

## THIS TREASURE

Pentecost 2 Year B

1 Sam 3:1-10 (11-20); Ps 139:1-6, 13-18; 2 Cor 4:5-12; Mk 2:23-3:6

Gladstone 03/06/2018

---

Following the retreat from Flanders, in 1940, Winston Churchill stood before the House of Commons and made the following speech...

We shall not flag nor fail. We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France and on the seas and oceans; we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air. We shall defend our island whatever the cost may be; we shall fight on beaches, landing grounds, in fields, in streets and on the hills. We shall never surrender and even if, which I do not for the moment believe, this island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, will carry on the struggle until in God's good time the New World with all its power and might, sets forth to the liberation and rescue of the Old."<sup>1</sup>

Near the end of his life, Churchill was asked to speak to the graduating class of England's most prestigious university. The hall was packed. Young students perched on their chairs, eager to catch every word from the statesman. Finally, Churchill approached the podium. What seemed like minutes passed as the crowd waited in silence for their hero to speak. He stared up at the eager faces and said these words: "NEVER...GIVE...UP!" Another minute passed in silence. Finally, Churchill said to the students, "NEVER...GIVE...UP!" And then to everyone's amazement, he walked off the stage. The crowd was stunned. Then, as they recognized the significance of his words, a tremendous ovation erupted. The crowd went wild!

Never give up! That's pretty good advice, don't you think? It's the kind of advice that we need to hear again and again these days. The world today seems all over the place—chaotic—spinning out of control. Values that have been long held in high esteem are called into question and even ridiculed. The job we had worked at for years and counted on to take us to retirement is suddenly "down-sized" out of existence. The social safety nets are being sacrificed on the altar of a balanced budget.

We also see this downsizing within the church—particularly within the more traditional forms. Our own congregation has even downsized somewhat over the last few years for all kinds of reasons—people retiring to (lets face it) places with better beaches and more facilities, or to be closer to the kids—people leaving because there's no longer the work here that there used to be—and even busier lifestyles that compete with our worship and church involvement time.

---

<sup>1</sup> Speech following the retreat from Flanders before the House of Commons, June 4, 1940

Some church folks were talking together one day. One of them said, “Our congregation is sometimes down to 30 or 40 on a Sunday.” (Sounds like us, doesn’t it?)

One person from another church said, “That’s nothing, sometimes our group is down to 10 or 12 in the summer.”

Not to be outdone, in a truly competitive spirit, another dear lady added, “It’s so bad in our church on Sunday that when the minister says, ‘Dearly beloved,’ it makes me blush!”

But here we are, soldering on—keeping the faith—faithfully doing whatever we can to continue being the church in this place.

In Paul’s second letter to the church in Corinth, he writes,

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you. (2 Cor. 4:8-12)

Paul was, of course talking about in the first place, himself and his cohort of missionaries that travelled with him. And he knew what he was talking about. He knew what it was like to suffer persecution at the hands of those who wanted to quench his spirit and to quench the message of the gospel he was preaching. But like Sir Winston Churchill, he never gave up—never gave in to despair—never caved in to the adverse pressures around him. Why was that, do you think? What was it that kept him going—kept his resolve firm and secure?

Well, he tells us, doesn’t he? Immediately prior to the passage I just read, he writes, “But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.”

Often when ministers preach from this passage, they emphasise the “in clay jars” aspect. I’m sure I’ve done it too. It’s a very valid way of addressing the passage. But it’s interesting how a different emphasis can change the meaning of the words. What I want to address today is the aspect of the “treasure” that we carry in those clay jars. What is it that Paul had—that we have—that’s so special, so priceless as to set us apart and keep us going? What is this treasure that Paul hints at?

We all have treasures of one sort or another, don't we? Go in to any home and you will find the family's treasures. They'll be hanging on the wall or tucked in china cabinets or placed attractively for all to see somewhere on coffee tables, display cases and so on. Another treasure might be the family Bible. Or maybe the treasure is sitting in the driveway or parked in the garage. It could be that the treasure is the house itself. Watch people at any bank—treasures are stored there too. To some people their offspring are their treasures. And rightly so—for children are a heritage from the God.

I suspect, however, that these are not the kind of treasures that Paul is referring to.

These things are not "this treasure," that Paul is writing about. When you're in church look around. What treasures do you see? Prominent cross up high? The pulpit Bible? The musical instruments? The banners? The PowerPoint and sound equipment? The furniture? All around are things that people regard as treasures. But, these too, are not "this treasure."

What's the treasure you think of when you think of your faith? A story is told of the well-known writer William Willimon. One day he received a call from an irate father. "It's all your fault," the man shouted over the phone. Puzzled, Willimon gently pried the story behind these words from the man. It seems that his daughter, well-placed to continue on toward her medical degree, had withdrawn and decided to take training to serve as a missionary. And the father was blaming Willimon and the Christian school she was attending. Willimon told the dad, "I think it must be your fault." "Mine?" the father blustered. "Yes" said Willimon. "Didn't you take her to church and Sunday School all these years?" "Yes, but..." the dad stammered. "What did you think would happen?" asked Willimon. "But we're Presbyterian!" Funny, but sad.

All too often we respond to God with, "But we're...!" You fill in the blanks. It was Jesus who said, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Luke 12:34)

Where is your heart? Where is your treasure? Paul writes, "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.'

This is our treasure: "...the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." If we need motivation to keep going—to not give up—here it is in abundance. What we have to offer the world is the genuinely good news that God loves us, and the proof of that is in the life, death, and resurrection of this world's Saviour, Jesus Christ. And we are commanded to carry that love to others—to share it with those we meet.

On the night Jesus was betrayed he talked with his disciples and shared some of his last thoughts with them. He gave them what he called a new commandment. “Love one another, as I have loved you.”

This is the treasure we carry as the church and as individual members of it? A love so profound that it radically changes us and changes the world we live in? This treasure that we carry around in clay jars, in our fragile and imperfect humanity—this treasure is nothing less than the love of God for us and for his creation. Don’t keep it locked up and hidden away or overshadowed by the treasures of this world.

Yes we are fragile clay vessels, but as the Christian author, Oswald Chambers, writes,

God can achieve his purpose either through the absence of human power and resources, or the abandonment of reliance on them. All through history God has chosen and used nobodies, because their unusual dependence on him made possible the unique display of his power and grace. He chose and used somebodies only when they renounced dependence on their natural abilities and resources.<sup>2</sup>

We are called to share this treasure—to share the gospel of God’s love for each of us and for the world. A love without strings attached. A love stretched wide open to hold the whole creation in a new embrace.

Sounds simple enough, but Paul lets us know that, in his life at least, it is not. What does he say his experience has been? Afflicted. Perplexed. Persecuted. Struck down. All of those. But he hangs in there. “We are AFFLICTED in every way, but not crushed; PERPLEXED, but not driven to despair; PERSECUTED, but not forsaken; STRUCK DOWN, but not destroyed;” In other words, there is no call to GIVE UP!

Why? Because we have “this treasure.”

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

---

<sup>2</sup> Oswald Chambers, in *Liberating Ministry From The Success Syndrome*, K Hughes, Tyndale, 1988, p. 134