

## What on Earth is God doing, for Heaven's Sake – Sermon 24<sup>th</sup> Nov 2019

**Reading:** 2 Corinthians 1:1-24

*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,  
To the church of God in Corinth, together with all his holy people throughout Achaia:*

*<sup>2</sup> Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Praise to the God of All Comfort

*<sup>3</sup> Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, <sup>4</sup> who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. <sup>5</sup> For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. <sup>6</sup> If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. <sup>7</sup> And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.*

*<sup>8</sup> We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. <sup>9</sup> Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. <sup>10</sup> He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, <sup>11</sup> as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favour granted us in answer to the prayers of many.*

Paul's Change of Plans

*<sup>12</sup> Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, with integrity and godly sincerity. We have done so, relying not on worldly wisdom but on God's grace. <sup>13</sup> For we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand. And I hope that, <sup>14</sup> as you have understood us in part, you will come to understand fully that you can boast of us just as we will boast of you in the day of the Lord Jesus.*

*<sup>15</sup> Because I was confident of this, I wanted to visit you first so that you might benefit twice. <sup>16</sup> I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia and to come back to you from Macedonia, and then to have you send me on my way to Judea. <sup>17</sup> Was I fickle when I intended to do this? Or do I make my plans in a worldly manner so that in the same breath I say both "Yes, yes" and "No, no"?*

*<sup>18</sup> But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not "Yes" and "No." <sup>19</sup> For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us—by me and Silas and Timothy—was not "Yes" and "No," but in him it has always been "Yes." <sup>20</sup> For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so, through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God. <sup>21</sup> Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, <sup>22</sup> set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.*

*<sup>23</sup> I call God as my witness—and I stake my life on it—that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth. <sup>24</sup> Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm.*

## Introduction

The Christians in Corinth had been struggling.

- Corinth was not an easy place to be a Christian
- It was a wealthy and influential Roman colony
- The culture encouraged people to be valued by their position in society
- And leaders were rated by their celebrity status.
- Their Rhetoric was more valued than the substance.
- And these values permeated into the church

There was also trouble from within

- Divisions and faction quarrelled and vied for power
- And Paul was concerned enough to prioritise their pastoral needs
- He had probably already visited them twice and written 3 letters
- (1 Corinthians is thought to be his second letter)
- His previous visit had been painful and prompted a severe (his 3<sup>rd</sup>) letter
- Consequently, he was very keen to come back and make sure things were okay.
- So, had promised to visit a third time

However, things had not worked out as he planned

- So instead he writes this letter (The 2<sup>nd</sup> in the Bible but the 3<sup>rd</sup> he wrote to them)
- In it he makes his excuses for letting them down.
- Even though circumstances had prevented him from fulfilling his promise
- That didn't mean he was unreliable
- Saying in verse 17  
*"Was I fickle when I intended to do this? Or do I make my plans in a worldly manner so that in the same breath I say both "Yes, yes" and "No, no"?"*

Even more importantly he reminds them that God is always reliable

- Verse 18 -20  
*But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not "Yes" and "No." <sup>19</sup> For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us—by me and Silas and Timothy—was not "Yes" and "No," but in him it has always been "Yes." <sup>20</sup> For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so, through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God.*

These verses imply three important truths

1. God is always faithful in fulfilling his promises
2. They are fulfilled in Christ
3. They are fulfilled to God's glory – not necessarily for our personal benefit.

These words are written straight after Paul has sympathised with the Corinthian Christians

- Shared how he has faced terrible opposition
- To the point where he despaired of life itself
- Yet can still go on to confidently assert God has never let him down.

So, this morning I wanted to think about God's plans

- Especially in the context of finding our plans frustrated
- When things don't work out as we had hoped
- And even when they do work out, they just seem such hard work
- That we wonder why we bother
- When we are tired and discouraged
- And are not at all sure what God wants us to do.

So, the title for my talk this morning is a question

- "What on earth is God doing, for heaven's sake?
- I like the question
- It sums up both my faith and my frustration
- My desire to understand the work God is doing in the earth
- The belief that it is for heaven's sake he is working
- As God reminds Isaiah  
*"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,"  
 declares the LORD. <sup>9</sup> "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher  
 than your ways"* (Isaiah 55: 8-9)

## Perspective

In other words

- God encourages his people to see things from His perspective
- We sometimes need the bigger picture to put our experiences into context
- Even if we can't see the bigger picture it is comforting to know there is one.

I recently read something by Rob Parsons

- In a chapter entitled Don't Lose heart he made the following comment  
*Those of us brought up in the western world have been infected with a belief that makes  
 all of this especially difficult. This belief is quite different to that taught by the majority  
 of Christians through church history and yet in our culture it seems so fitting. It is simply  
 that God exists to make us happy*

He went on to talk about the parable of the sower (Matthew 13)

- How the seed that fell on rocky soil sprung up quickly because the soil was shallow
- But when the sun came up the plants withered and died because they had no root
- The sun speaks of hard times
- Yet it is also the sun that causes the good seed to grow
- The circumstance that causes one to lose faith can strengthen the faith of another.

