

I would like today to consider our first reading from 2 Corinthians and draw from it the encouragement that Paul has filled this chapter and this passage with.

One thing that the Covid pandemic has brought to the front of everyone's consciousness is the idea of mortality. The Corona virus has hit hard and it has hit right across the spectrum. Young or old, rich or poor everyone has been impacted. Across the world there have been in the region of 3 ½ million deaths, 125 thousand of those in the UK. 1 person in every 16 in the UK is recorded as having had Covid so even if we have avoided it personally we will almost all be aware of someone that has been infected.

The restrictions to reduce it's spread have impacted daily life in a way probably not seen since the second world war. They've brought isolation and financial hardship. It's probably even overtaken the weather as the most common topic of conversation.

We've had it hard, no doubt about that. Paul also knew what hardship was. He talks about it a bit later in 2 Corinthians in chapter 11.

Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, 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 fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. (2 Cor 11:24-27)

Despite all this, in our reading today he states “We do not lose heart” (16). How could he say this? Well, let's look.

It all comes from his outlook which was an eternal outlook. He recognised that our life here on Earth is not the be all and end all.

The first point that Paul raises is how we can have confidence that death is not the end. “We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself” (14). Jesus was raised from the dead, it's one of the fundamental truths of our faith. Paul here re-affirms what Jesus said while he was still with the disciples, that the God that raised Jesus from the dead will also raise us.

Paul's phrase “present us with you to himself” interests me. It's almost as if he is emphasising that it's not just “the leadership team” or “those travelling with Paul” (the us in the passage) that will be raised, and presented to God, but also all those that are hearing the letter read. Us and you, writer and recipient will all be raised from death and will be with God.

This confidence then leads Paul to the second point. The fact that once we have been raised from death our life with God is then eternal.

He acknowledges that as we get older our bodies start to fail. Having just passed my half century I am starting to discover this, things I used to take for granted are harder to do. I'm aware that for many in our congregation the memory of passing 50 is a distant one and they are even more aware of the frailty of the ageing human body. However the weakness of the body does not in any way impact our spiritual life. For example, we may find that our bodies are no longer able to stand while we sing but that does not make our singing any less of a blessing to God. We may find it difficult to get out of the house and to church for a service but that doesn't mean that we are any less able to worship God.

Spiritually we are able to be renewed day by day, able to praise God and worship him whatever our bodies are capable of doing. These physical bodies will weaken, but once they have failed we will be raised to eternal life with God.

Not only that, but we will be “upgraded” when we do. Did you notice that in the last verse of our reading? When “the earthly *tent* we live in is destroyed we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven”. No longer will we be living in a tent, a building designed to be temporary and moved around, we will be living in a house, a permanent dwelling set in place by God.

This is why Paul is so confident and can say that we do not lose heart. He knows what is ahead of him. He is confident that when he dies he will be raised, he will be presented to God and he will get to live for eternity in a house that God has prepared for him. Once we realise that we have exactly the same promise, how can we not also press on.

It's not easy getting older. It's not easy seeing those we love getting older and frailer. But we have a hope, no a certainty that this is just, as Paul puts it “momentary troubles” leading to “an eternal glory that far outweighs them all”. Let's allow this thought to lift our hearts however bleak things appear at the moment and affirm with Paul that we do not and will not lose heart. Amen.