

Sermon: What do you see, woods or trees?

Reading: Acts 2:14a; 36-41
Psalm 121

Introduction.

There is an old saying which says, 'You can't see the wood for the trees' Meaning we can be so caught up in the detail of something we fail to notice what is important about the thing as a whole.

Jesus said something similar to the Pharisees when he said,
"You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel"
(Matthew 23:23).

We can become so caught up with the tiny things that we miss the big things which are more important.

Jesus comment would be really funny if it wasn't so serious. Jesus in saying this was calling the religious leaders blind guides, as they were so caught up picking holes in Jesus' ministry they are missed the obvious.

These Pharisees and religious teachers must have preached and taught many times about the coming Messiah. Ironically here they are speaking to the very One they have been waiting for and what are they doing - nitpicking, criticising and plotting against Him. They are so caught up in their own priorities and selfish agendas, they fail to recognise the very One they have long awaited.

Today there is so much anxiety, worry and panic in our communities over something so small we cant see it with the naked eye! Now please don't get me wrong, Im not trivialising the seriousness of what is happening, but wanting to make an important point about where our fear and hopes lie.

It's amazing how something so very small and unseen to the naked eye has caused havoc across the nations. Covid 19, has disrupted lives, communities and nations, almost overnight. Its incredible how something so small should cause a worldwide shut down.

Not only shutting down commerce and global trading, it has even brought most of our modern day idols to their knees. Entertainment is on hold, sports paused, celebrities discovering they are not immune, shops are closed, leisure centres are abandoned, holidays cancelled and city night life has ceased.

As Christians our hope is in One who is much greater. For our God cannot be silenced, shut down, locked down closed down or shut out, many have tried and failed. For the Kingdom of God is within us. The one in whom we have our hope also reveals to us where our worship and fears should truly be placed.

The Psalmist reminds us of our hope and whom to fear, the wonderful words.....

"I lift up my eyes to the hills, where does my help come from?

My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.

Indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night."

(Psalm 121)

When our world (lives) rock and shakes, we do cast our eyes down in discouragement but up to God, the maker of heaven and earth. When we lift up our eyes we begin to see something so amazing, so wonderful, we suddenly the landscape opening up as our eyes gaze upon God's creation.

Lifting our eyes above the hills we see the vastness of the skies and our hearts remind us, just how big is our God who created all of this. For our hope and faith is not in this world but in the very One who made this world. The Psalmist speaks about the created things, of the sun and moon.

Even though the sun is 93 million miles away from earth, its light is bright enough to blind us but its heat strong enough that over exposure can burn us.

Now here's a big thought to consider.....

God in whom we have our hope is the One who not only set the sun in its place but set it ablaze! How powerful, awesome and amazing is the creator of heaven and earth who can set the sun ablaze and when it is in his presence, the sun fades into insignificance compared to the brightness, glory and holiness of Almighty God. Now that is an awesome thought, when rightly understood should strike within us a sense of fear of ever standing before this God, which one day every one of us shall.

One of my favourite chapters in Scripture is taken from the book of Job. As you remember Job was a righteous man. The devil sought to test him and brought him through many trials and terrible experiences. Job doesn't lose his faith but requests an audience with Almighty God in order to confront Him about his troubles and why he should be allowed to suffer in these ways when he is a righteous man.

When we get to chapters 38, Job gets his audience with God and how he wishes he had kept his mouth shut. For God confronts Job who now realises he has spoken unwisely. God confronts Job and tells him to stand and be a man for God will now question him!

Job realises has been foolish and literally places his hand over his mouth to stop himself from saying anything else foolish. It's a great couple of chapters. Job realises, standing before the Lord God Almighty, creator of heaven and earth, Job is simply a man, part of the creation and recognises he is a fool.

So what's my point and what has any of this got to do with our reading today?
Well I'm glad you asked.

If nations and cultures today are living in anxiety and fear over something so small the eye cannot see it, then how much more should we fear the One who can stand in the presence of the sun on its brightest day and the sun is the one that will bow down and lose its brightness and fail to shine.

The writer of Proverbs is right echoing Job's thoughts that

'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'.
(Proverbs 9:10)

For God not only has the power to create worlds and galaxies by his very words and breath life into his creation with his very breath. But we also need to remember that all

authority and power has been given to Jesus (Matthew 28:18) and he is the one who holds the keys to death and Hades (Revelation 1:18). Jesus tells us,
'Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the
One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

(Matthew 10:28)

That puts things into perspective of whom we should fear!

Now we reach the importance of our reading today. Peter is no longer living fearfully shut up behind closed doors but is filled with the power from on High. He has received the promise of Jesus, the gift of the Holy Spirit. He throws open the door from where he has been locked away, living in fear and enters the busy street with boldness.

Peter does something most preachers only dream of. He preached a sermon that was so powerful that 3,000 souls were saved turning to Christ on that day.

What did Peter say to bring so many souls to a saving grace?

Read the passage again. Peter spoke of a prophecy in Joel which was being partially fulfilled (Acts 2:18) and then went on to speak about Jesus and all of the wonders He performed. And for all of His grace and wonders He was put to death with the help of wicked men and nailed to a cross. Peter showing all of this was foretold in the scriptures and then proclaims the Good News of the glorious resurrection.

When the people heard these words they were cut to the heart and cried out, 'What should we do?

Notice what Peter doesn't say.....

He doesn't say, start giving to charity and do good works

Attend a church service occasionally, it's only for an hour

Say this prayer and you will be saved.

So what did Peter say?

"Repent each one of you and be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit".

(Acts 2:38).

Repentance conjures up a negative reaction when we hear it preached. However this is such a beautiful word, as it brings about healing. Repentance is simply turning around from walking in one direction which is leading to destruction and return to the ways of God.

A Greater Fear

It's not the Covid virus which we should fear, at the time of writing the survival rate of catching this virus is almost 80% (according to government statistics).

There is however a killer in our world which more effective at taking life, the survival rate is 0%. So what is so powerful as to bring about death 100% of the time to all people? The answer is Sin. For the Scriptures tell us that the wages of sin is death, and as all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, therefore we need a saviour. Peter's sermon tells the people of the antidote which improves the survival rate from 0% to 100% for those who accept it and act upon it in repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

Sin is the worlds biggest killer. We should not fear a virus which can only kill the body but fear the one who can cast us into hell afterwards. Wisdom is the fear of the Lord and therefore we should make peace with the One who can offer me the chance of life and this Saviour has a name - Jesus Christ.

The Scripture has these wonderful words from Jesus,

'I am the resurrection and the life, says the Lord, whoever believes in me, even though they die, yet shall they live'

(John 11:25)

Summary

What do you see? Do you focus on the trees, on the small things, living in fear. If so then stop and look up cast your eyes not upon a tree but upon the One who planted the Amazon. Cast yourself upon Him who offers life.

Lets keep things in perspective and keep our eyes on Jesus, for He is indeed the lover of our souls and He will raise us up on the last day. So what do we really need to fear?

'For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.'

(Matthew 16:25)

Maybe thats why Christians in every age, in every kind of persecution, in every kind of distress have always had a hope which has brought them through. For their hope is in the One who can save and save to the uttermost. What a Saviour our Lord Jesus is indeed.

If you still need persuading, turn to Romans chapter 8 and be blessed by what you read.

God bless.

Rev. Ken Gowland

Ambassador of Christ