



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 17th March 2024

Readings: *Psalm 51; Philippians 4.10-20; John 12.20-33*

Lent V, Passion Sunday

I have always appreciated the music of the Irishman, Charles Villiers Stanford, who died a hundred years ago on Good Friday. As well as singing his church anthems and canticles, I used to accompany my mother as she sang his setting of Winifred Mary Letts' *A soft day*, which Jennifer offered while we were gathering this morning. And how we treasure those 'soft days' that Letts conjures, when 'the soaking earth smells sweet under my own two bare feet'. An idyll to console us in an era that can feel so very different. Thank you, Jennifer, for giving us that, and for so much more that you bring us week by week.

Is every day 'soft', appealingly wrapped in mist and moistened with drizzling rain? Or, by contrast, do you ever feel trapped by your days' hardness? It maybe that our **work** is overwhelming. How can we keep all the balls in the air? It maybe that we face a **difficult decision**, and feel caught between the proverbial rock and the hard place. Or are our **physical circumstances** confining us, through the unwelcome visitation of an illness, or of advancing years, or of substances we are abusing, or of feeling at odds with our identity? Or maybe we are an orphan in Sierra Leone, or feeling vulnerable in gang-controlled Port au Prince, or that we live in an area of the United Kingdom where the depth of deprivation¹ leaves our community in poverty with a permanent grey shroud. Or do we feel trapped by our **errors**? – that past we cannot change, scarred by sins that are 'too heavy to carry, too real to hide, and too deep to undo'.² Or maybe we feel trapped by a **religion** so narrow that it too often feels like there's an 'in group' that would banish others to an 'out group', oblivious to the thought that Jesus seemed much more to want to create a 'come-on-in group', that blesses rather than badgers, respects rather than eradicates. Maybe we long for what Brian McLaren calls 'a generous orthodoxy', which enables 'the mysterious way of Jesus to be embraced across the whole Christian horizon (and beyond)'.³ A hard day, O God, trapped by circumstances, by sins, by grace-less ideas of salvation. And if we do feel trapped, how do we handle it? Frustration? Anger? Surrender? Depression? Rebellion? Going off the rails? Giving up?

Saint Paul is no stranger to entrapment. Indeed, in the Acts of the Apostles, Luke suggests that there were several times when Paul was literally in jail: in Rome (28.16-31), in Philippi, (16.23-40) and in Caesarea (23.23-26.32). And in II Corinthians, Paul himself tells of enduring 'far more imprisonments' than others. (11.23) Although we do not know for certain from which city he wrote it, it's clear that the letter to the Philippians was written whilst he was in prison. That's a pretty specific way to be trapped, and although we haven't all experienced it first hand, maybe one of you viewing the live stream of this service has. You'll know as few of us can know, what it feels like when the door from liberty slams behind you, and you hear the officer's key jangle in the lock.

Now, Paul's response to his imprisonment is remarkable. He doesn't quite sing Stanford's, 'A soft day, thank God', but we do hear him say, 'I have learned to be content with whatever I have.' Incarcerated *and* content; how does *that* work? Is it some sort of super stoicism? Contemporary with Paul, the stoic

¹ Domains of Deprivations: 1. income; 2. employment; 3. education, skills and training; 4. health and disability; 5. crime; 6. barriers to housing and services; and 7. living environment. Available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5dfce0d2ed915d1f2c718355/Deprivation_2019.pdf Accessed 16th March 2024

² Inspired by a prayer of confession in *Book of Common Worship* 1993 published by The Theology and Worship Ministry Unit for the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox Press

³ McLaren, Brian D. 2004 *A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I am a Missional, Evangelical, Post/Protestant, Liberal/Conservative, Mystical/Poetic, Biblical, Charismatic/Contemplative, Fundamentalist/Calvinist, Anabaptist/Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, Green, Incarnational, Depressed-yet-hopeful, Emergent, Unfinished CHRISTIAN* Grand Rapids: Zondervan pp 247 and 19

Seneca ⁴ also speaks of contentment – indeed, they both use the same word ⁵ - but the philosopher seems to be referring to that virtue which one dredges up from within oneself. Seneca is basically urging that we resign ourselves to the way things are; that ‘it is what it is’ and there’s owt we can do about it. ⁶ *That’s* not the root of Paul’s contentment with being in prison.

