

11 February 2018 (Sunday before Lent)

Preacher: Revd Canon Dr Martin Wellings – Superintendent Minister, Oxford Circuit

Set readings for this Sunday:

Mark 9:2-9;

2 Corinthians 4:1-6.

I saw my first live daffodil of 2018 just over a fortnight ago, on 25 January. By 'live' I mean that it was growing in the ground, and not sitting in a bucket in Sainsbury's, having chucked up hundreds of air miles on its way to Britain! This daffodil was growing in Philip and Sue's garden, and it was a very welcome sight! Welcome because daffodils are such cheerful flowers, aren't they! And welcome as a harbinger of Spring. And extra-specially welcome because the first few weeks of 2018 have been, or seem to have been, particularly gruelling. We've had the usual doom and gloom in the news. We've had so many people under the weather with a really virulent strain of flu. We've had a spate of funerals. And, of course, we've had the seasonal run of short, grey days and long, dark nights. Worse this year, I think, than for quite a long time. Not an easy time, for any of us.

Of course, seasons of difficulty and discouragement come our way, and not just in the winter. They come for all sorts of reasons. Sometimes we can identify the reasons and name them; sometimes we can't. Sometimes we're fed up, or weary, or feel under pressure. Sometimes things just get a bit too much for us. And sometimes we're just out of sorts, with the world, with other people and with ourselves. And I think that we sense some of that in Paul's letter to his Christian friends in Corinth, from which we read a little extract this morning. Paul is more than slightly out of sorts: he is seriously fed up. At the beginning of the letter he says that he has been 'utterly, unbearably crushed' by what has happened to him, and later on he writes of being 'afflicted in every way – disputes without and fears within'. But as well as writing very honestly about his troubles and hardships, Paul also sees the opportunity to share the consolation he has received, and to pass on to the Corinthians some solid encouragement. We can listen in, and benefit in our turn from what Paul has to say. Paul offers a remedy for discouragement and a word for hard times. We do not lose

heart, he says. Let's take hold of that thread, and follow it through. We do not lose heart. And why is that?

Well, we don't lose heart because we see the big picture of what is going on in God's world. I'm sure you'll have seen those picture quizzes which take an everyday object and either photograph it from an unusual angle, or else zoom in on one tiny detail. Shown in that way, the most ordinary and familiar object becomes a thing of mystery. Try as we will, it is really difficult to make out what it is. It's a baffling puzzle. And then, as the camera pulls back, and we see more of the surroundings, gradually everything falls into place and we see what has been in front of us all the time. The puzzle is solved. The mystery is unravelled. We get a clear view, and we know what it is that we're looking at.

Now, Paul does something similar here as he addresses a question which is troubling the Corinthians and which may be troubling us too. The question is this: why don't more people respond positively to the Good News of Jesus, to the Gospel? Why are so many people uninterested or even hostile to the Christian message? After all, we're trying to communicate the most amazing good news. The gospel has at its heart the faithful, generous love of God for the world and for all its people – for each and every human being. God has made us for a relationship with himself, a relationship that brings us happiness and peace. Although we have turned away from God, God has continued to reach out to us, with an offer of forgiveness, inner healing and transformation. This offer is embodied in Jesus, and through knowing him and trusting him we can receive all that God longs to give us. Surely this is a very welcome message? Apparently not! People react with indifference, or with scorn.

And why is that? Well, there are lots of reasons. But fundamentally, as Paul sees it, there is a battle going on in the world and in the universe between good and evil. Paul personifies it when he says in verse 4 that the god of this world has blinded peoples' minds to prevent them from recognising the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ. We might perhaps frame that differently, and say that for generations and for centuries people have turned away from God, and so they've made it very hard for anyone to recognise God's truth. But the point is the same. People don't approach the gospel with an open mind. They approach it with a presupposition that is set against God. And so it shouldn't surprise us if getting a

hearing for the gospel is hard work. It shouldn't surprise us that seeing the truth about Jesus and accepting it requires a change so great and so drastic that the New Testament likens it to being born all over again.

Keeping in mind that big picture, and recognising the challenges we face, we continue to affirm the Gospel and the Church's mission. We're on the threshold of Lent today: Shrove Tuesday and Ash Wednesday are almost upon us. And there will be some special services in Woodstock during Lent, including a weekly ecumenical service of Compline at St Mary's. Now, I remember an ecumenical Lent course from years ago, and I remember it because it had an excellent title. The title was: 'What on earth is the Church for?' I'm afraid that I don't remember anything at all about the contents of the course, but I've held on to the title: 'What on earth is the Church for?' A really good question. A really important question. We could answer that question in lots of ways, but here in 2 Corinthians Paul suggests three answers.

First, **we're here to speak God's truth**, openly, persuasively and with integrity. That's in verse 2: 'we refuse to practise cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.' We hear a lot these days about so-called 'fake news' and 'post-truth', don't we? We've moved beyond news management and spin to accusations of blatant lying, and that is profoundly disturbing for our common life. In such a world, we stand for the faithful, loving, honest communication of what we know of God, offered respectfully to the people around us, and supported by the way that we live.

Secondly, **we're here to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord**. Verse 5: we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord. We do well to remember that this very basic Christian message was both dangerous and subversive in the first century. In Paul's world there were many gods, and the Roman state was pretty relaxed about that. But there was only one Lord, and that was the Emperor. Loyalty to Caesar was the glue holding together an empire of many nationalities, languages, traditions and faiths. So to say 'Jesus is Lord' was really risky. It could sound like disrespect to the Emperor – which it was! It could sound like treason. And we do well to remember too that proclaiming that Jesus is Lord today has all sorts of implications. It isn't just a phrase in a hymn or a song or a prayer. It plays out in

everyday life. It bears on our use of time and money. It affects how we live and behave at home and at work. It shapes our engagement with the community, with society and with politics. Proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord is about lifestyle, and not just language. If we say that Jesus is Lord, how does that affect the way we live?

Thirdly, **we're here to serve others for Jesus' sake**. Verse 5 again: we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. We might perhaps have expected Paul to say that we are Jesus' slaves, but he doesn't, does he? We are to serve one another. Not as doormats, but as people who take thought for the best interests of other people.

And why do we do all this? Well, because we have seen God's light in the face of Jesus Christ. In 2 Corinthians Paul writes eloquently about the big themes of the Christian faith: about the cosmic struggle between good and evil, about the calling of the Church, and about the Gospel and its implications for the life of the world. But here he brings it down to our own personal experience: we do all this and we believe all this because we have seen the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. That great twentieth century theologian Karl Barth wrote millions of words of profound reflection on the mystery of God. But when asked to sum up his own faith, reportedly he quoted an old children's hymn: 'Jesus loves me, this I know; for the Bible tells me so.' We can spend a lifetime – an eternity – exploring the depths of God, learning, refining and re-stating the truth to the very best of our ability. But the essence is simple: to know God through Jesus Christ. That's all we need. And we do need it, in order for the rest to fall into place.

I love to see the Spring flowers, and I'm looking forward to more daffodils over the next few weeks. They cheer me up, and they make me feel better. But the real encouragement I need is here in the Good News of Jesus, in the message of God's all-embracing, welcoming and transforming love. This is a message for all seasons and for all time. Thanks be to God. Amen.