

We do not lose heart

Psalm 138; II Corinthians 4:14 – 15:1

After a long and challenging week at the General Assembly, when some really far-reaching, necessary, but hard decisions were taken, and a road towards the restructuring of the Church of Scotland was entered upon, many of us who had been present either in person or online came away feeling anxious, uncertain, and maybe a little fearful about the future. We were constantly challenged to think about change and the future, but I suspect we'd have been happier if it was others who were to change, and our own particular future would remain unaltered, or at least under our control.

A very talented colleague of mine has written about feeling hopeless about the pressure felt to 'save' the church by being, variously: more spiritual, more practical, more liturgical, more innovative, more missional, more organised, more flexible, more pastoral, more prayerful, more visionary and more realistic. We should be better with technology; better team leaders; better line managers; more inclusive; more accessible; more eco-friendly; visit more; attend more committees; sing more old favourite or more modern hymns; update our buildings. Then, we are told, everyone would come back to Church if only we'd do things better. With fewer resources and less people!

That general sense of anxiety, uncertainty and fearfulness is still clearly to be felt across our country. The will-we-won't-we move down through the levels, currently stalled at Level 2, is wearing and frustrating. We know we need to comply, and that we've come so far and not wanting to jeopardise all the sacrifices made, but come one! We want to sing! We want coffee after the Sunday service! We want a proper, in-person communion service! We want to take off these damned masks!

So maybe we feel a little blue. A little down-at-the-mouth. A little soul-weary. A little heavy of heart. How long, O Lord? How long?

The reading from Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians is one that I sometimes use at funerals because it speaks to those, whether through bereavement, or through some other struggle in life,

have a heavy heart. Zelda Fitzgerald once wrote that, "No one has ever measured, not even the poets, how much the heart can hold." We talk of our hearts breaking, or being full. Paul, with touching pastoral sensitivity and speaking from his own struggles in life, advises us gently, "So we do not lose heart." Paul was struggling to be taken seriously as an apostle. He was prickly and not easy to get on with. He tackled issues head-on and not always in a way that people found easy to hear. In Corinth he had to justify his ministry on more than one occasion to people who doubted if he was up to the job. "So we do not lose heart", he wrote to them, but really to himself. When we are fragile and fearful. When we are weary and run-down. When we are frustrated and irate. When we want to throw the towel in because we've had enough. When we think we're being taken for granted, or overlooked. When we wonder what the point of anything is, or how we are ever going to move on, Paul says, "So we do not lose heart."

Bear Grylls, the wilderness survivor expert, has said, "Survival can be summed up in three words: never give up. That's the heart of it really. Just keep trying." Of course it's the right thing to say and do, but it's not always that easy, when you're tired, and down. There is nothing more irritating in life than some cheery soul coming along, when you're struggling, advising you, 'Just keep trying', or, "Cheer up, it might never happen", when it probably has!

But that being said, in those low points, caused by weariness with this pandemic, caused by uncertainty about what the future might hold, caused by concern about your health, caused by worry about your family and friends, caused by what will happen to the future of the Church, Paul's words, persist and infiltrate our consciousness. "So we do not lose heart."

Why? How?

Paul writes: "...He Who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into His presence. For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving to the glory of God."

I know talking about Jesus, and resurrection, and God, and grace, and all these holy things, even in Church on a Sunday, can make us feel a little uneasy and squeamish. But it's why we're really here, and it's what our faith is really about. Not some theoretical philosophising from a pulpit,

but some genuine, life-affirming, hope-giving, soul-settling word from God spoken directly to us, at us, for us.

“For it is all for your sake...So we do not lose heart...”

This love from God; this grace from God; this peace from God; this hope from God. All for you, so you won't give up, and you keep on keeping on.

It might not seem much when you say it out loud. But keep saying it, and believing it, and it will seep into your life. And it will continue the transformation. It will continue your transformation, bit by bit; and it will continue the world's transformation, bit by bit. Desmond Tutu once said, “Do a little bit of good where you are. It's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.” Our not giving up in faith and hope and love will overwhelm the world.

There may be just one person in Church who needs to hear this today. There may be dozens of people here in Church needing to hear this today. There may be hundreds of people online watching needing to hear this today. It is for you.

Our faith in Jesus, articulated by one of His servants Paul, tells us to calm ourselves, steady ourselves, and prepare ourselves to take that next step forward, and the next, and the next, to get us from the darkness, or worse, the greyness, back towards God's light. And as we move ourselves, we become aware of others moving along that road of faith with us. Some more confident than us, some more tentative than us. But moving together, forward, because they, like us, have not given up. They, like us, have given everything, selves included, another chance.

God's gift to you, in Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, today. Everything He has ever done for us.

“For it is all for your sake...So we do not lose heart...”

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen