

Thursday 28th May 2020

“The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners...”

Isaiah 61:1

“Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses.”

Acts 13:38-39

I think we would be extremely foolish if we were to deny that pain and suffering are a very real part of many people's lives. For some the pain might be physical, as a consequence of chronic illness; for others it might be emotional suffering, such as for those who grieve the loss of a loved one. The Roman poet, Virgil, said “sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt” meaning “there are tears at the heart of life itself; and death presses on man's mind”.

How do we reconcile this with the Christian message? For we know that even among those who walk in the light, there can still be dark times. Many of us still feel imprisoned – whether by our habits and dependencies; by poverty; by suffering in an abusive relationship; by social exclusion; or by a past which overwhelms us. Where is the freedom we were promised?

It is tempting to believe that this is somehow our fault; that if we are not experiencing the freedom that Christ promised then we are doing something wrong; that we are not good enough or that we have failed.

But placing our faith in Christ is not some magical panacea that instantly makes all hardship vanish. We are still physically in the world and subject to the tribulations and sorrows that go along with that.

But whereas before we found ourselves alone in the darkness, we now have a guiding light we can look towards. We have a model in Christ, the Suffering Servant (“He is despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” – Isaiah 53:3); one who endured not only physical pain but who experienced the agony of separation from God on the cross (“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” – Matt. 27:46). His death and resurrection, as Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:17, means that “this light, temporary suffering is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.”

Let us heed the words Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor imprisoned for his work against the Nazi party. He was executed in a concentration camp in 1945, just a few weeks before the end of the war. He had spent the previous two years in captivity and, from Tegel military prison around Christmas 1943, uncertain of his future, he wrote a series of morning prayers for his fellow prisoners from which the following is an excerpt.

*O God, early in the morning I cry to you.
Help me to pray and to focus my thoughts on you;
I cannot do this alone.*

*In me there is darkness, but with you there is light;
I am lonely, but you do not leave me;*

*I am feeble in heart, but with you there is help;
I am restless, but with you there is peace.
In me there is bitterness, but with you there is patience;
I do not understand your ways, but you know the way for me.*

Lord Jesus Christ, you were poor and in distress, a captive and forsaken as I am.

*You know all man's troubles;
You abide with me when all men fail me;
You remember and seek me;
It is your will that I should know you and turn to you.
Lord, I hear your call and follow;
Help me.*

*O Holy Spirit,
Give me faith that will protect me from despair, from passions, and from vice;
Give me such love for God and men as will blot out all hatred and bitterness;
Give me the hope that will deliver me from fear and faint-heartedness.*

Amen"