

Transcript of Reading and sermon – Sunday 5 July 2020

Strangers in a foreign land. Be ready to give an answer.

Felicite Bamford reading 1 Peter 3: 13 – 22

Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, do not be frightened but in your hearts set apart Christ as lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect; keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

It is better if it's God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. For Christ died for our sins once for all; the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the spirit. Through whom he also went to preach to the spirits in prison, who disobeyed long ago, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, while the ark was being built. In it, only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolises baptism that now saves you also; not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience towards God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ; who has gone into Heaven and is at God's right hand with angels, authorities and powers, all in submission to him.

May God bless this reading to our understanding.

Amen.

Bevan preaching

Good day everybody, how wonderful to be with you again. George and I are at the church doing some recordings and of course we are missing you very very dearly, it is just not the same having to look over all these empty chairs. I trust that you are on the other side of the camera however and that you are ready to share God's word with me.

Today's passage comes from 1 Peter 3, and I would like to focus on verse 15, where the apostle writes the following, "Always be prepared to give an answer for the reason why you have hope."

Often we misquote this verse by talking about how we always need to have an answer for how we live, forgetting that this particular verse refers having to have an answer for the hope we have as Christian people. So, have you thought about this question? What would your answer be? Why are you hope filled? Why do you, and I, I suppose, why do we live our lives with our eyes fixed on the hope we have in God?

In the times in which we find ourselves, many people are feeling helpless and hopeless, not knowing what to do or where to go. I know that even many people in my life, in my circle of friends for instance, many are feeling discouraged and disheartened; not being certain of where the future will lead us. I suppose I

would be very foolish to disagree with them, for I myself feel that when one goes by what one sees, times are really tough, really challenging and really frightening. We the people of God however, are not called a people of hope for nothing, and as we unpack this verse written by Peter so long ago, we need to look at how we can be ready, willing and able to have an answer for the hope we seem to have in spite of these bleak times in which we find ourselves.

My mind goes to psalm 9 verse 10; where the author writes so fittingly saying, and I quote, "Lord, all those who know your name put their hope in you." So it looks like the hope we have is definitely based in God's name and what that name means to us. As I was looking at this passage, I've been thinking of why I try to always have hope in my heart, in spite of the circumstances I face and rather unsurprisingly I have come up with three reasons for why I think I always have hope. Firstly, my hope is inspired by the kind of love God offers us. When I think not only of how amazing and how unconditional God's love is, it always fills me with hope when I think that this love never ever ends. Long ago already through the prophet Jeremiah, in chapter 31, he speaks on behalf of God and says, "I have loved you with an everlasting love." God probably knew that that was a time in the life of his people when they needed to hear those reassuring words.

They were either on their way into exile, or already in Babylonian exile, where as it is recorded, they were sitting weeping by those rivers, feeling totally and utterly devastated and dare I say hopeless. God raised up certain prophets to minister during the time of Babylonian exile like Ezekiel, like Isaiah and of course like Jeremiah and of all things that Jeremiah spoke to the people this must have been the most uplifting. Promising God's people that they were still loved, even as they faced their harrowing situation of Babylonian captivity. If you will allow me dear friends, I would like to echo these words of old, telling you that this is one of the most important reasons for why where's believers can still have hope even during these dark times.

For we know that God loves us and that God will love us forever. There is nothing that we can do for God's love to be separated from us, and if you need proof for my statement you can scratch around in Romans 8 verses 31 to 39, where no one else but Paul tells us that this has been his very personal experience, that everything that he had been through, that all the torture that he had gone through, that all the loneliness he faced, that all the persecution he tasted could not in a million years get it right to separate him from the love of God. It was his dream for those in Rome reading the letter to come to a full understanding of this and I think it's also my dream as your pastor for us to fully grasp what this verse means. Nothing can separate us from God's love and that is why we have such a reason to hope. You are God's beloved, the object of God's affection, the apple of God's eye and it doesn't matter what you have been through or perhaps more pertinently it doesn't matter what you are going through currently, perhaps you are facing some loneliness, perhaps you are facing a job loss, perhaps your marriage is taking some strain, wherever you find yourself and in whatever you are experiencing you need to know that God loves you and that his perfect saving love will sustain, support and strengthen you on the road ahead.

The second reason for why I think we can always have hope as Christian believers is because I am

convinced that God's grace will be sufficient for us, just as he said he would be. Can I refer you to some of those gospel passages where grace runs wild, where God's mercy becomes manifest in profound and powerful ways?

