
⁵ For Moses writes about the righteousness that is by the law: “*The one who does these things will live by them.*” ⁶ But the righteousness that is by faith says: “*Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’*” (that is, to bring Christ down) ⁷ or “*Who will descend into the abyss?*” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). ⁸ But what does it say? “*The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart*” (that is, the word of faith that we preach)...

¹¹ For the scripture says, “*Everyone who believes in Him will not be put to shame.*” From Romans 10:5-15

At the time of writing this sermon (beginning of August, 2020) the COVID-19 situation has been going through significant changes in Australia. In the State of Victoria, as a result of a dramatic number of ‘community transmission cases’ of the Coronavirus, what is described as ‘Stage 4 Lockdown Restrictions’ have come into force. Other States within Australia have also announced increased restrictions (some minor, some more significant). We also know that such changes have a significant impact on people’s lives, livelihoods, and personal circumstances.

However, if you were to travel back about six weeks in time, it would have appeared Australia was heading in a different direction – of an easing of restrictions and maybe the opening of State Borders. And on that basis many people had begun to think of a different world – maybe catching up family or relatives they hadn’t seen for some time, or travelling somewhere for a vacation.

We could spend a long time reflecting on how things have changed (and what else may change among us). We could also spend a long time reflecting on the emotional toll this will have on many people. There are so many possible areas of discussion. How have things changed for you? How do you think they may change in the future? Can anyone really know what the true economic impact of COVID-19 will be (including for future generations)? And what about the social change and social dislocation? There are some who can narrow their worldview because they have control over many areas. There are others seeking to truly engage with the world even as the world around them changes. How are you coping? How are things changing for you? Do you get a bit down and depressed at this time? Where is your hope?

When we come to the Scripture Readings for this day we encounter various Bible Passages that can powerfully speak into this present situation. Our First Reading (Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28 Joseph sold into slavery in Egypt) reminds us that in very difficult circumstances, God can work for an ‘ultimate good’.

As we hear in next week's First Reading (Genesis 45:1-15 Joseph reveals himself to his brothers) Joseph says, "Now don't be worried or angry with yourselves because you sold me here. God sent me here ahead of you to save people's lives." And wasn't it wonderful for Joseph to look beyond the incredibly terrible things his brothers had done, to see that God could still be at work in such a difficult time. In the Holy Gospel (Matthew 14:22-33 Jesus walks on the water) we hear that the disciples that the disciples were in the boat (note, directly after the great miracle of the feeding of the 5000+), and they were "battered by the waves, far from land, with the wind against them." And early in the morning they saw Jesus walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were terrified. And yet Jesus says to them, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." And when Jesus finally got into the boat we hear that the wind ceased.

How we 'see things', and how things 'really are', so often can be quite different. And this is not just about the trials and troubles we face. This is also so often how we perceive our own selves in this world, whatever the circumstances. Indeed, there are times when we may be thinking we are 'doing the right thing', only to discover (if we can allow ourselves to be honest with our own selves) that we have 'done the wrong thing'.

How we may 'see thing', and how things may actually be 'different', is also really at the heart of our Second Reading this day (Romans 10:5-17 – which is really the Apostle Paul's continuing reflection on the rejection of Christ by his own people. The Apostle Paul, when younger by the name 'Saul' had a particular view of 'the faith'. But he had come to see (literally) the light of Christ. And he was passionate about this.

But the situation the Apostle Paul constantly faced was the rejection of the message of Christ by people he knew and loved. As we begin next week's Second Reading (from Romans 11) we hear Paul say "So I ask, God has not rejected His people, has He?" And Paul continues, "Absolutely not!" And yet for Paul – who had grown up knowing of God's incredible grace to His people throughout the ages, but understood this in terms of 'law' (what a person had to 'do' to be 'right with God') – he also had to learn that the way we see the world is radically different because of God at work in Christ Jesus.

This is why the Apostle Paul quotes various Scripture passage (from Leviticus 18, and Deuteronomy 30) and says, "For Moses writes about the righteousness that is by the law: *"The one who does these things will live by them."* But the righteousness that is by faith says: *"Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'"* (that is, to bring Christ down) or *"Who will descend into the abyss?"* (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead)." In other words, Paul is asking, "How do you perceive Jesus?" In your heart are you trying to 'do good things' because you feel you have to close the gap before God will accept you? Or do you have some sense of shame of guilt that you believe God cannot really overcome? (Hence the words about 'ascending into

heaven', that is, 'to bring Christ down', that is, to our own 'level'). Or do you have a sense of being a 'little better than other people', and have a sense of 'self-righteousness' that effectively says "I'm OK, unlike other people..." (Hence the words about 'descending the abyss' and wanting to 'raise Christ from the dead'). In other words, what is your view of your own self, and the world in which you live?

