

Shame

5 2 12

Almighty God,
who alone can bring order
to the unruly wills and passions of sinful humanity:
give your people grace so to love what you command;
and to desire what you promise,
that, among the many changes and chances of this world,
our hearts may surely there be fixed
where true joys are to be found.

My text today may be found in Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 10 and verse 11: **'No one who believes in him will be put to shame.'**

Normally, my Sunday sermon is written well in advance, probably no later than the Monday beforehand which takes the pressure off. But this week, for reasons I won't go into, it was Thursday morning and I still hadn't even looked at the set Bible readings for today, the 5th February, the 3rd Sunday before Lent. So at our Thursday service of Holy Communion at 10.00a.m., as I heard Helen read the Epistle, I had the equivalent of an electric shock because I knew precisely what I must preach on today: Romans 10 v11 **'No one who believes in him will be put to shame.'**

Why? Why did I feel I had to preach on this text? Because what the text seems to be saying to us is clearly nonsense: 'No one who believes in him will be put to shame.' Is St Paul really saying that by being Christians, we will never be put to shame? You have only to consider the martyrdom of our patron saint, St Bartholomew to appreciate the shame involved in being skinned alive: stripped naked in public and having your skin stripped from you. By most definitions of the word shame, what is being done to you is pretty shameful and you are clearly in full view of the on-lookers being put to shame.

So if our patron saint, who without a shadow of a doubt believed that Jesus is the 'Son of God' (John 1 v49), then perhaps what St Paul writes to the Romans does not quite make sense, given our common sense and our experience in the real world. Clearly, it is possible to believe in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour but still be put to shame.

The Greek word Paul uses is καταισχυνομαι ('kataischunomai') which means to be utterly ashamed. You can get worse than that. Actually, Romans 10 v11 is quoting Romans 9 v33 which itself is a quotation of Isaiah 28 v11.

Paul, according to our pew Bible (NRSV), writes the following:

See, I am laying in Zion
a stone that will make people stumble
a rock that will make them fall
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.

The stone to which Paul refers is, of course, Jesus. Jesus is the stone that the builders rejected, the stone which will ultimately become the cornerstone of the whole building!

If Paul is quoting Isaiah 28 v19, then a quick flip back to the Old Testament produces the following but this time I am quoting from the New International Version (NIV)

See I lay a stone in Zion
a tested stone,
a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation;
the one who trusts will never be dismayed

which I think better captures the underlying figurative meaning of the Hebrew word 'chush'. What the NIV renders as 'dismayed, the King James Bible translates literally as 'to make haste'. Now how 'to make haste' – to rush around – comes to mean dismayed you have only have to picture someone rushing about and tripping over something in their way to understand how 'more-haste-less-speed' has the potential to dismay someone – i.e. they are literally 'upset' – disheartened.

And there I think we have it. When Paul says as Christians we will never be put to shame, what I really think he means is that as Christians we will never be disheartened. Bartholomew was a witness of the truth of the resurrection. For this reason, he could suffer a martyr's death without shame, knowing he was being true to the truth. He may have felt shame in the manner of his martyrdom but he would neither be dismayed nor be ashamed of the love which informs his life.

There is no shame in believing in Jesus Christ as Lord.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

5th February, 2012

H: Sermon 25: Shame

