in Christ Jesus whose Spirit has set us free from the flesh – not just our physical being, but everything in us which is not pleasing to God, our selfish and fearful nature, lack of love, disobedience and the like – to become children of God.

We fail fully to understand the extent of His love - and it is good to revisit Paul's prayer in Ephesians 1 regularly to remind us of how great that love is – but the Holy Spirit teaches us to know God's love and to address Him as our Abba, Father, just as Jesus Himself did. This intimate term, 'Daddy' recalls the love which God shows for his chosen people Israel in spite of their repeated disobedience and lack of faith in the words of the prophet Hosea. How can He give her up when it was He who guided her first stumbling steps and taught her to walk as a child?

Last week Gini and I were on the beach in the late afternoon at the Pointe d'Aiguillon, just most people were leaving. Two devoted grandparents were encouraging their two small granddaughters to pack up their things ready to go

home. There were lots of things, buckets, spades, rubber rings and so on. The smallest child – was she in the terrible two stage?- refused all offers to help her carry what belonged to her. Her grandfather, sensibly stood back and let her try. Little by little he took off her what she could no longer carry until she was left with only her shoes in her hand. No complaints from her granddad, no 'I told you so.' Only the love which prompted him to say when she reached the concrete path at the end of the beach, 'take care, mind you don't hurt your feet.'

I felt it was a lovely picture of God's patient love for us or as we read in 1 Peter, 'Cast your burdens on God, and He will sustain you.'

In Christ we have been adopted into God's family and share the inheritance which Jesus died to bring us. God's Love, acceptance, forgiveness and the promise of eternal life in heaven.

Yes, there will be suffering in the world, there always has been, but we will not be overwhelmed by it, even if it appears to destroy us, because God's promise is that nothing will separate us from His love – as Paul will conclude this 8th chapter of Romans.

By the grace of God we have responded to the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ and it is growing in our hearts and the promise is that if we remain in Him, we will be fruitful. But we live in a fallen world, a world which is vividly described in the parable in today's gospel.

How are we to respond to the evil we see in the world around us? We could judge, condemn and seek to separate ourselves from it, but if we yield to this temptation we forget that we carry the seeds of evil within ourselves. We are part of the problem, involved in a battle against evil, both in ourselves and in the world, as Paul points out in Romans 7, not relying on our own strength, but on God who in Christ has already won the victory. We are not called to judge either ourselves or others, only put our grateful trust and faith in God our Father and our Saviour Jesus Christ.

So we are to remain in the world, not try to separate ourselves from it – and this is a temptation which can express itself in our hiding in the safety of our churches, wondering why people don't come to join us there – not only remain

in the world, but go out into it, making God's love known by word and deed. God will judge in His own time and His own way. In the meantime the promise of Jesus, like that of God to Jacob, is that He will be with us wherever we go, even to the end of the age.