

LIFE OUT OF DEATH

Pentecost 2 Year B

1 Sam. 8:4-11; Ps. 138; 2 Cor. 4:13 - 5:1; Mk. 3:20-3

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In what is generally regarded as Oscar Wilde's greatest novel, certainly his most famous, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde tells the tragic story of a young man in love with his youth. Dorian Gray is in his early twenties and to look at, his form would be somewhat reminiscent of one of those statues of Greek Gods. He had an immaculate complexion, a face that seems to have been chiselled by a fine craftsman and a body like Adonis. In short, he was a man whom everybody adored because of his good looks.

The story begins with the completion of Dorian Gray's portrait—a portrait that captured perfectly the youth, the beauty and the mystery of the young man. But, it was only when Dorian Gray saw the finished portrait, that he saw and understood for the first time for himself, the reality of his transient youthfulness. Only when he had seen the portrait, did he realise that there would come a time when he would lose his beauty and those who loved him now, would eventually turn away.

In the realisation that as he grew older, the portrait would always remain youthful, he longed that the process might be reversed—that the picture might grow old and that he might always retain his youth. He longed for this so much that he was prepared to sell even his own soul in order to get it.

To a vain person, the prospect of one's body wasting away can have a devastating and tragic effect, as it did for Dorian Gray. But not for the apostle Paul. In this part of his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul follows on from the thought, immediately prior to this passage in verses 5-12, of the fact that the immeasurable treasure of the gospel is contained within frail earthen vessels—vessels that are decaying and transient—vessels that will eventually suffer and die. Yet in spite of this, Paul says that we can be confident. What we suffer in the outward body, is of no comparison to the glory that we will share in Christ and with Christ for eternity.

How can this be? What is the relationship between who we are, as decaying sinful flesh, and who we shall become, in Christ and for all eternity? How can we face the reality of our own mortality?

The focus or centrepiece of this section is Paul's assertion, "*we believe*". And he traces his assurance right back to the Psalmist who in Psalm 116:10 states, "I kept my faith, even when I said, 'I am greatly afflicted'." In the face of suffering, the psalmist could still maintain his trust in God's faithfulness. That same spirit, that same attitude, that same

faith, that existed in the life of the Psalmist, is the same spirit, the same attitude, the same faith, that exists in the life of Paul. Paul shows that there is nothing new between faith in the Old Testament and faith in the New Testament. The times may have changed, the circumstances may have changed, but not the faith. The same spirit of faith that we have, as Christians, is the same spirit of faith which Paul had and which the psalmist had—even in times of suffering and distress—something of which many are experiencing at the moment with the COVID pandemic—as well as many other situations.

As we go about our everyday life, the things that we say and do, give testimony to the kind of faith that we have. If our faith is grounded in a doctrine of works, then that is what will become evident. If our faith is grounded in a doctrine of the grace of God, then that too will become evident to those around us. The faith that we profess, however, is not grounded in some subjective feeling; it is founded on what we *know*—by faith. And what is it that we know? We know, says Paul, that Christ will raise up this mortal body and present it to God clothed in the glory of Christ. Paul writes,

the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. (4:14)

We have seen elsewhere that Paul's faith is grounded in the God "who raised Jesus" from death to new life. Christ's resurrection is the guarantee of our resurrection. He generally hear that at every funeral—at least the ones that I officiate at. Apart from Christ's resurrection, there can be no resurrection for us. Our security as Christians, therefore, rests in the knowledge of our union with Christ—being identified with him in his resurrection. So, even though our mortal bodies may suffer and die, life, through resurrection in Christ, will finally triumph over death. And the ultimate expression of what it means to be redeemed, is to be in the presence of God.

The purpose of Christ in redemption is to present those who are redeemed as holy and without blemish before God—and Paul's ministry is closely bound up with this purpose. It's his desire in his preaching and teaching to present everyone perfect in Christ. In *his* ministry, Paul participates in *Christ's* ministry. For this reason, therefore, says Paul, we ought to give thanks.

