

Not losing heart

Genesis 3:8-15; II Corinthians 4:13 – 5:1

In a break away from the relentless coverage of the pending General Election, the coverage of the D-Day 80th anniversary events has put into perspective a whole range of issues for our country and our world, as well as to each one of us as individuals. You would have had to have had a heart of stone not to have been deeply moved to hear the stories of the men and women who served our country, and all those others who served other countries, during World War II. Some were heroes, but by no means all.

80 years is a long time ago and few will now remember serving in battle. But some are still alive and we saw them last Thursday. We also saw those haunting silhouettes representing almost 1,500 servicemen who died on D-Day, commemorating their ultimate sacrifice on and around Gold Beach, one of the key landing points.

French President Emmanuel Macron presented the Legion D'Honneur to a handful of veterans. One was presented to Christian Lamb, now 104. A leading WREN with the Royal Navy, she is credited with having made the maps for the D-Day landings. Macron referred to her, and to so many other people, as the shadow people. They may never have wielded a weapon, but in the time of war, their role, their commitment, their heart, ensured victory in the end.

Like the silhouettes, the people in the shadows played their part. Maybe no longer very distinct, maybe no longer heard so many decades later, but playing their part. In the darkest of times, maybe feeling less worthy than those who served on sea, land or air wielding weapons, these shadow people, were as much a part of the courage and perseverance that won the war as those who landed on the beaches of Normandy. By not losing heart, by remaining determined in the

face of the overwhelming numbers of Nazi Germany, these women and men did what they could to secure freedom and the defeat of tyranny.

In much the same way the Apostle Paul did not lose heart, kept the faith, spoke out his gospel truth in the face of a hostile or indifferent ancient world. We may lionise him in the Christian church now, God may have shone in his heart and given him an important ministry to carry out, but his life would not have looked important to an independent observer from 1st AD. Paul visited Corinth on a number of occasions and it was nearly always a tough gig. Although Corinth was an ancient Greek city, it had been totally destroyed by the Romans in 146BC, and the site had lain unused for about a century. It was rebuilt as a Roman city by Julius Caesar. Like many major cities in the ancient world, it contained a considerable number of Jews, and it was among them, according to his practice, that Paul began his mission. In II Corinthians, Paul is concerned with what was happening inside the church – the tensions that had blown up between individuals and groups; the constant fear of persecution by pagan Rome, and uneasy Jewish neighbours; tensions even between fellow Christians, who had their own ideas about what was important about the Church and would sometimes attack the existing views of the community, or its founder, Paul. It comes as a comfort and a shock to realise that these early Christians were fractious as Christians are today.

To all appearances Paul was no more than an earthenware vessel, a cheap clay pot. Precious objects and treasures can be carried in such pots. What was it that was contained in the life of often broken, always argumentative, frequently shining Paul? Any success Paul had in his ministry did not spring from his own ability and dedication, but to the power of God that kept giving him the strength to go on, despite everything. By all human reckoning Paul ought to have been crushed, driven to despair, felt himself forsaken and destroyed because of what he had been

through. Despite his care, the Corinthian Christians were failing to follow through in their Christian living. Christianity isn't so much a series of philosophical principles to be held in the head as it is a practical working out in our lifestyle and shown in the way we live, treat others, and treat God. Like Paul, we might be tempted to look at the bits and pieces of faith we've patch-worked together and not think they amount to very much. A bit like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, with their fig leaves covering not their physical nakedness but their spiritual nakedness too. They felt ashamed, they felt unworthy in the presence of God because they knew they had disobeyed God and let God down. So too with Paul, and with us. That peculiar Scottish/British susceptibility of not really believing we are all that good; of waiting to be found out; of being exposed as failures and frauds and hypocrites.

When we try to do good, our goodness is ascribed as an attempt to curry popularity. Or yet another census tells us how fewer than half the nation believe in organised religion, and somehow that is our fault. Or our perplexity when we try to apply Christianity to today's world: is unemployment worse than inflation? Does the possession of nuclear weapons endanger or preserve society? Is it possible to demand integrity and transparency from politicians seeking power when we look at our own moral inconsistencies and opacity? We find ourselves frustrated in our attempts to carry out some reform in the church or community or our own lives and feel driven to give up because it's too hard, too complicated, demands too much of us. We are tempted to lose heart. We are tempted to give up.

Though frequently perplexed, frustrated, brow-beaten and let down by others, and himself, the pressures Paul faced in Corinth, and elsewhere, did not get him down permanently. There's no glossing over the problems and the failures and the unrelenting hardness of situations he faced, but he persevered. Not because he thought he was anything special in himself. A mere cheap,

earthenware vessel. It was what Paul carried, or *Who* Paul carried, his treasure, that made the difference. In his heart, in his belief, in the way he tried to act, Paul carried Jesus.

For Paul, for us, have we found, are we finding, do we hope to find that somehow, through God, through the kindness of others, we are lifted up over our troubles and anxieties. Not out of our troubles and anxieties but over them, and through them. We wish it would all go away: the pain and grief; the injustice and burden; the gnawing fear and heart-stopping anxiety. But sometimes what comes is enough. Enough to keep going on. Enough to help ourselves, and what we often find, enough to help others, which in turn, funnily enough, helps us.

I wish I could rationalize this. I wish I could spell it out in logical, empirical terms that would demonstrate proof. But I can't, and never could. But I know it when I see it, and hear it, and feel it. And I have seen this empowerment and encouragement and enabling come, and I've heard it, and I've felt it. Just enough, to keep you going. Just enough, to keep me going. And in ways beyond explanation, that feeling that things will be, eventually, all right; that belief that somehow, we're going to get through; that trust that in the end, things are going to change gives us enough courage, and enough strength, and enough hope, to keep on, and not to lose heart.

Like those people in the shadows, and on the front line, of World War Two. In 1940, Britain on its knees, but from somewhere they found the strength and the belief not to lose heart. One of the veterans of D-Day interviewed said, in the landing craft as they approached the beaches, and the bombardment began, that to his surprise, he found himself praying. And to his surprise, he found everyone around him was praying too. When the outer nature of life wears away, and the transient things of life fade out, for many that, God-seed, that faith-hope in their lives opens up, and it is enough, just enough sometimes, to keep on. Not a magic talisman, not a charm against all evils and pain and suffering, but enough to keep on, and not to lose heart.

From a pulpit I cannot see into your hearts and heads, but I know there will be people here in church today, and watching online, who need to hear this word of hope, and steadiness, and faith, and love triumphing over whatever you are facing. Trust in it, work with it, do something about it on your own and with others, and find that, after all, you do not lose heart. God is here. God is now.

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

Amen