

REMINDERS OF GLORY

Mark 9:2-9

2 Corinthians 4:1-6

“We do not lose heart” says Paul. You know what, you only say that sort of thing if you are in danger of being downhearted. When everything is going well and life is good, it doesn’t even occur to you that you might lose heart. It is when things don’t look or feel so healthy that it becomes easier to get down. When it comes to being the church it is, and always has been, easy to get downhearted, to feel that we’re not getting anywhere. It is so easy to look around and say “There are so few, why are there not more who see the truth of the good news and the light of God in the face of Jesus Christ?” Or to say “If people say that they believe why don’t they live like it?” It is difficult, and always has been, to go about the ministry which God has entrusted to us: to all of us, not just ordained clergy (Paul, remember, was a layman. He had never been a priest). But we do not lose heart - because it is by God’s mercy that we have a ministry, that we have been given a task to do, a way of serving our God to fulfil. God’s mercy, his giving to us of what we don’t deserve, and not giving us our just deserts has entrusted us with a ministry. And what he has given us is wholeness, it is eyes which can see him in Christ, it is a restoration to the right way of being so that we can discern the truth.

Sometimes when we are tempted to lose heart we are also tempted to work at our ministry in the wrong way, with cunning or watering down the message so that we “falsify God’s word”, but that is not the way forward. That is to say that we have to accommodate ourselves to the voice of this world. There are things about our culture and times which as Christians with a ministry we must bear in mind, but they are not things that ask us to change the gospel - anything that asks for that must be ignored. We must pay attention not to what we are being asked to change of our message, but to where our society most needs to be transformed by the Gospel. You know how it is when you have an itch on just that place on your back which you can’t quite reach. You can strain your hand over your shoulder or round you side but never quite hit the spot. So you ask your friend to help you. He scratches, but it’s too high “No, a little lower” you say. He scratches, but now it’s too low. “Just up a fraction, and maybe marginally to the right,” you say. And so it goes on, frustratingly, until suddenly - ah yes, *that’s* the place. We want to scratch where people are itching, not where we think that they ought to itch.

In that respect we need to pay attention to what is going on around us in the world. We need to see where the good news about forgiveness and acceptance in Jesus, the good news about repentance and turning around, the good news about the wholeness which God’s Kingdom brings is most needed. And then we have to bring it.

But we mustn’t change our message or proclaim it in ways that are at variance with the message. To do that is to say that we are the odd ones, out of step with the world, where what Paul wants to say, what all through, the Bible tell us, is that the world is the odd one, fallen, out of step with how, in God, things really are. Certainly out of step with the way that God intended the world to be. Paul talks about the “god of this world” and whether you think of that as literally a spiritual force working to pull the world away from God, or whether you see it as the false god of worldliness, of greed and selfishness, the message is the same. It’s a false god, not the real God. The world

cannot tell the church what to proclaim or how to be, because we are the ones who have seen the glory of God in the face of Christ. We are the ones who see as God intended us to see, who are living in the world as it was before the fall - even though the signs of the fall are all around us and have an impact on our lives. Nevertheless we are those who live in the world as God created it to be - seeing his glory, working honestly to spread his Kingdom.

If it can be disheartening, then we need to remember the realities. We need to remember that what we are engaged in is not a hobby, something to do on a Sunday, which is nice and makes us feel good and keeps us in contact with our friends and the community. That's not what being the church is really about. We are people who have, by God's mercy, been given the ability to see God's glory in the face of Christ, and so have stepped into his Kingdom, into living in the world as he intended for us. We are the people who have been entrusted with the task of spreading the glory and the Kingdom further. And it's not just a matter of plans and strategy. It is a spiritual battle and prayer is our best weapon; prayer and honest dealing.

Jesus knew that. He wasn't immune from the temptation to be downhearted. In chapter 8 of Mark's gospel we see him feeding 4000 people, then, right after that, the Pharisees ask him for a sign. No wonder Mark tell us that he "sighed deeply in his spirit" (Mark 8:12). The very next thing that happens is that the disciples misunderstand his injunction that they aren't tainted with the leaven of the Scribes and Pharisees and think he is worried about them not having bread: when they have just seen him feed 4000 from practically nothing at all. Then he heals a man of blindness who doesn't gain his sight in one go, but first of all sees people like trees walking about, presumably because his faith wavered. And after all that Peter hails him as the Messiah and then goes on to misunderstand entirely what God means by that title, flatly contradicting Jesus and saying that no matter what he says, in fact he will not have to suffer and die. No wonder Jesus knew the temptation to be downhearted.

But he knew the remedy as well, and so he took three friends and went up a mountain. We know from what we see elsewhere, that when Jesus goes up mountains or into lonely places, he does so to pray. He has gone to God to draw strength for his ministry, to regain perspective so that he doesn't give up or do things the wrong way. He has gone to his Father in prayer.

What happens next is dramatic, both for the disciples and for Jesus. The light which shone, not on, but from him, the figures of Moses and Elijah, the voice, speaking, not to Jesus, but to his friends; but which cannot fail to have reminded him of the voice at his baptism. He is reminded of who he is: God's best beloved Son. He is reminded of where he belongs - in God's perfection and glory. He is reminded of the way that the world really is, when God's Kingdom holds sway.

His disciples also had a dramatic moment, one which they were far less able to cope with. For the first time they saw the realities and glory of God's Kingdom and of Jesus, God's Son whom they follow. It's all more than a little overwhelming, and Peter's suggestion that they should build sort of memorial chapels is far from appropriate; but the message to them is clear enough. Listen to him, to Jesus. Listen, and then you will know what to do and how and when to do it.

When we come to God in prayer he doesn't always, he doesn't often give us such an experience as Jesus and his friends had that day. But when we come, with the beginnings of feeling downhearted in our souls, then he will give to us what he gave to them.. Maybe not in dramatic vision, but that's not always necessary. But God will

give us the reminder of who we are and whose we are. He will remind us that we too have become his beloved children, and that we should listen, not to the world, but to Jesus, his firstborn, firstborn from the dead. He will remind us who he is -the one who commanded light to shine out of darkness, both at the beginning of time and in the sending of his Son, and he will remind us that he has shone into our hearts the light of the knowledge of his glory in the face of Jesus.

I know that as you begin to face the challenges of a forthcoming vacancy, there can be a tendency to become downhearted. I've already heard people say so. But God hasn't given the ministry of his good news just into the hands of the clergy. He has given it to all his children. And all can carry it out if we will just do what he told them on the mountain top: listen to Jesus, listen and then obey.