

**Pentecost 3**  
**10/6/2018**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Isaiah 61:1-3**

**2 Corinthians 4:13 - 5:1**

**Psalm 139**

**John 14:1-14**

**Outwardly in decay and day by day inwardly renewed** (2 Cor. 4:16b)

Sermon preached by Rev. Em. Prof. Robert Gribben

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Friday's issue of the online journal *The Conversation* led with an essay entitled 'What might heaven be like?' It was a mild-mannered survey of the way the images of heaven and hell have softened, been brought down to earth, and the vision glorious relegated to history books or possibly the Bible. The author didn't seem to think that one could hold these views all at once – as we do in worship, especially with hymns, though they too are becoming more and more pedestrian. The article encourages me to think (since this sermon was largely composed before I saw it) that some consideration of our eternal reward might be helpful to 'Christians who think'.

It was the set epistle which offered my theme, Paul's reflection on the decay of the body and the promised glory. I've replaced the other readings with selections from the Funeral Service, which, I remind you, is not to be miserable and mournful, not for Christians anyway. In fact, part of my motivation was also a funeral, one I attended in the cemetery at Numurkah, surrounded by glorious gum trees, a graveside event only, for a cousin with no religion.

His hearse was preceded by a polished red firetruck, and the liturgy was the CFA farewell, which has borrowed something from Freemasonry and something from the RSL, but the impressive thing was that the civil celebrant, himself a member of the CFA, avoided the temptation to introduce any myths in the absence of any for a secular funeral. Few clergy, and fewer people at a wake, can avoid these sentimental and death-denying absurdities like the dead looking down on us from 'up there', or our loved one having just moved to the next room, or whatever. It is remarkable how little the Bible has to say in detail, indeed it largely encourages us to be agnostic. The Qu'ran's heaven is much more explicit– and inviting, if you are an Alpha-male!

So, let me lead you through one of the New Testament's brief and succinct discussions of the subject.

<sup>16</sup> **'No wonder we do not lose heart!'** says Paul.<sup>1</sup> And both Isaiah and John agree. Losing heart is a temptation, a test for everyone with a heart who ponders the condition of the world we live in. I need not elaborate. This is *not* the world God wants; this is not even near the reign of God, and yet we daily pray for the coming of that kingdom – which was the burden of the sermon preached in St George's Chapel a week or so ago. Bishop Michael Curry set forth exactly what our trust in the love of God promises in terms of a world in which human beings live together justly and therefore peacefully, a world in which there are no more tears, no reason for tears, no more suffering, and – and this is faithful to Paul – God *means this world*, not only something in heaven waiting for

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<sup>1</sup> The translation read this morning, and quoted throughout here is the *Revised English Bible*, which updated the *New English Bible* in 1989.

us. Curry laid before the powerful, the wealthy and the privileged the true Christian hope. No wonder they were disturbed. It's not British to say such things in a church.

So, to continue with Paul:

<sup>17</sup> Our troubles are slight and short-lived, and the outcome is an eternal glory which far outweighs them,<sup>18</sup> provided our eyes are fixed, not on the things that are seen, but on the things that are unseen; for what is seen is transient, what is unseen is eternal.

We often take this as a diminution of our troubles, as if they didn't matter. But this statement was made by a man who, a handful of verses earlier in this chapter wrote, 'We are hard-pressed, but never cornered; bewildered, but never at our wit's end; hunted, but never abandoned to our fate; struck down, but never killed. Wherever we go we carry with us in our body the death that Jesus died...' (4:8-10a)

These are the troubles he regards as slight, and he did bear the wounds of an apostle in his very body, the wounds of the Crucified. He is not speaking of the creaks and groans of increasing old age! This is a gospel for every living human person!

When Paul speak of the inner person contrasted with the outer, or the transient with the eternal, he is not speaking of opposites. It is this burdened body which will be healed, not some outer husk encasing the heaven-bound part of us. The whole of who-we-are is caught up in this journey from death to life, and not death to 'after-life'. Paul is quite clear that the body that is all-of-us-now does decay and will die; but whatever we need for our shelter and our flourishing beyond what we know and understand is already promised, and in the hands of our God – outwardly in decay *and* inwardly renewed:

<sup>5:1</sup> We know that if the earthly frame that houses us today is demolished, we possess a building which God has provided – a house not made by human hands, eternal and in heaven.

And he has said earlier,

<sup>14</sup> for we know that he who raised the Lord Jesus to life will with Jesus raise us too, and bring us to his presence, and you with us. <sup>15</sup> Indeed, all this is for your sake, so that, as the abounding grace of God is shared by more and more, the greater may be the chorus of thanksgiving that rises to the glory of God.

(I like the 'and *you* with us'<sup>14</sup> by which Paul includes his recalcitrant Corinthian congregation!) So, we are not raised alone, but with a great company, a company which, as it has grown, has known God's grace more and more – so our eternal end is not individual but communal (and 'ecumenical'?). There will be transformed congregations in heaven!

Let me point out a pun in Paul. I'll give verse 15 in a more succinct translation:

Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. (NRSV)

The fruit of grace is thanksgiving. In the Greek, *charis* is grace, *eu-charis-tia* is thanksgiving. At the Lord's Table, Sunday by Sunday, in our bodies, we give thanks with the sign of *his* body; we 'make eucharist', for the grace by which we are enabled to live our fragile and fruitful lives.

I have pointed out here before that the words at the giving of communion are: 'The Body/Blood of Christ *keep* you in eternal life'. We have been in eternal life since our baptism, and every day, by grace, we have reason to be thankful, come what may. What

we know in this fellowship, at this table, under this grace, is all we need to know for life and eternity. Part of God's grace is to invite us Christians fitting-ourselves-for-the-kingdom-of-God to be washed in living water, and to partake of the bread of heaven. We need to be *here*, in this company, for this. To share the Spirit who, in Isaiah, promises,

to give [us] a garland instead of ashes,  
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,  
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. [Isa. 61]

For whom

even the darkness is not dark ...;  
the night is as bright as the day,  
for darkness is as light to you. [Ps 139:12]

And the Son who promised,

'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places...' [John 14:1]

*No wonder we do not lose heart!*

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