

Sermon 28th June 2020

Readings: 2 Timothy 4:6-6, 17-18 & Matthew 16:13-19

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Today we celebrate St Peter and St Paul. And it is good to remember the heritage and richness that St Paul's church brought to All Saints when they merged. Not an easy journey, by any manner of means but a journey of forgiveness, hard fought reconciliation and above all faithfulness. To mark the occasion, I will focus on Paul and his second letter to Timothy today. And do open your Bibles to 2 Timothy chapter 4 as I will be dipping into the verses that are missed out in our lectionary reading.

One of the pictures I received from Janet Harsent when I asked her about St Paul's Church was of their choir and in the photo was a very young Roy Maynard. And it set me thinking about the music we carry with us on our journeys. I'm not thinking what's your favourite song or style of music, I'm thinking of God's song within us and how it affects our spiritual journey.

The first line of that wonderful hymn Amazing Grace starts...Amazing Grace how sweet the sound. It's like God has a tune or a melody going on inside each one of us...Can you sense that tune in you? How has it changed on your spiritual journey?

I thought I'd give you taste of my own spiritual journey, told in a slightly different way...

As a child, I was good, I did as I was told, I studied hard,
I was fortunate to have music lessons, I studied piano and clarinet.
But God wasn't in the clarinet...

Then I went to medical school. These years were wild, out of control years but I bought a saxophone and my life began to change.

My first sax was a beaten up, rusty reject that I found in a junk shop. The pads were leaky and there were loads of scratches - it needed a lot of fixing up.

But as I played, there were moments, brief encounters, times where I heard a different tune...I dismissed these at the time and plunged myself into working the regular 100+ hours weeks that we used to have to do as a junior doctor. No time to look up.... Or listen within. After all Saxophones and God don't go together, do they?...

When I was about 28, I bought a new saxophone a bright shiny new one, all in working order with a big fluffy pipe-cleaner to clean the inside.

And the tune that had been playing in the background grabbed my attention. I joined a church and started playing in their music group – on the piano of course - saxophones (even new shiny ones) and church don't go, do they?...

Then my sax was damaged in a car crash but hey this was minor compared to my nephew being killed in a horrific crash. And all the music stopped for a while. Boy that was hard...

The time to play had stopped, the time to listen began. I love those verses in Revelation 2

where it says – if you have ears then listen to what the spirit says. And it repeats it not twice but 4 times like a constant drumbeat, if you have ears then listen to what the spirit says.

So, I listened. I listened to Nicky Gumble on audiocassette – it was that long ago! I went to an alpha course and then on the Holy Spirit day away – I heard God, for the first time I really heard God and what do you think he said? Did he say...go and play your saxophone?...no, God had deeper stuff to do with me... he said 'I Love you'. You are my beloved..

My whole journey changed direction. And you know...perhaps now, I am a saxophone... My insides have been cleansed, not by a fluffy cleaner, but by the blood of Jesus. I breath in, not just air, but the holy spirit and I breathe out a different tune, about God's amazing grace, And you know what saxophones and church do go together.

Ok so that's one way of sharing a faith journey. Some of us have been studying the early church in Acts and have been reading about Peter and Paul and their different journeys and their different personalities, and we have been encouraged to write our testimony in different ways and I have been humbled to read some of these. Some of your journeys have been far from easy and yet, you know that God has stood by your side and given you strength. Your journey will be very different from mine – the tune God plays in your heart is unique to you.

In our reading from Timothy, Paul is coming to the end of his life's journey He is writing from prison and is soon to be executed....Let's dip into the passage and see how Paul, the murderous persecutor, who was transformed by an encounter with Jesus, approaches the end of his earthly journey....

Paul probably ended his days in the Mamertine Prison in Rome. Although Paul doesn't name it, Mamertine was well known to be the Roman Death Row prison. In human terms this was a very difficult time for Paul. His friends had all but abandoned him. If we take a look at those verses missing from our reading – verses 9-16.... He tells us that Demas, the close friend and co-worker, who is mentioned in Colossians 4: 14 and Philemon 24, deserted him "because he loved this world." Maybe he lost his faith? Alexander the metalworker and former teammate had also abandoned his faith and was now taking advantage of Paul's imprisonment to undermine his message.

These wounds from former friends must have hurt Paul far more than the chains placed on his wrists and ankles by his enemies.

Some of Paul's friends had left him for the best of reasons. We are able to piece together what happened in the final months of Paul's life from these verses and from the rest of his letters. He had evidently been reunited with Titus and had sent him along the coast to plant churches in modern-day Croatia. (Titus 3:12) He left his Ephesian co-worker Trophimus behind in Miletus (Acts 20:4) He left Erastus behind in Corinth (Acts 19:22) And once at Rome, he sent Crescens to help the churches in Galatia.

So, some of his friends had left for good reasons but the only person who was left to bring comfort to Paul in his hour of need was his old friend Luke, the doctor. Paul is so cold and lonely that as we see in verse 9, he begs Timothy to come to him quickly, bringing his cloak to keep him warm in the dungeon and his scrolls and parchments to help him pass the long and lonely days. We read in verse 10 that he asks Timothy to bring Mark too. Paul & Mark had clearly been reconciled by this time having fallen out several years earlier.

