

Sermon – 02/07/2006 am

Be of Good Cheer

Study Text: John 16:32-33

The famous Czech reformer, John Huss, became a martyr at Constance on 6 July 1415. Like Wycliffe before him, Huss held to the absolute authority of Scripture and encouraged everyone to read the Bible. He taught that the true church consists of all the elect, with Christ as the head, teaching that conflicted with that of the Pope in Rome.

As he languished in prison chains before being taken to be burned alive, it is said that Huss drew special comfort from the verses of Scripture before us today. Jesus spoke these words to comfort his disciples just before his own death. *Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world* (16:33).

These are in fact the last words Jesus spoke directly to his disciples in the upper room and before his death. They contain a solemn prophecy, as well a comforting promise. The enthusiasm of the disciples (16:29-30) would soon be tested. Their faith would be tested. Jesus gently seeks to focus them yet again on what was about to happen to him, and in consequence to them.

Alone But Not Alone

The disciples could not bear the thought of Jesus leaving them. Peter had already protested loudly – *Lord why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for your sake* (13:37). Jesus shattered his self confidence, telling him that that very night he would deny Jesus three times. Now he shatters such self confidence again. Confident in their belief that Jesus came forth from God, Jesus declared the hour had come *that you will be scattered, each to his own* (16:32).

Jesus was not the first to prophecy this scattering. The prophet Zechariah (13:7) wrote *I will strike the Shepherd and the sheep will be scattered*. The other gospel writers record Jesus quoting this prophet, before they tell how all Jesus' disciples *forsook him and fled* when he was arrested in the garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:50).

All believers must be wary of self confident faith. 'Even the best Christians know but little of their hearts' says Ryle. *Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall* (I Corinthians 10:12). There is only one way that we can stand firm in the faith and that is by humbling ourselves before the Lord that he might lift us up. We dare not trust in our own knowledge, heritage, tradition, works or anything else that is ours.

Watch and pray lest you enter into temptation. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak (Mark 14:38). This is what Jesus told his disciples in the garden. The words may be familiar, but let no one ever think they only applied to the disciples, or that they only apply to other people, to weaker brethren. It is easy to be bold in speech like Peter, but see how he fell trusting in his own strength. Many have followed in his footsteps despite this clear warning.

We do not know when, or what manner of trial may come our way. But we can be sure that one will come. *All who desire to live godly lives in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution* (II Timothy 3:12). Yet we can also be sure that the Lord will keep his children through any trial.

Death will of course be the ultimate trial. It was the threat of death that made the disciples desert Jesus. We all will face death and need to decide how we will do so. Will it be in our own strength or will it be in the strength of the Lord? It will not be sufficient in that day to merely say you believe in heaven, and in the resurrection of the dead. You will need to believe in your heart that Jesus died for your sins and that God raised him from the dead (Romans 10:9).

If you call yourself a Christian and believe you are going to heaven, but do not believe that Jesus died to take away your sin (substitutionary atonement) or that he rose from the dead (the resurrection) then you are of all people to be most pitied.

Yet I am not alone. Even though his eleven loyal disciples would leave him in his hour of greatest need, Jesus said he would not be alone. He knew he was sent by his Father into this world and that he was returning to his Father. He knew that his Father was with him. *He who sent me is with me* (8:29). So even though every single human being in this world failed him, Jesus knew his heavenly Father would never fail him. In Gethsemane, in his darkest hour, Jesus knelt to pray – while his disciples slept.

Have you ever been alone, feeling that no one loves you, no one cares about you? Maybe you felt this way after being betrayed by a friend or spouse or through separation by death. People may leave you but the Lord will never leave you. You will never be alone when you have a Father in heaven, and when you have Jesus as your friend.

Can a nursing mother forget her child asked the prophet? *Surely they may forget, yet I will not forget you,* says the Lord. *See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hand* (Isaiah 49:15). Do you believe this promise of the Lord? The Lord will never leave you nor forsake you (Hebrews 13:5). A child of God can never be put in solitary confinement!

Battles but Victory

In the course of a war many battles are fought. Some of these are won and some are lost. There are times of advance and times of retreat. In the end the individual battles are not important. What is important is winning the war.

Some still remember what life was like during the six long years of WW2. Some days the news was good – ‘the Allies take North Africa’. Other days the news was ‘Singapore has fallen to the Japanese’. They were anxious days, for no one knew who would win the war.

The amazing thing in our war against evil, against sin and death, is that Jesus has won the victory. Even before he won the victory he could say *I have overcome the world* (16:33). *Now the ruler of this world will be cast out* (12:31). It was on the Cross that he won that victory. In his resurrection *death was swallowed up in victory* (I Corinthians 15:54).

So although we struggle in the weakness of the flesh, and are assailed by trials and temptations, we are assured that Jesus has won the victory. We should not be discouraged if we seem to lose a battle or two, but must press on in this knowledge – the war has already

been won. *Whoever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world – your faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?* (I John 5:4-5)

In the world you will have tribulation Jesus told his disciples (16:33). Tribulation was just around the corner for them. They would see their master and Lord arrested, condemned to death, and cruelly hung upon the Cross to die. They would be scattered. They would flee to their own places.

But Jesus promised them peace, his peace, at this time. *These things*, meaning everything he revealed unto them in the upper room, he told them that they might have peace. *My peace I give to you* (14:27). In the very midst of tribulation they could know the peace of God the Son.

Hopefully they had not forgotten the time when they were out on the lake and a great storm blew up. They were scared that they would drown as the waves lashed their boat. Jesus stood up and told the wind to stop and it did. The sea became completely calm (Luke 8:24). ‘Where is your faith?’ he said to those in the boat.

This is a picture of the peace that Jesus brings to troubled hearts. The world will put you under great pressure, pressure to conform to the ways of the world. The world hates those who follow Jesus, unless they do so in silence. But even if the whole world hates you, even if all despise you and leave, you can know the peace of Jesus Christ, for he will never leave you or forsake you. As the chorus goes – ‘with Christ in the vessel we can smile at the storm as we go sailing home’.

Be of good cheer said Jesus. This may seem to be going a bit far. In the midst tribulation we might have peace – but to be of good cheer! Some translate ‘be of good courage’ or ‘take heart’ but still it is a very positive attitude that Jesus calls for.

When news came that the war was over, that the Allies were victorious there was great rejoicing. Jesus tells us here that he has won the victory; he has overcome this fallen world that was ruled by Satan. He expects us to rejoice at this news, to rejoice in the Lord.

After the Holy Spirit was sent to dwell in the disciples they rejoiced. When these same men were put in prison and beaten for preaching Christ, they departed from the Sanhedrin *rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his (Christ’s) name* (Acts 5:41). When Paul and Silas were chained in the dungeon they sang praises to God. For many who call themselves Christians such an attitude, and such behaviour, appears quite foreign. What do you think?

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