

Dear friends,

Events this week have demonstrated that the Corona virus pandemic is still very much with us both here and around the world. Only today has come the confirmation that we have lost our unenviable position of having the third highest death toll from Covid-19 following a sharp rise in the death toll in Mexico whilst we have also seen new lockdown restrictions applied across a swathe of northern England including Greater Manchester and a suspension of further relaxations of the Covid-19 lockdown restrictions.

The good news is that we have been able to resume limited services in church although as from next Sunday (9th August) we will need to wear face masks in church. Today (Saturday) has seen the lifting of the requirement, in England at least, for vulnerable people to shield although clearly with rising levels of Coronavirus infections, many will feel nervous about venturing out and we should continue to pray for those who remain vulnerable in our congregations and in the community at large.

We've been fortunate to have enjoyed a few days holiday this week as a family exploring the North Norfolk coast (including a ride on the North Norfolk railway, hauled by one of my favourite locomotives which was wonderful!). We stopped off for the day in Cambridge on the way back on Friday and with all the colleges closed and shops only open on a restricted basis, it was incredibly quiet for what should have been the height of the tourist season and this simply served to emphasise the impact of Covid-19 on the economy and ultimately on the livelihoods of many people and it will be a long while before economic activity returns to previous levels.

Our journey to and from Norfolk was a long one as is our journey through Paul's letter to the Romans. Last week we came to the end of Chapter 8, we were reminded of the power of God's love for us and how there is absolutely NOTHING that can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus, words that we can know to be true because of the price that was paid for our redemption from slavery to sin (nothing less than the life of God's own Son, Jesus Christ). We know that Jesus' sacrifice has been accepted because God raised Jesus to life on the first Easter Sunday so we can have confidence in God's promises, not self confidence but quiet confidence in God's promises to us.

As we move this week to consider the opening verses of Romans chapter 9, the tone seems to change. Paul expresses his great sorrow and unceasing anguish for his own people, the nation of Israel. Paul's words may seem strange in the light of the confidence he expressed at the end of chapter 8 as Paul says *"For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the same of my people, those of my own race, the people of Israel"*

If we go right back in the Old Testament to Abraham (probably around 2000 years earlier), God made a covenant promise with Abraham (or Abram as he was then) that if he obeyed God's calling and followed where he led, God would bless him with land and descendants as numerous as the sand on the sea shore or stars that light up the night sky.

This promise of being the father of a mighty nation must have seemed strange as he and Sarah his wife were childless and by now both well into what we would regard as old age (Sarah was around 65 years old so well past normal childbearing age). Despite being unable to see humanly how God could fulfil his promise, Abram obeyed God and *"it was credited to him as righteousness"*. God chose to adopt Abram not because of anything Abraham had done but because God chose him and Abraham was faithful to God's calling.

You can follow the account of Abraham, Isaac, Esau, Jacob and his sons including Joseph and his coat of many colours in the book of Genesis starting at Chapter 12, a story of blessing but also of family strife and rejection of God's promises.

Returning to Romans chapter 9 however, Paul is deeply sorrowful and anguished for his people because as a people (albeit with honourable exceptions) they have rejected God – ultimately crucifying the one who came as the long promised Messiah. In doing so, they rejected their adoption as sons of God, the divine glory that God had poured upon them, they had turned their back on God’s covenant promises, the law and the temple worship.

Abraham was the first of the patriarchs from whom Jesus traced his human ancestry and yet his own people rejected the one who came to save them.

Paul’s love for his own people is so great that he wishes that he could be cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of his own people (as of course Jesus bore the curse of sin and was cut off from God as he hung and died on the cross). This plea has to be understood in the context of Romans chapter 8 and what Paul is saying here is that he would rather be cursed and cut-off from Christ if it could save the people of Israel, if it could bring them back to God.

This should serve as a reminder to us all of the urgency of sharing the message of God’s love with those around us. The harsh reality is that just as if we found ourselves drowning, a lifebelt thrown to us can only save us if we reach out and grab hold of it, so our salvation is only assured when we take hold of Jesus and accept what he has done for us and turn to him in penitence and faith.

This is at the heart of the responses made by those being baptised who are old enough to answer for themselves (and the parents and godparents of infants brought for baptism) when they are asked if they reject the devil and all rebellion against God, if they renounce the deceit and corruption of evil, if they repent of the sins that separate them from God and neighbour and ultimately “Do you turn to Christ as Saviour?”

We must all ask ourselves these questions, and we all need to share the good news about Jesus with those around us so that they can have the opportunity to answer those questions for themselves.

Paul was passionately committed to sharing the gospel, first with his own people and then with Gentiles – how committed are we to continuing in Paul’s footsteps. We aren’t all called to be preachers and to publicly proclaim the gospel but we should all be willing to share the love of Jesus in both words and deeds with those around us before it’s too late. Just as the people of Israel couldn’t be saved by their heritage, neither can we.

Collect for the 8th Sunday after Trinity

Almighty Lord and everlasting God, we beseech you to direct, sanctify and govern both our hearts and bodies in the ways of your laws and the works of your commandments; that through your most mighty protection, both here and ever, we may be preserved in body and soul; through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever, Amen.

Please continue to pray for our churches, for our witness and ministry, for Veronica and the family and for all who were due to be married in our churches this year. Please pray that the Holy Spirit would fill us with a desire to share the wonder of God’s love for us in both word and deed.

Please pray for the most vulnerable in our societies, those who have been shielding and who may be fearful to go out, please pray for protection for them, and that they would be comforted and encouraged. Please continue to pray for all those who have lost their livelihoods and dreams as a result of Covid-19 and pray that the increase in the number of cases would be rapidly brought under control. Please pray for schools as they prepare to re-open in the autumn and for all the essential preparations that will be necessary for that to happen safely.

Jeremy Hunns