

## The God who sustains - Isaiah 40:27-31 (2 Corinthians 12:1-10)

Knowing God (Graham Cousins)

Sunday Morning 9:00am 22 June 2008

I was about 8 years old - a member of our Local Boy Cubs, and we had gone for the day on a coach to the big Scout Jamboree at Gillwell Park. I can't remember much about the day, except spending it with a group of my friends. The only thing I can remember is towards the end of our day there. I seem to remember that I had gone into one of the shops - and when I came out - everyone else had gone. I was alone.

Not exactly alone, of course - there were thousands of people milling around. But not my friends - they had gone. So had our leader. I was alone. I had been abandoned.

Anyone who has ever been in that sort of position will know how unpleasant it is. That feeling of being alone, of wondering where everyone else is, of wondering why they went off and left you. And, of course, thoughts like those aren't restricted to feeling abandoned by other people. They are just the same questions which can arise when things happen in our lives that make us feel as if God has abandoned us. And we end up wondering, 'where is God?' 'Why has he abandoned me?'

Such feelings are nothing new - in fact that was the situation behind those famous words from Isaiah 40 which we heard earlier: Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, My way is hidden from the Lord, my cause is disregarded by my God? And I guess that for most Christians, those questions do arise at times. Where is God when everything seems to have gone wrong?

Sam reminded us last Sunday that God isn't as big as we imagine - he is far bigger. And he isn't as powerful as we imagine - he is far more powerful. But - if God is so unimaginably great - if he is busy looking after the whole universe - does he really notice me? Can he really be concerned about me, and my little problems? Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, My way is hidden from the Lord, my cause is disregarded by my God?

That must have been a very real question for God's people in the dark days of their exile. More than 70 years earlier, God had warned his people that he would not overlook their sin for ever. But they didn't repent, and, true to his word, the Lord brought Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, against them. Israel was invaded, and conquered. Jerusalem was razed to the ground, and almost the whole population was carried off to Babylon. And for 70 years they stayed there in exile as virtual slaves.

70 years is a long time. And during that time, the people must have started to wonder if God had abandoned them completely. Why didn't God do something? Had God forgotten them? Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, 'My way is hidden from the Lord, my cause is disregarded by my God?'

And it was into that situation that the Lord God spoke words that have been so much loved by so many people. But those who hope in the Lord will renew their

strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not faint.

That is what we need, isn't it - renewed strength. And Isaiah gives us three important keys to finding that renewed strength. And the first is that when you feel battered and bruised, when you wonder if God has forgotten you, the place to start is to remember who God is. Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no-one can fathom.

I don't think it is any coincidence that this promise of renewed strength comes at the end of a chapter that is mostly about who God is. Look again at the earlier part of the chapter.

v.11 - The Lord is the one who cares for us - He tends his flock like a shepherd. He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart, he gently leads those that have young. That is a wonderful truth - but alongside that we need to remember the other things that Isaiah tells us:

v.12-14 - We cannot always understand what the Lord is doing - Who has understood the mind of the Lord?

v.15-20 - God is far greater than anything we can imagine - there is nothing and no-one we can compare him to - To what will you compare God? I think that often we subconsciously compare God to some person we admire - maybe we even compare him with ourselves. But God is beyond any comparison.

v.21-24 - God is in control. He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. We may not always understand his ways, but we can be sure that nothing can happen which is outside his control.

And then, in v.28 - The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. His understanding no-one can fathom.

There have been times in my life when I have not been able to understand what God was doing - with other people, or with me! Times when life just hasn't made sense. Times when I have felt that God has let me down. Times when I have been so tempted to give up following him. But then, I have to remember that I won't always be able to understand God - sometimes I do have to trust him in the dark. And that isn't a cop out - it is an acceptance that if I could completely understand God, he would be too small to be able to help me!

So - if we want the renewed hope and strength that Isaiah talks about, it begins with remembering who God is.

And the second thing we need is to trust that God. You see, just knowing these things about God won't necessarily help. That word 'hope' - those who hope in the Lord - could be translated 'trust.' Those who trust in the Lord. And, of course, that

isn't always easy. Because it means trusting God, even when we can't understand. Trusting God, even when we are hurting. Trusting what the Bible tells us about him, even when it feels as if he has abandoned us.