Paul felt lonely, abandoned, betrayed. Lonely, abandoned and betrayed, words that may resonate with you at this time...Lonely, abandoned, betrayed...but more than this Paul knew he was going to die.

One thing this pandemic has brought is a change in the taboo about talking about death. Every day we are told the daily death figures in this country and others. We hear stories of thousands who have lost loved ones. I'm sure all of us know people who have died. Many things are uncertain in life but at least one thing is guaranteed. Unless Jesus returns first, every single one of us will die. You know that, and perhaps at last we are beginning to talk about it more openly.

Some people die kicking and screaming against death, but not Paul. He is determined to end well. He sees his life as something that belongs to God. ... like the drink offerings, that were poured out by ancient priests as liquid sacrifices to God. (Exodus 29:40-41) The very tune of Paul's heart was worship. During his first imprisonment in Rome, he talked about being poured out like a drink offering. (Philippians 2 :17) And now, as he faces certain death, he repeats that he is happy to be "poured out." He does not see death as a waste of his life. He sees it as the glorious culmination of a life, a life that he has walked with God, and for the glory of God. In verse 6, he refers to his imminent death as his departure or analysis, the Greek word that was used for unloosing the moorings of a ship so it could set sail. Paul never moored his identity to what he did, or to what he achieved, or to his position as a leader and so he is happy to be unmoored from it by death. He looks to the horizon like a sailor eager to set out to sea.

Some people die full of regret that they have not seen all their dreams fulfilled, but not Paul. He looks back positively on what he has managed to accomplish, instead of mourning the years that have been wasted, as he could have done. He has spent five of the final ten years of his life in a Roman jail, but he is not bitter. He tells Timothy "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." He never had the chance to preach the Gospel in Germania or Britannia, but he is content to accept that those were not part of the journey that God had laid out for him. He never saw the fulfilment of his great longing to see the Jewish nation turn en-masse to Jesus, as their Messiah, but he trusts that he has played his part in that unfolding drama. Let's do our best, dream our dreams but have no regrets. It's human nature, isn't it, to wish we had done more, the 'if only's'but Paul is teaching us to do what we can and accept that it is enough, in God's economy.

We read in Hebrews 11:13 that similarly Abraham, Sarah, Isaac and Jacob 'were still living by faith when they died.' They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance." The writer commends them for passing their prophetic

promises on to their children, trusting God that he would accomplish their dreams without them.

This, my friends, is faith.

Faith looks at God and believes that, by his grace, the next generation will be ready. Paul happily hands the baton over to Timothy, Mark and others. No regrets. Because he knows there is a crown of righteousness waiting for him. The word crown here was that used for the laurel crowns awarded to victorious athletes. He ends these verses by telling us that similar victory crowns await us all if we live our lives longing for Jesus, as he did.

Was he perfect? Oh boy, No! Did he know he was going to be judged by God when he died? Absolutely, Yes! And that's the same for us all. None of us are perfect and we will all be judged...

Are you afraid that God will not receive you into heaven, because of past failings? Paul mentions Judgment Day for the third time in this short letter because he is convinced that for him it will be a day of great reward. Far from being fearful about Judgement Day, as he ran towards the finishing tape of his life, he became more and more excited that it would vindicate him. He believes that Jesus is "the righteous Judge" who will not forget the sacrifices Paul has made. He is in no doubt that a "victory crown of righteousness" awaits him.

None of us gets to decide whether we will die. We only get to decide how we will do so. Paul models for us what it means to die without reluctance or resistance or regrets. He shows us how to trust in God's grace. He knew Jesus was the Messiah, the son of the living God. He knew that through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, this crown was a certainty for those who believe.

Our Matthew reading reassures us that whatever we do, Christ's church will continue. 'the gates of Hades will not overcome it'. Yes, we play our part, and our role is to encourage the next generation of believers and preachers and evangelists. Teach your children, encourage each other to seek God, to seek that melody that God is playing within you. And be reassured, be not afraid, as it says in v 7 – The Lord stands at our side and gives us strength. We may feel afraid or lonely, but if you believe, you can never, ever be alone.

Paul is about to make his final defence before a Roman judge. Nero has already spilled so much Christian blood that Paul knows his fate is sealed. His time is close and he accepts it without reluctance or resistance, He rejoices that "I was delivered from the lion's mouth" and he is confident that "the Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom." No earthly chains stopped Paul from knowing the freedom that Jesus brings in this life. He truly understood grace.

My friends, let no earthly chains stop you from knowing the freedom that Jesus bring you in this life. The letter ends with a promise for us all. The promise that the Lord will be with us always, just as he was always with Paul. The promise that God's grace will be sufficient for us and for all those we bring to faith in the Gospel.

May I encourage you to spend some time seeking God this week, listening to his voice, listening to his wonderful melody that is going on inside you. If you feel like you are a rusty beaten up saxophone and the only noise you can hear is a squeaky honk, listen harder....God thinks you are of infinite worth and loves you so much. Play your part, as well as you can, for his kingdom and his glory. Journey as well as you can, dream dreams and spread the kingdom and live in his freedom, knowing that he has a victory crown waiting for you.

The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you all.