

At the end of the introduction to his letter to the Colossians, Paul writes these words about himself: *I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. I became its servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me.*

The phrase *Christ in you, the hope of glory* has been singled out as the theme for the final session of this year's Lent Course, so I wanted to work out what Saint Paul actually meant – *Christ in you, the hope of glory*. The context is Paul's reflection on the meaning of his own sufferings. He makes the strange claim that they form part of what Christ still needs to suffer for the sake of the Church. And the purpose of this suffering is to bring forth in all people the potential which they have – because Christ is in them.

There is a paradox at the centre of all this, and it's the key to understanding where we stand in relation to the redemption won for us by Christ. The contradictory facts are these: we believe that all creation is made new, reconciled to God by the death and resurrection of Jesus; at the same time we observe that evil still flourishes in the world around (and indeed in the very depths of our own being). The simple way of understanding this is in the catchphrase *already, but not yet*. We are already redeemed, but not yet living in the full power of that redemption. Or – the Cross was the (literally) crucial point where the world was redeemed; it will be the end of the world before we see the fullness of that redemption.

This can explain the alarming way Paul describes his sufferings as *completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions*. Elsewhere Paul is insistent on the all-sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice, and Christ's role as the unique mediator between God and humanity. What then can be lacking in Christ's suffering? Only that the work of redemption has begun – its completion is inevitable – yet there remains much to be done.

Pauline theology makes much of the Church as the body of Christ, and the sufferings of Paul are, he says, for the sake of that body. While Paul and the other apostles have a special role in the body, they are part of the body just as much as anyone else who is part of the Church. The point for Paul is that Christ's sufferings continue, so to be part of the body is to share in both the joys and the sufferings of Christ.

We are quite rightly taught to have a proper humility before God, to recognise that the salvation of the world is not dependent on us, not to have the arrogance to imagine that our failures could somehow cause the purpose of the Church to fail. Yet at the same time, through baptism we all have the daunting vocation to do just as Christ has done – to be redeemers in our own small way, to suffer and die in our own small

way – and in the Father’s love to rise again in our own small way. It isn’t unrealistic to see ourselves as having the huge responsibility of playing our own part in the continuing redemption of the world.

I have mentioned before that I have a friend who is a ‘Lydia’ and consecrates herself, along with women all over the world, to the work of intercession for the needs of the world around her. The Lydias have a very developed theology of intercessory prayer, and they have moved it on from the sort of prayer of petition we are familiar with in the liturgy, the shopping list of requests made of God, to an understanding that the vocation of the intercessor is to stand *in the breach* – in the parts of humankind’s relationship with God that are broken or crumbling – to build a bridge for God to work in situations and in people who are marred by the evil of sin.

This might help us to see how we play a unique part in the ‘already but not yet’ of redemption. We may not be, as Christ was, capable of the ultimate sacrificial love, yet we can stand in the breach – in the gap – between what Christ has already brought about, and what is yet to come. The weight of the whole thing is not on our shoulders, yet we can do our small part in filling the gap, through our own sufferings, through our own sacrifices, through our own acts of love.

This too is how we can hold within us what Paul calls the *hope of glory*. We cannot achieve anything through our own glory, yet think of the quite astonishing vocation of the Christian not only to share in the final glory when all things are made new in Christ, but to have played a part in bringing about that glory. Christ in us is not just the hope of a glory we will one day share; Christ in us gives to you and me a part in making that glory happen.

Among the many deceptively simple yet very profound teachings of Pope Francis we find the constant reminder that prayer is never complete without action. Summed up as something like *you pray for the hungry, then you feed them – that’s how prayer works*, it’s very similar to this teaching of Saint Paul on the work of redemption – you believe that Christ is in you as the hope of glory, and then you go and do something to bring the world around you closer to that same hope – you take your part in bringing about the glory that is to come.

Given that we’ve been reflecting on Saint Paul and somehow ended up with Pope Francis, let me leave you with some thoughts from his Lent teaching this year. After reflecting on the Exodus journey and Jesus’s desert experience, he goes on to point out that we aren’t in a position to duck out of the hard work of making the world a better place. Jesus didn’t suffer and die so that we can go to heaven in a carriage. Jesus did invite us to follow in the same redemptive path in order to share with him the same glory.

There is the hope! There is the glory!

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