

The Gift of Life in Jesus Christ

Ps 1 and Galatians 2:15-21 – Sermon Text =Gal 2:20
340, 642, 366, 468

***“... and it is no longer I who live,
but it is Christ who lives in me.
And the life I now live in the flesh
I live by faith in the Son of God,
who loved me and gave himself for me.”
(Galatians 2:20)***

I remember having a bookmark years ago
with an illustration of a monster
with a large, grinning mouth
full of razor-sharp teeth.
The caption was this quote from Sir Francis Bacon,
the philosopher and politician
who was a contemporary of William Shakespeare in England:

*Some books should be tasted, some devoured,
but only a few should be chewed and digested thoroughly.*

I've been reading one of those books to be chewed and digested
over the past three weeks.

It's Huston Smith's *The Soul of Christianity: Restoring the Great Tradition*.
Huston was born to Methodist missionaries in China in 1919.
He became one of world's leading scholars on religion.
It is said that his introduction to world religions has sold over 2 million copies.
The Soul of Christianity was published in 2005,
when Smith was 85 years old.

Here are the opening words of the book:

*This is a passionate book, written with a great sense of urgency.
Endowed by blood and birth with an instinctive feeling for the holy,
a sense of awe for the wonder and beauty of sacred things,
I feel like a voice crying in the wilderness,
the wilderness of secular modernity
which religion is unable to pull us out of
because it presents our culture with a babble of conflicting voices.
And yet a voice that can pull us out of the wilderness
is on our very doorstep.*

*That voice is the voice of first-millennium Christianity,
the Great Tradition,
which all Christians accept because it is the solid trunk of the tree
from which its branches have sprung.
It is the voice of peace, justice, and beauty
that emanates from the Christian soul
and which (in the company of other authentic religions)
the world desperately needs. (vii)*

You will hear more from me about this delectable book in the weeks ahead.
I would highly recommend it as summer reading for you.
It is a deep, but not a difficult, read.
If anyone is interested, I can get used copies for about \$5.
Just let me know if you want one after church.

This morning, given our text from Galatians,
about Paul's passionate conviction that he lives in Christ
and Christ lives in him,
no matter how desperate the situation is around him,
I wanted to quote some more from Smith,
this time about his take on Paul.
For Smith, Paul was a "vivid" example
of what he calls the "radiance" of the early Christians,
the energy that gave them an inner peace
that found expression in a joy that was uncontainable.

*Here was a man who had been ridiculed, driven from town to town,
Shipwrecked, imprisoned, flogged until his back was covered in stripes.
Yet here was a life in which joy was the constant refrain. ...
Life was not challenges to be met; it was glory to be discerned.*

"Glory to be discerned."

What a wonderful turn of phrase to capture the Christian perspective.
That's what the truth of this morning's text did in Paul.
That's the kind of freedom Paul discerned, discovered in Jesus Christ.
That glory engulfed him, devoured him, on the Damascus road
and he was renewed by God's forgiving love
for the life God had intended for him from the beginning.
It was not a life of ease in the flesh,
as Smith so eloquently pointed out.
But it was a life of joy,
of peace, justice, and beauty,
because of the graceful power that filled every cell of his body,
the power of God's love freely given
so Paul could freely act in any situation he faced.

Think again about the poetry in Paul's words this morning –
Christ living in him,
living by faith in a God who loved him and gave himself for him.
That is the love Paul was called to, compelled into.
It led to a life of faith and service.
It led to an assurance
that Christ was in Paul and Paul was in Christ.

I'm not sure Paul would have been really satisfied
with that way of putting his experience into words.
In so many ways, it was beyond words,
like so many of the most profound things are.
But the words he found are powerful.

They convey, to me at least, an indescribable intimacy with God.
God, the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of the universe,
lives in me, in all of us, in every person on this planet.

In some we can see it, in others we can't.
The great Christian tradition calls this the 'visible' and the 'invisible' church.
Humans should not assume that they know the mind of God in this matter.
Be humble enough to assume that God is working in God's own way
with everyone you encounter.
Your calling, should you chose to accept it,
is to add your unique radiance of welcome and support
to God's tool kit.

As we begin to open up this space of grace in which we are worshiping
for the use of the arts community,
we will meet many people who have no conscious connection
with the God we know and worship.
But I'm convinced that God has a connection with them,
albeit invisible.
Their passion to inspire, evoke, enlighten, and enliven through their art
is a gift of God, a radiance for the world,
that we help spread by offering this space for their use.
We do so with hopes and prayers that the Spirit will use this space
to encounter those who enjoy it
with a voice witnessing to the grace of Jesus Christ.
It may be our voice of welcome.
It may be the Spirit's whisper of love.
It may be the audience's shouts of joy.
We don't control it.
We only make the space for God to use in making it happen.
Then we remain open to walking with those people
whose curiosity about God's radiance has been peaked.

If we are going to live resilient lives of Christian radiance in this world that is desperate for peace, justice, and beauty, then we would do well to heed the simple but profound words that Paul penned to the Galatians all those years ago.

*... and it is no longer I who live,
but it is Christ who lives in me.
And the life I now live in the flesh
I live by faith in the Son of God,
who loved me and gave himself for me.*

Our strength and patience and humility for this mission does not come from within our own resources, but from the presence and power of Jesus Christ being within us, at the core of our beings, using our passions and talents to complete his salvation of the whole of creation.

That was the gift of life Paul found in Jesus Christ that enabled him to flourish for Christ through all his hardships. And that same gift is ours for the accepting.

Written and preached by the Rev Dr Brian Fraser at Brentwood Presbyterian Church