

## Sharing in the sufferings of Christ

Last Sunday Bishop Michael Baughen introduced his Lent study course, a Passion for Christ. Few who heard him will ever forget the vigour and enthusiasm of this 89-year-old Bishop, as he introduced us to the Apostle Paul's second letter to the Christians at Corinth. If you were not here last Sunday I warmly encourage you listen to his sermon on the All Saints website.

Second Corinthians is one of the least studied books of the New Testament, in my experience. So it is very good that Bishop Michael has drawn our attention to it.

Our subject for today is sharing in the sufferings of Christ. Paul writes a great deal about suffering in 2 Corinthians, so I make no apology for quoting extensively from this letter of his today, as well from other passages on the subject.

At the outset of 2 Corinthians, in chapter 1 verse 5, Paul wrote "The sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives", or, as another version translates Paul's Greek "We share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ".

What were the sufferings of Christ?

They were many. I do not have time to give detail.

He gave up his home and was never sure of a comfortable night. He was misunderstood by his closest followers. He was verbally abused by the religious leaders. On the last day of his life before his death he was betrayed, deserted, marked, abused, spat upon, flogged, and then crucified.

What were the sufferings of Christ that the apostle Paul experienced?

Paul was not ashamed to tell the Corinthians what he had suffered during his ministry. In chapter 6 he writes about the difficulties he experienced –

"... travels, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; ... Glory and dishonour, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as imposters; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything." (6.4-10). Many of these things had been suffered by Jesus.

In chapter 11 Paul returns to the subject, comparing himself with those he or the Corinthians called "Super-apostles" (verse 5, also 12.11), also called by Paul "False apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ" (verse 13), to whose teaching the Corinthian Christians had been listening.

He wrote "I have worked much harder, being imprisoned more frequently, being 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 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 ... " (11. 26-27).

What a list! What a list! Dangers, hardships, punishments, insults, misrepresentation, poverty. All of these Paul had suffered in the course of travelling around sharing the gospel of Christ.

Why did Paul dictate to his scribe these lists of what he suffered?

Well, as we heard in passing, Corinth had been visited by some false teachers. Paul wrote about them that they preached "a different gospel from the one you accepted" (11.4), meaning the gospel they had had accepted from him, when he first visited them, as recorded in the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book of The Acts of the Apostles, when he told them the good news of salvation through faith in the crucified Jesus Christ, who had died so that those who believed in him could be put right with God, and who had born the punishment our wrongdoings deserve, so that we might be forgiven and receive new life, eternal life.

It is not clear what these false teachers had been teaching, but it seems most likely that they were Jews who had been encouraging the Corinthian Christians to adopt some Jewish practices, in order to try to earn their salvation, something it is impossible for us to do. None of us can be good enough to earn God's forgiveness and a place in heaven.

But one result of these false teachers' activity was that we learn from Paul that those sufferings, which he experienced and which were described in the book of the Acts, were by no means his only sufferings. He had indeed suffered much more for Christ than Luke tells us in the Acts.

As we heard in our reading, Paul referred at the beginning of his letter to his most recent sufferings – "The hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death." (1. 8-9).

The Roman province of Asia is not to be confused with the continent of Asia today. Roman Asia was a small part of modern day Turkey. Paul may be referring to the riots in the city of Ephesus there, as described in Acts chapter 19.

"A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in no little business for the craftsmen. He called them together, along with the workmen in related trades, and said: 'Men, you know we receive a good income from this business. And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that man-made gods are no gods at all. There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited, and the goddess herself, who is worshipped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty.'

When they heard this they were furious and began shouting: 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!' Soon the whole city was in an uproar." (Acts 19. 24-29).

Paul had to be restrained from appearing before the crowd to speak to them. The crowd shouted in unison for about two hours: "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" The city clerk eventually quietened them. (19.34-35).

Despite experiences like this, Paul found value in suffering, firstly by receiving and then giving comfort. As we heard he began 2 Corinthians by saying -

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our suffering, so also you share in our comfort." (1. 3-7).

Or, to put it more briefly, firstly, God comforts those who suffer, and secondly those who receive his comfort are enabled to comfort others when they suffer.

Michael Baughen tells us in his study guide that the Greek word Paracletos, which the Lord Jesus used for the Holy Spirit, and which is translated comforter, counsellor or helper in different English translations, means someone who comes alongside us. God the Holy Spirit comes alongside us to comfort us, when we suffer.

Later Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome of another benefit from suffering: character development. He wrote "We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit whom he has given us." (Roms. 5.3-5).

That reminds me of a similar passage in the letter of The Apostle James, later in the New Testament: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.

Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." (James 1.2-4). Character development.

The Apostle Peter also wrote about suffering for Christ in his first letter in the New Testament. "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering as though something strange was happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the spirit of glory and of God rests on you ... if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name ..." (1 Peter 4. 12-14, 16).

So there is a third benefit from suffering: blessing.

Thus Paul, James and Peter, the three principal leaders of the church in New Testament times each wrote similar things about suffering. (SP)

Have you suffered for Christ? (SP)

And have you experienced God's comfort when you have suffered? (SP) - Both comfort directly from God, and comfort through him from your brothers and sisters in Christ?

I will give you a couple of personal examples.

In one parish of which I was vicar, the editor of the local paper, the equivalent of the Bournemouth Echo, was antagonistic towards churches. When one of his feature writers wrote a full page article commending the work which my wife Jo and I were doing for marriages in difficulties in the area, and which article presumably the editor cannot have seen before it went to press, I rang the paper to thank the writer, only to find she had been immediately sacked.

That editor particularly did not like my public stand for biblical morality, and shortly before I moved from the parish he libelled me in a front-page article, which was picked up and repeated in the national press.

I received a great deal of support both within the church and outside it. For example, a former youth worker, paying us a return visit to preach on the following Sunday, kindly chose to preach on Jesus' words "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5.10). I was most grateful for his kindness.

My suffering cannot be compared with what Christians are suffering in Muslim lands though.

Secondly, as I have mentioned before, when Jo died nine years ago, whenever grief came on me the Lord told me to think of her rejoicing in his presence in heaven.

That was very comforting, and I have tried to share that comfort with several people since, after the death of their believing loved ones. Think of them rejoicing in heaven.

Have you been able to comfort others who suffer with the comfort you have received from Jesus?

And do you know that your perseverance and character have been developed through suffering?

Suffering is not pleasant. It would be an unusual person who did not wish it to end as soon as possible.

But looking back on difficulties we have experienced, we may be able to see how, as well as helping us to comfort others, our own character has been developed through suffering.

And we can remember the words of the Lord Jesus, who, on the evening before his crucifixion, said to his disciples, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. ... Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also." (John 16.18, 20).

Indeed if you have been a Christian for some time, and have not been called to suffer for Christ, you can ask yourself - Am I standing up for Jesus in the ways I should do so?

In the Apostle John's Book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, he tells how he saw in his vision of heaven "A great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne ... And one of the elders said to him 'These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; .. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'" (Rev. 7. 9, 13, 14, 17).

Jesus said "In the world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (John 16.33)