

Dear friends,

We finally seem to be back to enjoying some summer warmth and even a bit of sunshine (although we were in South Wales earlier this week visiting my parents who had been looking after our dog while we were away last week and we were given a reminder of why Wales is such a green and pleasant land when it rained solidly pretty much the whole time we were there).

It was a great privilege to be able to lead a service again at St Michael's last Sunday and I'm very much looking forward to doing the same, God willing on the 16th of this month. Although we can worship God anywhere and the church is the gathering together of God's people and not the building, there is something very special about being able to gather for worship in the beautiful buildings that we have the privilege of being the current guardians of.

The news this week has been overshadowed by the dreadful events in Beirut when the port area and large parts of the city have been devastated by Tuesday evening's massive blast. Lebanon, then the centre of the Phoenician empire features throughout the Scriptures with Solomon's Temple being built using logs cut from the great cedars of Lebanon. Although Beirut is one of the oldest cities in the world, it isn't mentioned explicitly in the Bible although Tyre and Sidon to the south feature frequently. Once an extremely fertile and prosperous region, in more recent times Lebanon has been torn apart by civil war and even before Tuesday's explosion faced economic collapse.

As the facts begin, slowly, to emerge, it seems that the explosion was due to a lethal combination of corruption and incompetence rather than as a result of any sectarian or terrorist motive and serves as a reminder of the destructive power of what is a very effective agricultural fertiliser but also a very powerful and commonly used industrial explosive which must be treated with the respect it deserves.

The consequences for Lebanon of this explosion are far greater than the immediate devastation caused by the blast as Beirut port served as a lifeline for the country, bringing in much needed imports of grain to feed the people including many thousands of refugees. Can I please encourage you all to pray for Lebanon and its people and especially those responsible for the government of the country as they seek to rebuild the shattered city of Beirut and bring about much needed economic and political reform across the country.

As we continue our journey through Paul's letter to the church in Rome, we come this week to chapter 10 and verses 5 – 15 where Paul emphasises that our profession of faith doesn't rely on some immensely long and complicated formula rather *"If you declare with your mouth "Jesus is Lord" and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you will be saved"*. This is the earliest recorded creed and although the creeds that we use in church today fill in a lot more of the detail about what we believe as Christians, this statement remains at the heart of what we believe as Christians.

Our passage begins with Paul quoting Moses in contrasting passages taken separately from the Books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. In verse 5 Paul quotes Moses words recorded in Leviticus 18:5 where Moses reminds his readers that righteousness is found by obeying the requirements of the law – do this he says and you will live. In verse 6 Paul quotes Moses words from Deuteronomy 30:12 where he speaks of the righteousness that comes by faith.

The passage that follows can seem confusing although it is worth referring back to the text that Paul is quoting in Deuteronomy and to consider also the preface from Deuteronomy 30:11 *"Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it? Nor is it beyond the sea so that you have to ask "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it? No, the word is very near you, it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it"*.

Paul interprets these verses in the light of Christ as he writes *“Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ (that is to bring Christ down) or ‘Who will descend into the deep?’ (that is to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart”, that is the message we proclaim”*

The point Paul is making here (as Moses was two millennia previously) is that we don't have to ascend into heaven or descend to the depths (or even cross the seas) to find God because God has come among us in the person of Jesus Christ who is nothing less than Immanuel, God with us.

The word is near us, in our mouth and in our heart. We proclaim Jesus is Lord with our tongues and believe that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead in our hearts. It is our belief in what Jesus has done for us in dying on the cross and being raised to life again that justifies us (makes us right with God) and our confession of that faith that saves us.

The great promise and hope is found in verses 11 – 13 *“Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame” For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile, the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved”* There are no divisions in Christ (apart from the ones that we invent), Jew and Gentile, slave and free, all are saved by Jesus Christ.

The challenge then is found in verses 14 & 15 *“How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? We may not all be called to preach but we should all be prepared to give an account of our faith to anyone who asks and our lives should be so filled with the love of Christ that that people will ask what it is that makes us different from those around us.*

The collect for the ninth Sunday after Trinity

Almighty God, who sent your Holy Spirit to be the life and light of your Church, open our hearts to the riches of your grace, that we may bring forth the fruit of the Spirit in love and joy and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. Who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever Amen

Please pray for the people of Beirut and Lebanon more widely as they come to terms with the devastation caused by this week's explosion. Pray for an effective response to bring aid both to the people of Lebanon and those (especially the thousands of refugees) in the region who rely on food aid shipped in through Beirut.

Please pray that we might live lives that are filled with God's spirit and which glorify God and help us to speak for you. Pray for all who are called to preach the word of God that they might do so clearly and effectively. Pray for Veronica that she would soon be able to fulfil her calling to lead and pastor your people.

Please continue to pray for all who are in distress at this time, for those who are facing economic hardship whether as a consequence of Covid-19 or for other reasons, those who are ill or mourning the loss of a loved one, for those who are struggling to regain confidence to venture out after lockdown or having to shield, for those who are frightened of the consequences of Covid-19. Please pray that they would be comforted and would know God's love and power surrounding them at this time.

Jeremy Hunns