"It is for your sake", Paul tells the Corinthian church, "that I suffer", for through his suffering, the ministry of the gospel has gone forward and been delivered to the Corinthians, so that they might know the joy of salvation. In the light of this we must constantly give thanks, for it's in thanksgiving that we can best respond to God's saving action in the lives of others. As it is God who both initiates our salvation and brings it to

completion in himself, it is to him that all praise must be given. There can be no grounds for praising ourselves in any way.

As more people are brought into the kingdom, through God's will, not through human action, so God's grace is made more evident. Because of this, therefore, Paul says, we should not lose heart, for our present sufferings are nothing when compared to the hope of eternity (4:16-17). Paul writes,

¹⁶ So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, (emphasise mine)

I like that: *this slight momentary affliction*. It's in the hope of eternity that comes through faith, that Christians are able to persevere in the hardships of this present life. Although, physically, Paul was wasting away and in a sense he believed that his death sentence had already been pronounced, inwardly he was being renewed every day. This is the paradox of the Christian life. While outwardly our physical lives are running down and wasting away, our inner beings are being constantly renewed.

Paul believed that his present suffering would reap a reward from God that far outweighed his bitter experience. In contrast to the magnificent glory that awaits him, his sufferings, he regards as a "slight and momentary affliction". "This slight momentary affliction" must have been one of Paul's greatest understatements, for later on in this letter (2 Cor. 11:21b-28), Paul says of his own trials...

I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

If these are Paul's slight and momentary afflictions, then we, indeed, have a great deal for which to be thankful, provided we do not keep our eyes on what is visible, but keep our eyes on that which is invisible and eternal. (4:18-5:1)

It's very easy, isn't it, when times are tough, to centre our thoughts and lives on ourselves and on our problems. It is also very easy, especially in this day and age, to fix our attention on the material things that are around us, in order to find meaning for our lives. But it's not in our self-centeredness nor in the material things of this world, that this inner renewal of which Paul speaks, is to be found.

The things that are visible—our frail bodies and material possessions—are, as Paul describes them, temporary and transient. That is, they're here for a while and then are gone. They have of no lasting value—including our frail bodies, which are wasting away. However, the things that are visible are not the only reality that we can experience. Eternal reality lies in that which cannot be seen or experienced in the normal, physical sense. It's in this invisible realm—the realm of the spirit and heavenly glory—that Christians are to fix their gaze. The invisible realities on which Paul encourages his readers to set their gaze, are part of the new world where fellowship with God is the most real of all life's experiences.

As Christians we are to press forward toward our heavenly goal, enduring our present sufferings in the assurance that they are, in contrast to the prize, temporary, fleeting and transient. It's here that God has provided for us a new, resurrected body—a body that will not be temporary as this one is, will not decay as this one will, but will be perfect and eternal. Our lives in this world can only ever be transient—we are here for a while and then we are gone. It is in the invisible realm, where we will dwell with Christ for eternity, that we will find our final resting place and as the psalmist says, *"we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever"*.

The life of Dorian Gray, lived in eternal youth, while his picture grew old, ended up being a life of misery—for him and for those around him. Those who live with their eyes fixed only on themselves—either in pride or despair or because of their physical frailty—will find no lasting meaning for life. Suffering in and of itself has no meaning. True meaning can only be found in our relationship with Christ in the midst of our suffering.

By virtue of our faith in the faithfulness of God, we can have the confidence that although we are frail and transient vessels—sinful and suffering, God, through his grace, has deigned to place in us, the treasure of the gospel, and has prepared for us a lasting, resurrected presence before God. In this and for all who share the faith, we can only offer up continual thanks to God. The hope of the resurrection is the hope of faith, for therein lies life in the midst of death and glory in the midst of suffering.

To God our Saviour, be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.