

Sermons at the Anglican Church of Luxembourg

Sunday 24th March 2019

Text: I Corinthians 10:1-13

I recently came across a new version of the 10 Commandments – for using a mobile phone in a public place

Thou shalt set it to vibration or silent at the cinema or a concert ... or a church service

Thou shalt not surf the internet or do emails during meetings

Thou shalt not shout the details of your private life that none of the rest of the train carriage need or want to know...

I sometimes think that reading the NT epistles is a bit like listening to one side of a phone conversation

All we hear or read is Paul's side – but what prompted the reply he sends, what did they say back to his letters, who are the people he sometimes sends personal greetings to?

I Corinthians is just such a letter. And we need to remember it was written not as an academic theology text book but a pastoral response to a pastoral situation in the church.

Paul knows the Church, it is made up of real-life people like us - Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, slaves and free – who all find themselves living in this cosmopolitan multi-culti city called Corinth and who all find themselves drawn to be disciples of Jesus

Last week we heard about how the call to be a disciple is less about leaving and more about staying in the vocation, the place, the 24/7 life we are in and learning to live our heavenly citizenship in the here and now, not as a philosophy but a lifestyle of faith, and how we can “stand” in that discipleship in daily life through the strength God gives us

This passage takes up that theme – READ v12-13

Did you hear the word “stand” again – a military word the retired soldiers in Philippi would have understood

Maybe less so the CI hipsters of Corinth

And so Paul takes them on a quick tour of OT history about what happens when you try to stand in your own strength – a reminder for the Jewish disciples and new territory for the Gentiles

Its about the Exodus – how God rescues his people from slavery in Egypt by taking them through the Red Sea and into the desert - there He leads them by a cloud during the day and pillar of fire by night. All the way he provides food and drink – the drink is an incident when water flows from a rock struck by their leader Moses

Paul then does some theology in v1-5, mixing OT and NT ideas to show the common story between the people of God in the wilderness and the people of God in Corinth.

Those Corinthian Christians would have been baptised, plunged down into a river or a deep pool – a strong echo of what it must have been like to be saved by God in the Red Sea, made alive when the sensible money was on being destroyed by either Pharaoh or the waves

Spiritual food and spiritual drink have strong associations with Holy Communion and all that it helps us “remember” – life coming from Jesus and His cross, something as strange and unexpected as water coming from a rock

So far, so good: but then we are brought up short by this verse: READ v5

How do we put that together with v13? READ v13b

How do we hold together the displeasure of God that leads to the deaths in the desert with the faithfulness of God, that will provide a way out?

The story of the OT and of the NT is all about the choices people make in response to God

He weaves into His creation causality – the same knife that is skilfully used by a surgeon to save life can be used to end a teenager’s life on the streets of some European city

As He creates not just a physical creation but a moral and spiritual one, a relational one, he weaves in meaningful choice

As God makes us, He puts into our humanity choice, free will

And what gives value and significance to the choices we make, the words we speak, the actions we take is accountability, some sort of judgement

So what we have here is what Paul calls “testing that has overtaken us that is common to everyone.”

Be it in the desert or the Highstreet

Be it in OT Exodus, first century Corinth or 21C Luxembourg we are people making choices and living with the natural consequences – in the desert snakes, starvation and sickness

But here’s the thing: in the choice-making and even in the consequences, our compassionate God will provide a way out – the question is will we recognise it and will we use it?

That’s not to say it will be easy: swallowing pride and saying “sorry” never is

And even then, ours is not a fairy tale faith where magic wands get wielded

V13 talks about God “not letting us be tested beyond our strength” – our strength is needed for time for a coffee with someone to say “sorry”, living with the uncertainty of a diagnosis, a parents anguish at the behaviour of their child

But all the time watch out: if you think you are standing, watch out you don’t fall – fall, because you are doing this only in your own strength

Because an essential ingredient of that “watching” out is about the practical steps of believing and trusting that God is faithful

Will we allow Him to be faithful to us: or will we plough on, be tested beyond our own strength?

For some people, they plough on through pride

I think many Christians plough on because they think that is what God wants them to do – a variation on the belief that the Christian faith is a philosophy, a belief in God’s absence in our daily lives rather than an expectation of His presence that we looked at last week

For others its simply that they don't believe God could or would be interested in them or their situation – He's got bigger issues in the floods of Mozambique, the shootings in Christchurch and Utrecht

God is faithful: that's what Paul writes – why don't you let Him decide?

Ask. Seek Knock says Jesus

READ v13

Part of discipleship in daily life is the realisation that Jesus has high standards for us but low expectations of us

Which is where His faithfulness comes in: it's only by His grace that we are able to live the lives He has created us to live

That's not to say we let go and let God

Discipleship in daily life is a call to "follow me" – we have to move, but its always to join in with the things Jesus is already doing

As we baptise Zac today it's not just that we have said something to Jesus

No: it's that He has first said something to us, to Zac – He speaks and we answer, He is already acting, reaching out to us in love, and our part is to discern and join in and respond

So I wonder, what will be the testing you will face, maybe this time tomorrow?

I have no idea

Except, I bet it is of the sort common to everyone – be it in a desert, a CI city or in the lives of those around sitting around you right now

If you say Yes to Jesus and seek to live as a disciple that testing will come

But don't forget – don't face it alone: turn to Jesus, talk to Him, and discover what He is already doing to enable you to stand, how He is providing the way out so that you may be able to endure.

Prayer after the Service – to see, to stand in His strength