

Sermon Evensong Ordinary Sunday 14/Trinity 4

Saint Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians in the famous passage on love – read at just about every wedding I have celebrated – the apostle outlines the three theological virtues: *now, faith, hope and love abide*. And Paul, of course, settles on the idea that *the greatest of these is love*. Still, with love, *faith and hope abide*. That is, they belong together, they speak to and inform each other. Without one the others are impoverished.

In this time of disruption, when violence and uncertainty, trouble and disturbance rumbles and at times roars across the globe, we should, as Christians, be looking to these virtues: faith, hope and love. At this time when there is so much anger and frustration and anxiety bubbles and boils about us, we should, as Christians, be setting as our anchor these: faith, hope and love. When so much darkness and chaos push against us, faith, hope and love will be the remedy we so desperately need.

Let us give thanks that the very worst of all the troubles these past months has passed us by. Even if there are some setbacks in this city, we should rightly give thanks to God for his mercy here; that in many ways we have been touched lightly by the troubles of late. But we remain part of the one human family. And so we remain aware of the huge issues (and not just from COVID, but political unrest as well) that continue to face huge portions of the earth's population, and will continue to disturb and unsettle for some time to come.

Even if Paul sees the greatest of the virtues as love, it is *hope* that will keep our sanity in place. Hope that will allow us to see past the fog to a brighter day. Hope that will compel us to move past ourselves and our own concerns to sharing the faith and love we have been graced with. Hope, then, a powerful remedy, especially when so many around us appear hopeless.

Christian hope speaks very powerfully to the situations we now find ourselves in. Because, quite simply, Christian hope is founded in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Christ's victory over death and the powers of darkness show that these do not have the last word. These *are not* the greatest and most definitive forces at work. All those forces of death, despair and darkness are conquered in Christ. And they have no power over us. We know that God in Christ can overcome all things and has overcome all things. And so, we are people of hope.

The strident message of hope shines through in both reading set before us tonight. The remarkable story from the Second Book of Kings tells of how, under the young king Josiah, a religious reform was enacted. His story is remarkable because almost all the kings in the ancient record tell us how they *did evil in the sight of the Lord*. Yet here was one who *did what was right*. Under Josiah, the Temple was restored after having fallen into neglect. And while digging around the high priest discovered the law. We might overlook this detail, but the law of Moses had essentially been forgotten.

This central aspect of Jewish faith, belief and identity had been lost. For centuries – generations! - the law had not been observed, the covenant had been forgotten. But having discovered this book – almost certainly a copy of the book of Deuteronomy – Josiah set about to clean up the act. The law is read out, the idols and their priests cast out, and the people recommit to the covenant. It is a powerful story. After centuries of neglect and forgetfulness things are put right! Hope wins out!

And Luke's' singular masterpiece – the story of the prodigal son – likewise a story of hope. The sorry lad in a state of desperation and despondency has his story turned around. His selfishness, his greed, his insult to family, are put aside – cast aside – in the light of hope. The boy's own hope, yes, but the father's as well. The Father's hope that his son would return. And a hope that was not disappointed.

We only see half the picture if we imagine Christian hope is simply about our hope for something better. Our hope ultimately rests on *God's* hope for us, that we will hear his voice, respond to his invitation and accept the faith and love he offers.

When we might be tempted to give ourselves over to pessimism and despair - for our lives, our world and even our church – we need to remember these stories, and others like them. We need to remember that we are people of hope, that God can turn any situation round. No matter how dark and dangerous our world and our lives might become, as Christians we are people of hope. In hope we believe that things can turn around, that there can be a second chance, that things can get better. Amen.