

Sunday 9th August – Trinity 9
Material for Virtual Worship

2 Collects : *you may like to use one of these for your Sunday worship, and the other during the week*

Almighty God,
who sent your Holy Spirit
to be the life and light of your Church:
open our hearts to the riches of your grace,
that we may bring forth the fruit of the Spirit
in love and joy and peace;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

(or)

Gracious Father,
revive your Church in our day,
and make her holy, strong and faithful,
for your glory's sake
in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Readings *(the Reflection is mainly based on the passage from Romans)*

Romans 9.1-5

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit— I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen.

Hymn

1 I, the Lord of sea and sky,
I have heard my people cry.
All who dwell in dark and sin
my hand will save.
I who made the stars of night,
I will make their darkness bright.
Who will bear my light to them?
Whom shall I send?
Here I am, Lord.
Is it I, Lord?
I have heard you calling in the night.
I will go, Lord, if you lead me.
I will hold your people in my heart.

2 I, the Lord of snow and rain,
I have borne my people's pain.
I have wept for love of them.
They turn away.
I will break their hearts of stone,
give them hearts for love alone.
I will speak my word to them.
Whom shall I send?
Chorus

3 I, the Lord of wind and flame,
I will tend the poor and lame.
I will set a feast for them.
My hand will save.
Finest bread I will provide
till their hearts be satisfied.
I will give my life to them.
Whom shall I send?
Chorus

Daniel L. Schutte (b.1947)
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Matthew 14.13-21

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.' Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.' They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.' And he said, 'Bring them here to me.' Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Reflection

When my brother was born, and my grandmother heard he was to be called 'Paul', she said to his parents, 'You're not calling him after that awful man who said women should wear hats in church, are you?'

Unfortunately, this is how the Apostle Paul has been regarded, all too often – as a difficult man who wrote difficult and off-putting things – a bit of a tyrant, really. But Paul wasn't like that, at all. His writings are hard and knotty at times; like all passionate people he could express himself forcefully in ways people find uncomfortable; but, at heart, he was a man full of love and gratitude – love for God, and gratitude to him for seeking him out and finding him on the Damascus Road; love for those with whom he'd shared the Gospel, both those who'd accepted it, and those who hadn't; and, in today's passage from Romans, we can see his love burning in a wholly natural way for his '*own people*', his '*kindred according to the flesh*', his fellow Jews.

It's very painful to be divided from those we love and are related to by deep disagreement over the essential things in life. What agony it caused Paul that many of his fellow-Jews had not accepted Christ when he came and lived among them; the religious authorities had spurned him and had him killed; a great number of the people hadn't understood Jesus' preaching or priorities, nor had they embraced his vision of the Kingdom of God.

Through his dramatic conversion, Paul had discovered *'the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord'* (Philippians 3.8), and despite all the trials and testing he had lived through he had never wavered in experiencing it as the source of the hope which drove him onwards. As he put it in 1 Corinthians 2.9, *'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him'* – everything else seemed like dross and rubbish in comparison to this living relationship with God through Christ. No wonder Paul yearned for his own people, his kith and kin, to share it too.

When we read Paul's words of agony and yearning for his people, they may put our own feelings and prayers about our families in the spotlight. Probably nearly all of us have relatives and dear friends who don't know the joy and value of Christian faith. Do we care about that as much as Paul did? Do we make it a subject of earnest prayer? Surveys show that quite a large proportion of Christian parents don't see it as their responsibility to share their faith even with their children. Why not?

Is it because we have not allowed ourselves to be gripped enough by the love of God? Is our faith an 'add-on', or do we treat it as the bedrock of our lives? Maybe by neglect of prayer, worship, Bible reading and reflection, we have allowed its significance to fade; like the seed sown among thistles, other things have grown up and become more important for us, choking our relationship with God till it has become weak and spindly – not a vital thing we feel it important to share.

It might be that we see God as mostly important for what happens to us at the end of our lives- the one who gives entry to heaven through the forgiveness Christ won for us; and, in another mental move, we say to ourselves, 'God's love is so great that surely he will save everybody (or at least, everybody who isn't determinedly wicked)', so we don't need to share our faith with our families. They'll get there anyway.

Well, of course, the question of ultimate salvation is a huge and mysterious one, and I would be very far from wanting to limit our understanding of the love of God, and his will and work that all should be saved; but the question still remains, isn't there here, in this life, a transforming experience making everything new, and springing from a living relationship with God, which we should deeply desire everyone to know- not least those nearest to us?

Of course, the temper of the times makes us reticent to ‘push’ our religion onto anyone; we rightly respect people’s autonomy to be themselves. We want to love our family members and friends ‘just as they are’, without condition – which of course, is right. There’s much resistance around us to Christian faith if it’s too enthusiastically worn on the sleeve., and we may find that resistance very explicit in our families. All of these things inhibit us from seeking to share our experience of believing and trusting in Christ, because it seems just too difficult. This makes it tempting to push the issue to one side in the way we care about our families, kindred and friends. But Paul, in his *‘sorrow and unceasing anguish’* (Romans 9.2) over his own people, which led him even to say that he would choose himself to be *‘cut off from Christ’* (9.3) if only it would bring them nearer, stands – as he so often does – as a challenge to us. Whilst there are times and situations when it’s better to be reticent than to antagonise, there are never times when it’s good to stop caring and praying that ‘our own people’ should know the love of God in Christ. And, if we care and pray earnestly and persistently, God will surely show us the best way to act as his witnesses, and how and when to speak of him to those who are near and dear to us.

Hymns after Peace

- 1 Come down, O Love divine,
 Seek thou this soul of mine,
 And visit it with thine own ardour glowing;
 O comforter, draw near,
 Within my heart appear,
 And kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.

- 2 O let it freely burn,
 Till earthly passions turn
 To dust and ashes, in its heat consuming;
 And let thy glorious light
 Shine ever on my sight,
 And clothe me round, the while my path illuming.

- 3 Let holy charity
 Mine outward vesture be,
 And lowliness become mine inner clothing;
 True lowliness of heart,
 Which takes the humbler part,
 And o'er its own shortcomings weeps with loathing.

4 And so the yearning strong,
 With which the soul will long,
 Shall far outpass the power of human telling;
 For none can guess its grace,
 Till he become the place
 Wherein the Holy Spirit makes his dwelling.

*Discendi, amor santo Bianco da Siena (died 1434) translated Richard Frederick
Littledale (1833-1890)*