

“THE POWER OF GOD’S LOVE”

Titus 3:1-11

The things we hear from pulpits and platforms, and the stuff we read in books about the Christian life is usually pretty heavy on the ways in which we should live our lives. There’s plenty of advice about godly habits and lifestyle, lots about the behaviour and attitudes that we think are expected of us. And that’s very much as it should be. It’s how Paul starts off in the passage we read from *Titus* a few minutes ago.

Titus is a pastor on the island of Crete, and Paul writes this letter to him to encourage and advise him on his ministry there. He tells him at length in this letter what needs to be taught to the various groups within the church he has planted there, and in the first couple of sentences of chapter 3 there is more about the responsibilities he needs to set before his members. It’s very much the “what” and the “how” of being a Christian. Again and again we read in the New Testament letters what we should be doing and how we should do it. And the sermons and talks and seminars and addresses that we hear take up those themes. But after a while, however much we might appear to succeed in living in the way God wants us to, we lose sight of the “why”. Why should we do this? On what basis are we called to be God’s people?

Well, fortunately, Paul goes on in this chapter to set out the basics of the gospel, the ways in which God has worked in our lives to bring us into the company of his people. Paul says explicitly in v8 that he has explained the gospel in order that “*those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good.*” He has told them about the power of God’s love in their lives so that they have a basis for their actions, a rationale for their lives. And it does us no harm, from time to time, to remind ourselves of the gospel of Jesus Christ to which we respond by the way we conduct ourselves day by day. I’m sure there will be many sermons and so on over the next weeks which deal with the ways in which we live our lives in the day to day world, but unless we have truly grasped the amazing truth about how much God loves us and how much he has done for us, then we will not be able fully to reflect that love in our own lives.

So as we gather together once again after the diaspora of the summer holidays, let’s look at what Paul has to say here in vv3-8 about the power of God’s love and its effect on our lives. He sets it all out quite simply and we’ll just work our way through it this morning without, I hope, complicating it too much. It may be something that you need to be reminded about. It may be something that you’ve never really thought about at all before. It may be that you revisit these truths every day and you’re glad to have an opportunity to do it again this morning. Whatever your situation, allow God to speak to you by his Holy Spirit today – and pray that it will make a difference to you.

Paul begins by looking at what the situation was like before we allowed God to enter our lives. He uses a number of words to describe the human condition that we might fight shy of using about ourselves, but there’s a good deal of truth in all of this. We were “*foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved*”. “Never!” we cry. But Paul is writing here about those who have no desire to live as God wants, who have in some way or other tried to live without God. For Jewish people, the ultimate folly was ignoring God: the Old Testament is full of references to the foolish who have tried to cut themselves off from God. “*The fool has said in heart ‘There is no God’.*” Partly that is due to disobedience, as Paul himself says in the opening chapters of his letter to the Christians in Rome. There’s plenty of evidence around you, if only you’re prepared to look, that there is a God and that he loves this world he has created. He put that message very forcibly to the philosophers in Athens when he addressed them in their debating forum. Look around you: look at the complexity, the intricacy, the beauty, the order, the wonder of this whole universe. Only a fool would really want to argue that there’s nothing, no-one behind it all.

And that’s where the disobedience comes in. Deep down we know that there’s a God, that there is something beyond us and within us that is greater and more powerful than us. But we turn against that thought and against that God. We want to do our own thing, to live our own lives, to rely on our own

ideas and ideals. Although there are clear guidelines in the Bible, and things that are clear even to our own common sense and consciences, we turn against them.

To some extent we know what we're doing, but there's also a sense in which we are deceived. Right from the very first encounter humankind had with evil, deception has been at the root of it. The devil in the form of a serpent in the Garden of Eden deceived Eve and then Adam into thinking that they could get away with it, that they could live without regard for God. "Don't worry: he's not really going to punish you," he hissed into Eve's ear, and she passed the message on to Adam. "It won't matter in the long run: just get on and do as you please." And ever since then we have been deceived into thinking that our actions and the attitudes which give rise to them will have no consequences for us. We have allowed ourselves to be deceived by those philosophers and scientists and artists and commentators who have an interest in turning us away from God, in convincing us that he does not exist – and even if he does, we don't need to bother about him. "Just go with the flow: live your own life and enjoy it while you can."

And so we give ourselves over to "*passions and pleasures*", to the search for fulfilment and satisfaction in any way we can. And it's great, isn't it? People can rail on all they like about the despair of sin, but a lot of it is jolly good fun, and you're being a bit dishonest if you try to convince the rest of us that you don't enjoy it – at least for a while. But many of those passions and pleasures can start to get addictive. We find that they begin to play too large a part in our lives. We are always searching for the next kick, the next high, the next wonderful experiences. And before long, we are "*enslaved*" by them. However much we might try, there are certain habits we cannot seem to break, certain problems that we can never seem to resolve. It's still fun, but not quite such good fun as it was. And there's no longer the same sense of fulfilment; we are never satisfied. You recognise that, don't you? Restlessness, frustration, a lack of peace and contentment – it all comes along sooner or later.

