

Trusting in God and giving thanks even in times of worry and uncertainty

SERMON

EVENSONG – ALL SAINTS HIGH WYCOMBE

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May I speak in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

In both the evocative poetry of Isaiah and the prose of Paul, thanksgiving and trusting in God are the two threads of steel which run through our scripture readings tonight.

In the Isaiah reading, the text is effusive in its command to give thanks:

Give thanks to the Lord,

call on his name;

make known his deeds among the nations;

proclaim that his name is exalted.

Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously;

let this be known in all the earth.

Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion,

for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

Equally, Paul's directive to the Corinthians that their trust should be in God alone is unwavering:

“In him it is always “Yes.”

For in him every one of God's promises is a “Yes.”

For this reason it is through him that we say the “Amen,” to the glory of God”

This is not to say, however, that these two threads – thanksgiving and trust in God – will be easy and all plain sailing, and this is acknowledged in the texts.

In Isaiah we hear references to God's anger, and our potential fear:

I will give thanks to you, O Lord,

for though you were angry with me,

your anger turned away,

and you comforted me.

Surely God is my salvation;

I will trust, and will not be afraid,

for the Lord God is my strength and my might;

he has become my salvation.

Similarly, Paul sets out his second letter to the Corinthians by speaking of thanksgiving after affliction:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ.”

On a cerebral level, we probably generally accept that we should give thanks and praises to God, and to put our trust in Him alone. However, I suspect that on an emotional level, in amongst the difficulties, anxieties and complexities of our lives and the world around us, most of us find this challenging at times.

The state of the world in which we currently find ourselves is often hard to reconcile with thanksgiving and trust in God.

Last weekend saw two more mass shootings in the US. Here in the UK, our place in the world becomes more and more uncertain. In recent times we've seen a surge in right wing extremism at home and abroad in a way which is scarily reminiscent of events leading up to the last world wars. More and more people find themselves in poverty, and our political leaders all too often fail to inspire trust, or to demonstrate leadership which would best serve society as a whole opposed to themselves and their cronies.

On top of this are the personal afflictions which Paul refers to in his letter. Paul praises the Corinthians for their strength in the face of suffering.

Suffering of any kind makes our lives extremely challenging and can make it difficult to give thanks and praises to God – physical illnesses, mental health struggles, chronic pain, or perhaps the difficulties or diseases associated with getting older. We don't know what the afflictions were which Paul encountered, but they sound extreme, to the point where he appears to be questioning his very survival:

He says

“We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead”

And yet, Paul remains resolute in his thanksgiving and trust in God. Our God, Paul says – is the God of consolation, a God who offers comfort in the midst of affliction.

Nobody knew suffering as much as Christ himself. As members of Christ's body, believers continue to share in his afflictions, but we will also be comforted through him.

So are we thankful enough, I wonder – as individuals, as a society, as a church, as a congregation? Are we thankful for the things God is doing in us, and in our midst? Are we thankful, even when things go awry and we are suffering?

In the Ordination service, the new Deacons are addressed by the ordaining Bishop, who tells them:

“You cannot bear the weight of this calling in your own strength, but only by the grace and power of God”

I think this sentiment applies to us all. We cannot bear the weight of our afflictions and sufferings without the sustaining presence of God in our lives, and, though we can and should be the change we wish to see in our society, we ultimately can't control the world around us. We HAVE to trust in God, and in God alone, because there's no other way.

In the latter part of our second reading, Paul explains to the Corinthians that his travel plans have changed, and that he will no longer be visiting them on the way back from Macedonia as he had originally intended. As he tells them, this is not because he is vacillate or fickle – but rather, that he believes it is God's will that his plans be changed.

“Do I make my plans according to ordinary human standards?”, he asks. “In him it is always Yes”

Paul is demonstrating his obedience and trust in God here.

And just as Paul sets this example to the Corinthians, so we must follow too.

Our faith is a great gift, and the biggest reason to give thanks.

And, as people of faith, we need to be willing to always say Yes to God and to put our trust in Him; Yes to spreading His good news, and Yes to consoling others with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God.

In the midst of the suffering, affliction, inequality, uncertainty and atrocities which happen to us and around us, we need to be the good news people.

And so, to close, a simple quotation from the Swedish diplomat and Nobel Peace Prizewinner Dag Hammarskjöld: **DARG HARMASHOLD**

“For all that has been, thanks. For all that will be, yes”

AMEN

