October 18th

Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, “Be strong, do not fear; your God will come,  
he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.” Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness  
and streams in the desert. (Isaiah 35:3-6)

Paul and his companions travelled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. (Acts 16:6-10)

The Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two, to every town and place where he was about to go.  He told them, Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road. When you enter a house, first say, ‘Peace to this house.’  If someone who promotes peace is there, your peace will rest on them; if not, it will return to you. Stay there, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not move around from house to house. When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is offered to you. Heal the sick who are there and tell them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’ (Luke 10:1-9)

Keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry. For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near.  I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.  Do your best to come to me quickly, for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me, Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry. When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments. Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm because he strongly opposed our message. At my first defence, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. (2 Tim 4:5-17)

This week Andrew, Peter and I have been organising the service rota for November - and of course, as most things are at the moment, it has to be provisional. So many plans have been cancelled or changed - I particularly feel for all the wedding couples I’ve been working with, many of whom have been saving and preparing for their special day for years - only to have to cancel or scale things back drastically to comply with the covid regulations. There is an ancient Jewish proverb made popular by Woody Allen: ‘we make plans and God laughs.’

This does make God sound rather cynical though, like the gods of Greek tragedy where extreme confidence was punished by Nemesis - downfall. It’s what we still see today in dramas on TV or in film, just when things seem to be going well, perhaps too well, you know something awful is about to happen.

We *are* wise not to take things for granted and become too attached to our personal plans, but that doesn’t mean that our God is like those Greek gods, looking for opportunities to trip us up. We know that: ‘my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord’ (Isaiah 55) but that isn’t because God wants to thwart us, but that he has the ultimate plan, and the perspective of eternity. In a sense he has a ‘bird’s eye view’ of the journey that we, and the whole world is taking.

The coronavirus is a symptom of our fallen world; it was not part of God’s plan, but he already knows what he will bring out of it. We see in part, glimpses of kingdom values breaking through; in time we will see the full extent of what God can see now.

A few weeks ago, we read of Joseph telling his treacherous brothers: ‘You plotted evil against me, but God turned it into good.’ And we stand ready to be surprised by what God can do, how he transforms even the most challenging of situations.

The author Somerset Maugham wrote a story about a long-serving verger at a church in London. One day the new vicar discovered that the janitor was illiterate. The verger was too set in his ways to want to learn to read, so the vicar fired him. Jobless, he notices that there are no tobacconist’s shops in the area and invests his meagre savings in opening one. When this prospers, he buys another, and so on, ending up with a chain of shops making him a wealthy man. One day, when depositing his money in the bank, the manager asks him to fill in some forms. When the man reveals that he can’t read or write, the astonished bank manager exclaims, rhetorically, ‘what would you be today if you *had* been able to?!’ “Well,” replies the man, “I’d be verger of St. Peter’s Church in Neville Square.”

The most amazing results can come from situations which, at the time, may seem a disaster to us.

There are three points that I’d like to draw out of today’s readings, and the first illustrates the same message as the story of the illiterate verger. In Acts 16, Paul is on his second missionary journey, spreading the gospel in the countries of the middle east. He had planned to go to what is now Turkey, but the Holy Spirit prevents this. This could have felt like a real knock back, but in answering the call to go west instead, to Macedonia, Paul begins the process which introduces Christianity to Europe and the whole of the western world. God knows what his plans are. Our role is to listen and ask him to guide us *before* we seek his blessing on our endeavours.

Then, in today’s gospel reading, we have the instructions Jesus gives as he sends out the 72. He calls for trust ‘carry no purse or bag or sandals’ but also for patience and endurance: ‘remain in the same house … do not move about from house to house.’ Don’t lose heart, God plays the long game, he has the overview, things will come to fruition in his good time.

Finally, we need to remember the character of the God we follow. Paul is writing his second letter to Timothy from prison, chained in a dungeon and aware that he is nearing the end of his life. Speaking of his friends he says: ‘everyone deserted me.’ But his trust in God is steadfast: ‘the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed, and all the Gentiles might hear it.’ Even when the going gets really tough, God does not desert us - as we read in Isaiah:

‘Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, “Be strong, do not fear; your God will come.’ Or, using today’s more prosaic language, ‘don’t tell God how big your storm is, tell the storm how big your God is’.

I’m going to end with some words which I often use with bereaved families, because I think they are an encouragement, even for challenging times such as these:

**Let go the past; loosen the thongs that bind.**

**Love the present; enjoy each shining moment.**

**Look to the future with courage and hope.**

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