Many of you will know that I enjoy bird watching. And it is fascinating to watch the way that different birds fly. For some - it is exhausting just watching them. Little wings pounding away, desperately trying to get where they want to go. Sparrows are great ones for that, especially if they are flying into the wind. They must completely exhaust themselves.

But a few years ago, for the first time I saw an eagle flying - actually a pair of eagles. It was an awesome sight. It was in a gorge in the south of France, and for several minutes we just stood and watched. And the amazing thing was that throughout those few minutes, I don't think that either of those eagles once flapped their wings. They just rode the thermal currents, and circled up - they went where the current took them. Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength, they will soar on wings like eagles. That is what we want - that trust in God that allows us to soar like eagles.

In our second reading we had a picture of what that means. The apostle Paul wrote about what he called his 'thorn in the flesh.' We can't be sure what Paul's thorn was - he doesn't explain it - it could have been some persistent temptation he faced, or, more likely I think, a physical problem, maybe something like epilepsy. We just don't know what it was, but what we can know is that it was definitely something which caused him pain, something in his life that he longed to be free from, or to be healed from. Something that he was aware limited him in his mission, stopped him from being as successful as he longed to be. Something that must have worn him down.

So Paul did what any of us would have done - what any of us should have done. He prayed that the Lord would take it away. If Paul was free of whatever this problem was, then his strength would be renewed. Paul prayed, and the Lord said, 'No.' But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'

God does not take away, but gives! We want him to take away the thing that is wearing us down, the thing that makes us feel abandoned, but God knows that what is important is not the absence of suffering, but rather his presence in the suffering. He is the God who sustains. And when we know that - well, look at that amazing statement of Paul's: Therefore I will boast all the more about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. Paul was so keen to know Christ's power at work in his life that he would happily embrace suffering.

One writer put it like this: 'Before, when Paul looked at his thorn, he saw a poor man buffeted by suffering, an unjust and undeserved situation. He felt wretched and maybe even forgotten by his Lord. ... Now, every time he suffers the thorn of the scourges of the thorns, he sees Christ and his power resting upon him.'

I don't know about you - but for me that is a real challenge. I can see that for Paul, trusting the Lord in the face of his suffering did lead to his strength being renewed. But - could I face a thorn in the flesh like Paul did?

And I think that question leads us to a third point here, though it is not spelt out like the other 2. We need to remember who God is. We need to trust him. And we need to grow in that trust: But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles, they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint. That might just be a poetic way of saying the same thing three times - soar on wings, run and not grow weary, walk and not faint. But - I know what I'm like. You know the expression trying to run before you can walk? Well, when I am going through some tough time, and my faith seems weak, and I feel that God has let me down, what I want to do is to soar like an eagle. Now. But what I need to do is to learn to walk - and then I'll be able to start running. And then, when I have mastered running, I'll be able to soar.

We do live in an instant fix society - people want everything today. But Christian discipleship isn't a quick fix, it is a growing process. Do you want to soar on wings like eagles? Then first, make sure you can run. Do you want to run and not grow weary? Then first make sure you can walk. Ask the Lord to help you to trust him. Do those things that will help you to grow in your knowledge of the Lord and your trust in him. Walking might sound decidedly mundane compared to soaring, but it where you have to start.

When I got lost in Gillwell Park, there were 2 things I could have done - though I don't think that at the time I was thinking clearly enough to work that out. I could have gone off and tried to find the rest of my pack, rushing round the park till I found them - or I could wait there till someone came to find me. Fortunately someone there saw that I was looking a bit tearful, and kept me with them till rescue arrived. If I had gone off to look for the others - I might never have found them! I had to trust that they would find me.

Struggling with the hurts of life is something that at some time or another affects us all. As Isaiah says Even youths grow weary, and young men stumble and fall. And, of course, so do those of us who haven't been youths for a long time! But the promise is the same. Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. That renewed strength comes from remembering who God is - he is the everlasting God, he is the God who sustains. But we need to not just know that, we need to trust him, because it is in trusting him that our strength will be renewed. And we need to remember that that renewed strength will grow as we continue to learn of him, and to trust him more.