This is why Paul goes on to say, "But what does it [Scripture] say? 'The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart' (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

In terms of what is happening in our world, and what is happening in our own lives (and the way we see our selves), what really matters is the way we see Jesus. Now sometimes Romans 10:9 ("If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved")... sometimes this Bible verse is reduced to some 'process one needs to follow in order to be saved' – eg "Are you really wanting to know Jesus? (ie: have you really 'confessed Jesus as Lord'?) and "Have you got the facts right about Jesus? (ie "Have you really made a good confession of your faith?"). And it's not that these are unimportant. But at the heart of all this is having the sort of 'relationship with Christ' that one knows how God truly and genuinely changes one's life – for the better of one's own self, that is also for the better of those around one's own self. And this is why Paul is led to say, "For the scripture says, 'Everyone who believes in Him will not be put to shame'." This is quoted from Isaiah 28:16, which says that God will lay a cornerstone in Zion for a sure foundation, and people who have faith in this cornerstone will not be found short. Paul quoted the entire verse in 9:33; here he just repeats the part about believing in Christ as the key to salvation. Paul then repeats a favourite theme: "For there is no distinction between the Jew and the Greek, for the same Lord is Lord of all, who richly blesses all who call on Him. For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (verses 12-13, quoting Joel 2:32).

The Apostle Paul calls Jesus 'Lord'. He knows that in Christ God is in control of everything in life. That is an incredibly radical statement to make, and one that can only truly be comprehended by faith (and thus, also only by true faith, applied appropriately in this world today). To 'be saved', you must recognise that Christ has done for you what you could never do for yourself.

This word 'saved' is a radical word, and one that many people today do struggle to comprehend. That is why so often as Christian we may instead speak about people how Christ can give peace, joy, freedom from guilt, harmonious relationships, and other present blessings. But it is important for us to understand the radical nature of what it means 'to be saved'. If you are on a cruise ship sailing smoothly through waters, and if you had rushed into the dining room and yelled, "Get into the life boats now," the passengers would

think you were crazy. But if you knew the ship was about to strike rocks, and it did, then everyone's attention would be on 'being saved'. And the great truth is that in our 'boat of life' we strike the rocks of our own sin, and the sins of others, and the great rock called 'death'. And so we need to 'be saved'.

Life may be going smoothly at the moment, but if you're not right before God, then you need to be saved. The angel told Joseph (Matt. 1:21), "You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." Jesus said (Luke 19:10), "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which is lost." The Lord is the Lord of all people, and He gives good gifts to all who call on Him.

God's character is to have mercy on everyone. Salvation from God, says Paul, comes by confessing Jesus as Lord and believing that God raised him from the dead (Rom. 10:9–10). In other words, salvation comes to everyone who trusts in the life-giving power of God. The confession of Jesus as Lord is followed immediately by reference to God raising Jesus from the dead. And there is a reason for this: it is to know God's great grace and power at work in our lives (in our sin, failings, pain and suffering), as we rejoice in the power of His love that raises us to newness of life. And this is not of our own selves or efforts (to think 'How good am I'). Rather, it is on account of Christ ('How good He is – in spite of all I am and experience). No wonder Paul says, "How timely is the arrival of those who proclaim the good news." And that is why Paul says, "Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ."

Our greatest victory, however, isn't really ours at all. We can face any situation and be content no matter what happens because of one important fact: "But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Corinthians 15:57). Jesus died in our place and came back to life as a true Conqueror, and all He accomplished gets credited to our account. We didn't earn a single bit of it, but we're guaranteed so much.

Even in the midst of turmoil, God sticks with us and uses those challenges to shape us. When we understand that, our perspective completely flips. No longer do we see our setbacks as failures; we see them as moments when God, as our loving Father, works on us. And that's exactly why we can trust in the Lord with all our hearts. He cares for us each and every day. He gives us what we need to thrive. He pours blessing after blessing upon us. For the scripture says, "Everyone who believes in Him will not be put to shame." Amen.