I think that it's rather safe for us to go as far as saying that Jesus was grace personified, that Jesus came not only to speak words of God's divine grace but also to live it out in the lives of all those who came across his path. There are countless, countless passages that bring to us these expressions of grace; grace of course meaning undeserved favour, where those who were not at all worthy of God's grace found that that is exactly what was made available to them. Because you have been going to church for much longer than I am alive, I don't want to quote all these passages that you know off by heart, but I want to just perhaps remind you are one or two. The Samaritan woman; John chapter 4, the woman caught in adultery; John chapter 8, the demon-possessed man in Mark chapter 5 I think it is. We have written by the gospel authors one record after the other of how God's uncontained and uncontrollable grace was spread like a wildfire through Jesus wherever he went.

If there is ever a time where we have to know that God's grace is also enough us, it would be now. It was John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, who said, "There is enough grace for one and all. Enough grace for every sinner, enough for evermore." The most classical example we have of God promising that his grace would be sufficient for all our needs is that of Paul, where he writes in one of his letters to the Corinthians, that he had gone to God not once, not twice but three times, sounds like me I must say, three times he went to nag God to remove the terrible thorn that had got stuck in his flesh. Because Paul was who he was, because he was already firmly on his way to sainthood, I so expected God to do at least this; to remove this darn thorn the apostle had in his flesh. But shock! Horror! God ended up not doing that, not answering his prayer in a way that he had expected or envisaged.

God comes with some other, very interesting at that, promise. God says to him, "My child," I'm paraphrasing it that, "My child, my grace will be enough for you." And so even as this pandemic causes havoc across the world and of course also in our own lives, we need to realise that even in these difficult times God's grace seeps through into our lives, saving us and bringing us peace. Nobody is perfect and everybody is in desperate need of God's grace, God's forgiveness, God's new life. Hear the good news today; if it's grace that you are looking for, it is a grace that you will find. Or perhaps I must say that in another way; perhaps grace will find you. Grace enough for one and all, grace abundant, grace forever. God's sufficient grace stirs up a reason for us to hope.

The last reason that I need to cover is this; not only does God love us with an everlasting love, not only does God come to us with an inexhaustible grace, God also makes available to us as his most impressive gift, a future which is indestructible. Gosh it's like I can see how you are now all of a sudden sitting straight up at the edge of your seat! What did I say? You did hear correctly. You and I have in God guaranteed, a future indestructible, a future which the world cannot destroy, a future which the devil cannot touch, for in God's name the plan is secure. Once again I can't find any better verse from scripture to summarise what I'm trying to say by using the words of that ancient prophet Jeremiah. Remember he was speaking to the exiles flattened by their despair; having been consumed by the defeat that they had gone through at the hands of the Babylonians. Just imagine what music to their ears this verse must've been; Jeremiah

29 verse 11. "For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord. Plans to prosper you, not to harm you, plans to give you a future." I can also imagine how those Israelites of old were sitting at the edge of their seats as they heard this happy news; for all that they had been hearing was unhappy news.

Remember they were sitting at the edge of those waters of the rivers of Babylon, feeling abandoned by the God, feeling that God had given up on them, that God had even turned his back on them. Then the prophet came with this exciting word, that that was untrue; for God can never abandon his very own, that behind-the-scenes God was still planning for them a surprise second to none; a future purpose which did not include harm or wickedness.

If we bring those words into our reality today, what a difference it can make; not only to the condition of our faith and to the state of our hearts but also to the renewing of our hope. I have a funny feeling that some of you watching this today have fallen into this unhelpful trap of hopelessness. It doesn't make you a bad person, we are all human and our roads often turn that way, where we feel a little bit hopeless, a little bit doubtful, a little bit nervous as we think about the tomorrow's that lie ahead. Allow me this opportunity to share this happy news with you; that the future you have in God is indestructible. That is God's word to you and to me; that in the end we will be ok, for somehow we always land on our feet. We are God's people after all. We see very clearly that this is the dynamic message locked up in the symbolic language of the book of the Revelation.

People often ask me difficult questions about that complex book and to try and evade having to go into a complex answer, I tell them that all they need to know is this; that in the end the good guys win. I would like to take this chance to wish you well for what lies ahead. I pray for you every day and part of that prayer is for you to have this hope in your heart, in spite of all that you might be facing, in spite of all that we are going through as the human race. That you will have your hope steadfastly placed in God's name; knowing that you are loved and that nothing and no one can ever change that. Knowing that there's grace offered to even you. Grace to cover all your sins. and God also comes to you, silver platter in hand, carrying on it a future which is good, a future in which you will be well and happy, a future nothing can take away from you.

Let me end by what I saw on a bumper sticker the other day. It was still pasted on a very old dirty rusty Chevrolet, but I think the message still holds true. It says that, "the world offers us a hopeless end, but Christ offers us an endless hope." so may we who bear his name be carriers of hope. May we always be ready to give an answer for the hope we have in him and may be in the darkness out there; the ones who speak hope, the ones who live hope, the ones who are hope.

Amen.