

LORDSBRIDGE TEAM OF CHURCHES



The Church's prayer for this Sunday

Almighty God,
by the prayer and discipline of Lent
may we enter into the mystery of Christ's sufferings,
and by following in his Way
come to share in his glory;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Bible readings and reflection for Sunday 28th February 2021

A reading from Romans 4:13-end

The Promise Realized Through Faith

¹³ For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴ For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. ¹⁵ For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.

¹⁶ That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, ¹⁷ as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations"—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. ¹⁸ In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, "So shall your offspring be." ¹⁹ He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness^(b) of Sarah's womb. ²⁰ No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹ fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. ²² That is why his faith was "counted to him as righteousness." ²³ But the words "it was counted to him" were not written for his sake alone, ²⁴ but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, ²⁵ who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

For the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.



A Gospel reading from the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 8: 31-end

Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection

³¹ And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³² And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

³⁴ And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever would save his life^(a) will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. ³⁶ For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? ³⁷ For what can a man give in return for his soul? ³⁸ For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

For the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

A reflection from Revd David Newton, lead minister in Comberton, Toft and Caldecote

I love a good 'family movie' occasionally (the Disney type, or the rom-com and so on). We all need a bit of feel-good to get us through these times. There is something deeply re-assuring about the predictability of the classic plot line – the scene is set, things go wrong, then it all turns out okay in the end.

We watched Frozen with our son Toby recently (he got a little scared by the ice monster but generally enjoyed it). The film wonderfully turns all sorts of clichés on their head... but the general plot arc remains pretty much (and thankfully) untouched. Some bad things happen, Elsa and Anna (the main character) overcome a series of insurmountable obstacles, they go through some transformative moments, and then come and save the day.

LORDSBRIDGE TEAM OF CHURCHES



We cannot help but be attracted to this plot line. If you're anything like me, such films always make me cry – they are stories of transformation, redemption and all being well. But rarely does real life follow such a tear-jerking narrative arc.

Often though, the Christian narrative is presented along just these lines. We can all understand why, for there are some similarities. A mess is made, a messianic figure comes to save the day, characters go through transformative moments, and in the end the cross paves the way to resurrection and all is well as the disciples sit and eat fish on the beach as a foretaste of heaven where all really will be well.

As Julian of Norwich so famously said, 'all will be well, and will be well, and all manner of things will be well'. Or more simply, if its not okay its not the end. There is truth in all this. But presented in this way the gospel can come across a little bit too much like a 'family film' or a nice fairy tale. And, perhaps more importantly, it can lead to dangerous expectations about the Christian Life, as if each of our lives should conform to the Disney-type story line.

Too often have I met Christians who are struggling with one thing or another, where there is no clear resolution in sight, who have been left entirely perplexed because they have been fed a Disney Gospel – of struggles leading inexorably to transformation and happy endings. Too often, the stories that are trumpeted in church only conform to this lovely patten: I had a drug problem, but then I met Jesus and my life turned around, and here I am (or whatever it might be). Problems are in the past, not the present.

But the road is usually not quite so straight. We live with struggles, issues, problems today, tomorrow – things that are not just confined to the past!

I remember a speaker at a big Christian Conference de-crying exactly this kind of neatly packaged redemptive story line. He told us how he had taken into his home an addict, who he had poured love on and hoped the guy might be able to reform his life. Instead, the guy stole from him and left, came back again, on repeat, and in the end he stole some more and took an overdose. Notice how jarring that story is; notice how it is not the ending we expect. Where's the transformative moment, we ask.

More subtly, but still problematically, we often speak of 'finding life in giving it away'. Our Gospel reading points to this kind of idea and once again there is truth behind such a statement. We can all think of plenty of examples where we have genuinely

LORDSBRIDGE TEAM OF CHURCHES



felt more alive when we've centred ourselves other people: perhaps we've work hard to bring a smile to a friend or family member, or we've given ourselves in service to a community or event and felt chuffed about it afterwards. In all these little ways we sense the truth of the idea that we find life in giving it away. You may well have heard me use the phrase!

Yet, it is far from the whole story, and itself can be a bit dangerous, because it seems to assume that giving of ourselves will automatically and naturally lead to a good outcome. Or in other words, we're back to the Disney-World and the fairy tale. In this nice story, the difficult self-giving leads inexorably and inevitably to the happy ending.

But again, the road is rarely so straight. Perhaps in these days, we might think of the nurse who has given so much of themselves over the last year, but has not found 'life' through it all and instead is now struggling with PTSD or anxiety. Life has definitely not been found through giving it away for such a person.

So, what does one do when the problems are in the present and do not look like they are going to be dealt with any time soon? Where do we turn when our lives (or the world) do not conform to this lovely narrative arc of struggle and resolution and instead just look like a mess, or full of difficult, or of pain?

We turn to the one 'who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist' as Paul says in his letter to Rome. For in this One we do not find a simple happy ending. There is not an inevitable move from struggle to resolution. Instead we simply find God who creates and re-creates out of nothing.

Let me unpack that a little. The point is this...there is no automatic or natural link between losing our life and saving it. There is no automatic move from cross to resurrection; no inevitable journey from something going wrong to a happy ending.

There is no 'law' that means if we do certain things it will all work out okay. Hence, we are met every day with people's personal stories that do not have happy endings, that we cannot really make sense of. We meet people (or are people) where problems are not resolved and in the past but are very much part of life as we experience it now and life as it probably will be until the day we meet our maker. The faith of which Paul speaks, the call to carry the cross which Jesus gives, are not assurances of a fairy tale ending in which everything gets tied up, makes perfect sense, and ends wonderfully. No. Our lives will be full of loose ends, and bits that

LORDSBRIDGE TEAM OF CHURCHES



make no sense, and unanswered questions, and unresolved difficulty, until the day we die.

In and through all that, the gospel asks us to trust that we are held by the Love that made us and can re-make us. No happy ending that follows a struggle as surely as day follows night. Rather, we trust that not even death has the last word. So whatever mess is around us - or in us - there is always a greater and deeper resource on which to draw, there is always something more to say, there is always love to give or receive, there is always reason to hope. No final resolution that ties everything up in a nice bow, but the unfathomable depths of God which our struggles, and pain and difficult can never exhaust. Not even death could hold him.

Amen.