And that starts to have an effect beyond ourselves. We want the things others have got. We want to experience their pleasures and passions. We want to have the stuff that they've accumulated – it might ease our own insecurity and inadequacy. So "*malice and envy*" creep in. We're constantly looking over our shoulder at other people, always trying to get one over on them, always suspicious of them and their lifestyle, cynical about their attitudes. (And being a part of a church doesn't make that any less of a problem – it seems to make it worse somehow.) Then we're in a situation of rivalry, out to get what they've got, determined to make ourselves look as good as them. Soon we're "*being hated and hating one another*." You might not put it that strongly, but Paul has no qualms about telling it as it is. It's every person for himself or herself. And once you're cast adrift like that, then the rot has well and truly set in. Life may have its ups and downs, but there seem to be a whole lot more downs than ups.

God didn't create us for that kind of situation. God created us because he wanted to love us and to be loved by us. He created us for relationship with himself and with each other. And as he watched this sorry sight of humanity tearing itself apart with no reference to him and no love for one another he had to step in. "*The kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared*." God intervened because he wanted to stop that rot, to bring us back to himself. It was a downward spiral – as we've seen – and you may well have experienced that downward spiral in your own situation: you may well be sliding down it now. God's idea is to "*save*" you from it. He wants to put a stop to it, to offer something better, something that is fulfilling, that brings peace and contentment, rather than deceit and slavery.

So, through the death of his Son Jesus, in a way that is beyond our understanding, from a love that is beyond our imagining, he gave us the opportunity to be plucked from the abyss. There was nothing in what we had done to make him feel that we deserved it. We had done no "*righteous things*" and even those things we had done that appeared righteous were just utter garbage as far as he's concerned. This salvation is no reward for good living, no prize for the best behaved. It's actually the antidote to all the bad things we found ourselves doing that we couldn't seem to give up. This salvation is offered "*because of his mercy*." Can you get your head round that? In his kindness God reaches out into our despair, into our selfishness and disobedience, and offers us a new start.

It's like being born all over again, Jesus told one of the Jewish leaders who came to ask what it was all about. It's like being a newly created being, Paul told the Roman Christians. "*He saved us through the washing of rebirth,*" he says here. All the accumulated grime and filth of our old sinful lives is washed away and we come out looking brand new – we **are** brand new! And that's outside **and** in. The behaviour changes – slowly, maybe, but surely – and the attitudes change. Our spirit is renewed. We receive "*renewal by the Holy Spirit*". God pours his own Spirit into our lives to bring about transformation and a complete change of direction. And, as we're always having to remind ourselves, that is something God does "*generously*". There's an awful lot that has to go when we receive God's salvation, so there's an awful lot to fill. God loves you and he loves to give you things – and what he most loves to give you is the Holy Spirit. I know some people like to tell us that we have to toil in prayer and beg God for it, but it's not really like that at all. If you're serious, then God will pour his Spirit into you.

And with that comes the experience of being "*justified by his grace*". No longer do we have to justify ourselves, to find a rationale for everything we do, explain our every action in order to make ourselves look better, feel less hated. God justifies us, vindicates our faith in him by making us "*heirs having the hope of eternal life.*" Now, there's a real transformation. Once we were "*foolish, disobedient, deceived, enslaved ... being hated and hating one another.*" Now we're on our way to heaven. The dissatisfaction and frustration, the lack of fulfilment and contentment are replaced by an authentic hope of an eternity spent with God in heaven. Once there was nothing really worth living for other than the transitory thrill of "*passions and pleasures*". Now there is really something to live for: now there is a purpose.

Once we've sorted all that out we can get on with living as God wants. Having sorted out the "why", we can address the "what" and the "how". That's exactly what Paul says here. He has taken time to emphasise these things so that "*those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good.*" God hasn't saved you only so that you can enjoy an eternal future with him, but so that you can make a difference now, so that you can start living as he wants and show something of his love by the way you live – "*these things are excellent and profitable for everyone.*"

How do you respond to that, then? Maybe, as I said earlier, you needed reminding of that. You've been trying – unsuccessfully – to live as you think God wants you to. Maybe you haven't even been trying. You became a Christian a long time ago, but things have drifted a bit. And they've drifted because you've forgotten just what an investment of love God has made in your life. You've forgotten just how bad it was before he touched your life. Slowly you've been pulled back into a life where you've been deceived into believing that it's all about you – "*passions and pleasures*" – and you've ended up feeling hated, and giving as good as you think you get. Just pause for a moment and consider the way in which God has tried to reach out to you, to welcome you back into his fold. And then ask him for a fresh outpouring of his Holy Spirit, a new transformation to take place in your life. Ask him to renew you, to rebuild you, to restore and refresh you. Pray for his help.

Maybe you're someone who has never really thought about this before. You've come along to church – maybe for months, years – because someone else brought you, or because you thought you ought to. But you've never really thought about how much God really loves you and how much he has done to try and draw you closer to him. Life's OK, but there's that sense of frustration that lurks under the surface, the idea that things could be a heck of a lot better. Don't be deceived into thinking everything's OK, when there's God's voice telling you this morning that it's not. You need to experience the power of God's love in your life, to feel the power of the Holy Spirit within you, to have a reason for living a "good" life. Pray for his help.

Maybe you are someone who knows all this inside out. It does make a real difference to you. You know that God's at work in your life. If that's the case, well, praise the Lord! And pray that he'll keep reminding you of it all, and that you never fall away from it.