

Our passage today is very appropriate for the occasion. We join the nation to celebrate our Queen's 90th birthday. If you have not yet picked up your copy of this booklet, *The Servant Queen, and the King she serves*, a small contribution will get you one; please see Graham after the service.

Last Sunday we examined Paul's advice on intercessory prayer, a conscious and deliberate act of praying specifically for others. We learned, in a group, when everyone is praying for everyone else, our own needs are also covered in prayer. Intercessory prayer starts by thanking God for the other person and their life. Then remember their struggle and difficulty and how they came into it. Remind yourself of their spiritual heritage and encouraging them to fan into flame (into life), the gift God has given them. Finally, reconnect them with the Author and Giver of life, who will, out of His love for us, see us through our difficulties and problems.

So, having told Timothy that God has not given us a spirit of fear, but the power of love and self-control, Paul says, *Therefore, do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me His prisoner...*

It seems strange doesn't it, that Christians in the first century might have been *ashamed* of sharing their faith, preventing them from proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Perhaps a better word might be *embarrassed*, which is to experience shame through humiliation.

It is amazing that, Paul's second letter to Timothy, which was written around thirty years after Jesus' death, the Gospel of Jesus Christ continued to upset people. A disturbing side of human nature is that people make fun of what they don't know, or understand. At one extreme, this attitude is known as bullying. Today, people like Richard Dawkins, who do not make the effort to understand the Christian faith, make fun of Christians and their faith, humiliating them, wanting them to feel ashamed of it, and deny the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. There is a limit, how much humiliation one can take, because constant humiliation and embarrassment results in depression.

On Thursday afternoons, at Seacourt Bungalows, we have just started a topical study of the Beatitudes. Reading the first Beatitude, we realised, the life Jesus is calling us to, is *counter-intuitive*, i.e. to live life against the accepted norm; contrary to what others think is natural and normal. The first beatitude reads, *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

The first problem we have is our reading of this sentence. I cannot begin to tell you how many times I have read set liturgy which starts with this Beatitude, *Blessed are the poor in spirit ...* and goes on to pray for the poor in this world. One prayer reads: "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*", and the response is, *Keep us from being preoccupied with money and worldly goods, and with trying to increase them at the expense of justice.*

Another prayer reads: "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*", and the response to this is, *We remember the poor of our world, for whom the kingdom of heaven often seems distant and unattainable.*

Is it any wonder then, the world we live in says, *Look how blessed the rich are! They have everything and lack nothing; so it is good to be rich! Therefore, lets get rich!*

Jesus offers a **counter-intuitive** view: The poor **in spirit**, not the poor, nor the rich, anyone who has reached tether's end, used up and exhausted their supply of material, intellectual and spiritual resources, and **calls on God for His help because they have no where else to turn**, they are really blessed, because for them, God opens the treasures of heaven.

Try teaching this, to those who believe the rich are blessed because they have everything. Many will be challenged and some will be disturbed because Jesus' teaching demands a response. Some may change, but many will make fun of and mock those who believe, *blessed are the poor in spirit...*

False teachers, whom Paul addressed in his first letter to Timothy, exploit this by offering a **seemingly** easy way out. *Why suffer when there is perfectly good way by which you can live a comfortable life!*

The irony is that, it is false teachers, not Jesus, who make undue demands and impose harsh requirements on us. Their strategy has not changed: they impose rights and rituals, insist these be followed. They find ways into church leadership, to impose their laws and create division and conflict in the congregation and among the members, and walk away, often with the riches of the church and its members.

I have been counselling a young man who has gone through years of difficulty, at work and in his love life. Recently, his wife said, **she felt** he was no longer

man she thought he was when they were married only a few years ago, and **she** decided, they were not right for each other.

Through the hurt and pain of this rejection, this young man made a comment which disturbed me greatly: could it be, the reason for the breakup of his marriage, was the result of not doing enough of the right things to please God? Nothing could be further from the truth! Difficulties and problems in life do not arise because we are not performing rituals, or observing a set of laws to please God; God does not punish us with troubles and struggles because we have not gone to church, or failed to pray for three days in a row, or not asked for forgiveness, or went to bed angry, or not fasted.

My counsel to this young man was to remind Him, God is Holy and He calls us to Holiness, and this request is neither unreasonable nor impossible.

First, we are made in His image; is it unreasonable for Him to ask that we be Holy, as He is Holy? *Second*, we **ARE** Holy because God breathed His spirit into us at creation, therefore, we are created Holy. *Third*, we have misunderstood Holiness as something to be attained through the performance of acts and rituals. This is the *soft option* offered by false teachers who pervert God's Word: if you are going through difficult times, then God is displeased with you because you are not living the life God wants. Do this act, observe this ritual, utter these words, most importantly, pay this price, and God will be pleased and all will be well with you.

Paul says exactly this to Timothy, *It is God who saved us and called us to be Holy, not because we have done anything to merit it, but because of His own purpose and grace which he gave us through Jesus the Christ, before the beginning of this world (v9).*

Some time ago, I was challenged to explain as simply as possible, the fall of the human race. I prayed and studied, and this was revealed to me: God made us with His hands and breathed His spirit in us; we **ARE** Holy, as He is Holy. We share God's DNA as His sons and daughters. God made us responsible for this His creation, that as we multiplied and spread all over the earth, God's Holiness would cover the earth.

But God's enemy, knowing we were not God, but created by God, exploited this and tested our loyalty. *Did God really say ...?*

Paul says, God knew this **before** the creation of this world, and prepared Christ to deal with it. So, when we failed the loyalty test, God says to us, *Don't worry. I anticipated this. My Son and I will deal with it. While you wait for us to **abolish death and restore immortal life** (v10), I give you the gift of the Holy Spirit, to guide, counsel and protect you.*

In the 16th chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus reveals the struggles we shall face, in the church and in the world, but we will not be without help. God will send the Holy Spirit to guide, counsel and comfort us. It is a long chapter, at the end of which Jesus says, *I have told you these things, so that in Me you may have [perfect] peace and confidence. In the world you have tribulation and trials and distress and frustration; but be of good cheer [take courage; be confident, be certain and remain undaunted]! For I have overcome the world. [I have deprived it of power to harm you, and have conquered it for you.]¹*

Where does Paul's confidence in the Gospel and his faith come from? *I am not ashamed or embarrassed, for I **KNOW whom** I have believed, and I am convinced that He is able to guard until that Day, what has been entrusted to me! (v12).*

Before we close, let me leave you with an image: imagine an infant learning to walk. Most infants learn to walk before they can talk. The infant does not ask for the ability to walk, nor does the infant say, *I won't walk because people will laugh at me when I fall!* The infant does not expect someone who knows to walk, to walk for her, nor does the infant expect someone to be there holding his hand every time he walks. The infant is not ashamed to persevere and try to walk.

So it should be for us, when we struggle with discouragement because the world refuses to believe the truth of Jesus' Gospel. It is not our "success" which matters to God, rather our perseverance which demonstrates our dependence on God's love, His power and His wisdom, in the same way a child perseveres to learn to walk, depending on an adult's love, care and wisdom.

Today we join the nation to celebrate our Queen's 90th birthday. She is not ashamed of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, nor is she embarrassed to proclaim it! If we have the same confidence in the person of God, and the Gospel of Jesus the Christ, should we feel ashamed to proclaim it? **AMEN.**

¹ John 16:33 (Amplified)