

Today is being used by many churches as 'Back to Church Sunday'. We've not made a big fuss about it in this parish, but if you're here because of it, then you're very welcome. I wonder if you came out of a sense of 'fear and trembling'? That used to be the church's style: scare people silly and they'll know they need what the church has to offer. And it looks like there's support for such a method in our New Testament reading today:

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

*Phil 2: 12-13*

How do we put our lives on the right track? With fear and trembling says Paul, because this is God we are talking about. "Nowhere in the New Testament", says one commentator "is the work of salvation more succinctly and epigrammatically stated." Here the action of God and the action of humanity are brought together in a vision of discipleship which has nothing to do with grim faced hard work, nor a laid back spirituality. God is at work. We should be at work too.

But before we get to the 'fear' bit we need to look at that phrase about "working out our salvation". It sounds like we don't need God: we can work it out for ourselves. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Greek word is not about doing it yourself, but about bringing something to completion. The same commentator translates the passage in this way: "bring to its perfect conclusion the work of your own salvation".

God, in Christ, has taken the loving initiative, and offered salvation, rescue, hope, new life, to humanity. It is not for humanity doggedly to pass various tests and journey to within an inch of our lives before discovering enlightenment. It is to open ourselves to God's loving engagement with us, and in accepting Christ to die with him and rise to a new life, in which God's salvation is planted in us. Paul asks his hearers in Philippi to allow God to do his work, so that their work may be encompassed by and be an expression of his salvation. We don't apply ourselves to gain God's approval, we apply ourselves because God has given himself to us first.

How then does Paul envisage that this salvation is worked out? It is very personal and very practical. Personally, with 'fear and trembling'. But don't be frightened. This is, I think, about awe and wonder rather than gibbering and quivering before a power we think will kill us. Perhaps excessive familiarity with God is more difficult in a place this awesome: if the builders of Beverley Minster had a view about the initial response to this building, fear and trembling would have been high on the list. But even here it can become possible to be nonchalant about our dealings with the Lord of the universe. Remember wonder, and holy fear.

Practically, we prove our salvation in our human dealings, in our everyday life. Philippians 2 begins with a very practical piece of instruction – 'do try to get on with each other please. Play nicely'. Or, in Paul's words:

Make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

*Phil 2: 2-4*

And this down to earth advice opens up one of the greatest theological passages of all time. Why get on with each other? Why make sure our lives are sorted out? Because Jesus Christ, ruler of everything, a living part of the Godhead, fount of creation, eternal Son of God, the pre-existent Word of God...because this Jesus Christ voluntarily emptied himself of all of that, and became a servant, a slave. Even his humanity was of the lowest type. He washed feet, as a sign that he would soon die a death he did not deserve, for the sake of people who might not respond to his love. How low can you go?

This is the servant, the slave, who offers his service to us, and whose service sets us free to serve others. Jesus would have done this even if we said 'no thank you'. But when we do say 'yes' we are swept up from the lowest point to the highest point, from death and hopelessness to life forever. We are liberated through the service of Jesus Christ, and this is our motivation to serve others. Jesus died to set free your next door neighbour, your spouse, your mother, your boss, your colleague, your friend. So treat them as Christ would treat them. Treat them as if they were Christ. Jesus died to set free the person the world regards as the least and the person the world regards as the greatest. He serves them equally and so do we.

That's a great motivation for the church to be a place where our love for each other, our valuing of each other, our thinking ahead for each other should be so evident that people are bowled over by it. I hope that those who come Back to Church today will remember that God is to be feared - to be reckoned as majestic and greater than we can imagine. And I hope that we will remember that this God has served us completely and to the very end. And I hope that we, the church, will love with that love, serve with that heart, welcome with Christ's open arms. I hope that we will bring our salvation to completion: if we have been loved by Christ in this way, how can we keep that love to ourselves?

We've all come Back to Church today. Even if you were on a rota, you didn't really need to come. But we have. So: with awe, wonder, with patience and courage, may we work out our salvation, and in so doing shine like stars in the world and show the world the Good News of Jesus Christ, to the good pleasure of God who is at work in us, now and always. Amen.