And nor does Paul want us to think that his plight can be eased by material gifts: a bunch of daffodils here, a cake there. The section of Philippians Robert read is often thought to be expressing Paul’s acknowledgement of gifts that Epaphroditus brought to him in prison from the church in Philippi where Paul is very well known. You may have noticed, he doesn’t actually say ‘thank you’. He expresses his joy at their charity (4.10a). He remarks appreciatively that their previous thoughtfulness has blossomed again (4.10b). He is touched that they got alongside him in his distress (4.14). He says that the Philippians’ kindness to him reflects well upon them, and pleases God (4.18). But he doesn’t say ‘thank you’. Now, one theory for that omission is because in those days and that culture, saying ‘thank you’ required the making of a reciprocal gift, and he is not going to do that. If he was in prison, maybe he simply couldn’t have done so; there was no Tesco Express round the corner to which he was free to pop out. But that is not his point anyway. He carefully emphasises that he doesn’t have any needs, not least because he has learned how to manage both plenty and poverty. He doesn’t want to have a relationship with them that is defined by gift giving. No, his contentment is due neither to stoic resignation nor to material massaging. It is because in each and every circumstance he trusts the presence and power of the living Christ. That is what transforms Paul’s entrapment into contentment, and he offers the same Christ to his readers – readers in Philippi and readers in Cambridge, or wherever you are.

I want to close with suggesting three ways in which you and I might so encounter the living Christ, that our entrapments – whatever they are – are made as bearable as was Paul’s ... until we too can say, ‘I have learned to be content with whatever I have.’ First, is it not the presence of others, that’s presence with a ‘ce’, not an ‘nts’ - that offers us an encounter with the One whose aroma they carry? As if it was yesterday, I can recall from thirty years ago, the valedictory address to a missionary who was returning to the USA from South Africa. The person paying tribute honoured her for how, in the days of high and brutal *apartheid*, she had offered a truly incarnational ministry to the people of Soweto, living out the presence of God in Christ. By being there, faithfully, sacrificially, and often silently, she had wafted the aroma of Christ into the trap of racial segregation, and inspired a contentment that was about neither complacency nor resignation, but about resilience and hope. And such is our vocation: in the Hub, in our homes, in our solidarity with Sallymay International School, to be the aroma of Christ breaching the most impenetrable of traps.

Secondly, one of the most profound paradoxes of the Biblical witness is St Paul’s contention that ‘when we are weak is when we are strong’. ⁷ I believe he means that it is only in recognising the inadequacy of our own resources – the *naïveté* of a stoical determination to cope in our own strength – that we are humble enough to know our need of God. In a seventeenth-century sermon, John Donne suggested that none of us is an island entire unto ourselves. ⁸ But even that interconnectedness with one another is not Paul’s pathway to contentment for the entrapped. Paul’s point seems to be that we are to abide in Christ (John 15.4), to tarry all our days with him, to linger with the expectation that the God who is made known in Jesus Christ is given to all who open our lives to that God. This is in an entirely realm different welcoming friends for their fellowship, or tradespeople for their skills. To be open to God is to know our need of the Source, Guide and Goal of all that is. ⁹ It is to know that God and God alone is responsible for ‘our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all, [out of an]

⁴ Lucius Annaeus Seneca the Younger died c 65 CE in Rome

⁵ αὐταρκής – ‘self-sufficient’

⁶ cf Fowl, Stephen E. 2005 *Philippians: the Two Horizons New Testament Commentary* Cambridge UK: Wm B. Eerdmans page 194

⁷ II Corinthians 12.10

⁸ Donne, John 1572-1631, from a sermon, *Meditation XVII*, published in 1624, as part of *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, whilst he was Dean of St Paul’s Cathedral.

⁹ Romans 11.36 (NEB)

... inestimable love, [for] the redemption of the world' as the General Thanksgiving incomparably, irreplaceably puts it; the God who says, 'the one who comes to me, I will not reject; they will neither hunger nor thirst.' (John 6.37 and 35) It is precisely the opposite of that contentment which vainly battles on in dogged determination. It is the contentment to find which an ancient Celt, maybe St Patrick himself, bids us turn to Christ 'I bind unto myself today the power of God to hold and lead, his eye to watch, his might to stay, his ear to hearken to my need, the wisdom of my God to teach, his hand to guide, his shield to ward, the word of God to give me speech, his heavenly host to be my guard.'¹⁰

And finally, *guilt* with its first cousin, *despair*, are amongst the entrapments most difficult to escape. Confined in his jail, wherever it was, Paul could have languished in self-criticism. And don't get me wrong, we do well to examine ourselves and sing with King David, 'Wash me thoroughly from my wickedness, and forgive me all my sin.' It is a key element of Lent. Be assured, though, our freedom doesn't lie in *our* penitence; it's from *God's* forgiveness – knowing we are accepted because there is far more love in God than there is sin in us.

Paul is content. It's not because he is numb to the realities of his life nor of the world's, insensitive to hard days. It's not because he has a super-human shoulder-shrugging personal resilience. And it's not because material gifts make anything better. It's because he trusts, indeed rejoices that he 'can do all things through him who strengthens us.'

May it be so, Amen

N. P. Uden

17th March 2024

¹⁰ 'St Patrick's Breastplate' (5th-7th cent. Gaelic), sometimes attributed to St Patrick (c. 370-c.460) – RS 36.4