This made me think

- So often I feel like it is my job to solve problems
- People come to me with their needs and worries,
- And I am supposed to resolve them in some way
- But this helped me realise that is not necessarily true

God's plan might well be to strengthen our faith through difficulty

- Or to witness to his love and faithfulness
- Or to use our experience to be able to support and comfort others
- That's what Paul was talking about to the Corinthians. (2Cor. 1:3-4)  
*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, <sup>4</sup> who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.*

### God's plan for fruitfulness

When Jesus called himself the True Vine

- He went on to tell his disciples  
*I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. <sup>16</sup> You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. <sup>17</sup> This is my command: Love each other.* (John 15:15-17)

God's Plan is for us to bear fruit - to be fruitful

- I remember when I was young,
- On the landing my father had some plants
- One of which was a rather pathetic peanut cactus
- Now, my father liked succulents
- And he had some magnificent specimens
- Great big things
- But this particular one was small and weedy and never seemed to grow

As a child I was quite clumsy

- I'm not much better as an adult
- But the inevitable happened
- I ran down the stairs and collided with the table and knocked the pant pot over
- And we thought that was the end of the cactus.

But my father scooped up the remains and managed to salvage some of the plant

- That he duly replanted
- But then the plant seemed to go mad
- It started growing and sending out buds
- Before long, it had filled the pot and he had to replant it in several pots
- And we had lots of little Peanut cacti all over the house.

Even as a child I had a ministry for encouraging growth!

Now this is a great story for me to tell

- And we can all have a laugh
- But I am not a cactus
- The experience might have been very different from the pot

And that is our problem

- When our pot is overturned, we don't always see the outcome
- Sometimes we never do get to know why
- So, the question is
- How can we learn to trust God's plan for our life?
- To see this 'bigger picture'?

I am going to suggest there are three things to Remember

### Three Things to Remember

#### 1. Remember who God is

This was Job's experience

- He had experienced a terrible time
- At one point he accuses God of unfairness
- And challenges him to justify himself

Then God turns up and answers Job

- But he doesn't tell Job why
- He just reveals himself in his glory as an awesome creator God
- Afterwards Job is strangely comforted
- And we read his reply in Job 42:2-5

*Then Job replied to the LORD:*

*"I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted. <sup>3</sup> You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?' Surely, I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. <sup>4</sup> "You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.' <sup>5</sup> My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. <sup>6</sup> Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."*

It was the same for the Jews when exiled to Babylon

- Yet Isaiah spoke God's words of encouragement to them
- Isaiah 46:8-10

*"Remember this, keep it in mind, take it to heart, you rebels. Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. <sup>10</sup> I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say, 'My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.'"*

We need to start by reminding us who God is

- If our focus is on Him and not on ourselves
- We will always have a better perspective
- That is why worship can be so helpful when we are struggling
- Because it isn't about us but about Him

The writer to the Hebrews reminds us to fix our minds on Jesus (Hebrews 12:1-3)

*And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*

## **2. Remember all he has done in the past**

It is helpful to remember personal experiences of God

- Times when you have been helped or known God's blessing
- But these can be affected by our emotions and feelings
- We also have the Bible as a record of God's faithfulness over the ages

It is good to focus on encouraging passages or verses that have spoken to us

- But the bible is more than a collection of encouraging words
- More than a guide to morality
- Nor a theological textbook

Primarily the Bible is a story

- The true story of God and his relationship with His Creation
- That is why large parts of it are narrative
- It has a beginning
- It as a plot that develops containing tragedy, romance, sacrifice
- And it has a happy ending
- If fact the bible is the only true story to really end 'happily ever after'

Even the parts of the bible tat are not strictly narrative

- They only make sense in the context of the story
- Prophecy are words spoken by God by a particular person to a particular people at a particular incident in history
- The psalms are songs of peoples experience of God in their life
- The letters are correspondence between people helping each other to make sense of their experience of God.

If we see the Bible in this way it can be helpful

- Our faith becomes rooted in real life rather than principles or statements of belief
- God never intended for us to live by a set of rules
- He wants a dynamic living relationship with us
- We are part of the story
- Sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, friends

Christianity is not something we should just talk about on Sunday

- It is supposed to be lived
- It is a journey with God a part of our story
- And us part of His story

This brings us to the third point

### 3. Remember who you are

We are precious to God

- He is our loving heavenly father
- Jesus came to earth to save us
- God didn't just tell the exiled Jews to remember he was God
- He reminded them of his love for them (Isaiah 46: 3-4)

*Listen to me, you descendants of Jacob, all the remnant of the people of Israel, you whom I have upheld since your birth, and have carried since you were born. Even to your old age and grey hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.*

We know the promise from Jeremiah 29:11

*For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*

- These may be God's plans and for His glory
- But His plans are conceived in love
- And are ultimately for our good
- This is echoed in Romans 8:28

*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

This was Joseph's testimony

- As a young man he was abused by his brothers and sold into slavery
- Many years later they come to Egypt to buy food because of a famine
- And Joseph reveals himself to them (Genesis 45 4-5, 8)

*Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! <sup>5</sup> And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. .... <sup>8</sup> "So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God.*

Despite all that had happened to him

- He could see God working for good
- That's not making it good for Joseph.
- But bringing good about from what happened to Joseph.

### Conclusion

I want to end with the reminder that God will complete his purpose

- This is the point Paul made the Corinthian Christians. (vs 23)  
*I call God as my witness—and I stake my life on it—that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth.*

Paul may have been unable to come but God would use this for his purpose

- And his purpose is for us to grow in faith and be fruitful
- Our assurance for this comes from our faith in God keeping his promises (vs.21-22)  
*Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, <sup>22</sup> set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.*

Remember who God is,

- Remember His faithfulness in the past
- And remember who we are
- And know through the Holy Spirit that God is working his purposes out in you.
- And ultimately this will be for good
- And His glory

Amen