

Struggling

Driving back from the Tarbert Seafood Festival last week, my daughter Kirsty and son-in-law Kevin, were listening to their two boys having a conversation in the back seat of the car, as they journeyed round Loch Fyne, Jack is 4 and Harry is 6, The conversation went something like this.

Jack said, “Harry, did uncle Duncan build the sea”

Harry replied, “No Jack, it was God!”.

Jack instantly replied, “Did Uncle Duncan give God the instructions?”

Uncle Duncan, my younger brother, is involved in many building projects in and around Tarbert, and when the boys were down Kirsty was saying to them Uncle Duncan built this and that!

So, the seed was planted in Jack's mind that Uncle Duncan must be able to do almost anything, but Harry with a slightly more mature mind knew that building the sea was something that only God could do.

Back in the 11th century there was a famous theologian called St Anselm and he is credited with coming up with the phrase, *faith seeking understanding*.

That’s the journey that we are all on as Christians.

Whether we are a four-year-old trying to work out who built the sea or you are a theologian like the Apostle Paul grappling with eternal truths – our faith should always be seeking understanding.

The Apostle Paul is arguably the greatest Christian and theologian that ever lived. Without Paul and his understanding of Jesus, the Church may well have disappeared in the First Century. But through the Apostle's courage and vision, he took the Gospel message out into the foreign world of his time, the world that was known as Gentile, and he brought people to faith in Christ and he planted small house churches that like green shoots would take root, grow and spread.

So, when we consider this great man, the Apostle Paul, and what he achieved, one would imagine that the Apostle had no problems with his faith, and that life was simple and everything went his way.

But today in our lectionary readings, we discover something very different, we hear of the Apostle's struggles. He says that the things he wants to do he doesn't do and the things he shouldn't do, he does. Sounds like something my two young grandsons would discuss together.

Paul recognises an internal conflict within his soul. He writes, v24 "What an unhappy man I am!" In other translations, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is taking me to death?"

We can feel Paul's struggles. Theologians suggest that Paul is struggling with his Jewishness; he had been a teacher of the Jewish law before meeting with Christ, his life was transformed through God's grace, but yet he is not entirely free, there is a battle raging in his soul between law and grace.

Other theologians suggest that it's Paul's new found Christian faith and he is being attacked by his own selfish nature which Paul calls sin. Some see that the two things are working in his life to make him feel so wretched and so unhappy.

Whatever we may think Paul is struggling with – the reality is that he is in a deep inner battle and it is bringing him little joy.

I'm sure that if I went round the church today and asked you about personal struggles and battles in your life, each and every one of you would have your own story. You would tell me about different times in your life when you felt overwhelmed and the struggles were so great that you didn't know where to turn.

You could identify with the Apostle and say what an unhappy person I am.

But what I want us to notice is how the Apostle Paul deals with his struggles, depression, mental health, soul sickness, his inner battle, his struggles with sin.

Here we find Paul's faith seeking understanding...

We discover how he handles things. He cries out, "Who will rescue me from this body that is taking me to death?"²⁵ Thanks be to God, who does this through our Lord Jesus Christ!"

There is the answer! You see, he knows deep down that there is only one way out of this mess and that is to turn to our Lord Jesus Christ.

One of Scotland's finest ever preachers was Robert Murray McCheyne and he wrote, "Every look we take at ourselves, we should take ten looks at Christ".

There is the answer to our inner conflicts and our struggles.

That's what I want us to do now?

Matthew 11 v 28-30 – our Gospel reading this morning...

In the words of Jesus, "Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Those words change everything.

We have a God who is inviting us into relationship with him.

Jesus said come to me, not come to church, not come to a creed, not come to a minister but come to me...

It's an invitation to all who struggle in life, who don't know where to turn to. It's an invitation to all who struggle with their faith and their faith is in need of understanding. *Come to me*, said Jesus.

It's a message for everyone who feels weary and burdened, like the Apostle Paul. Are you in this category, do you feel burned out and tired and find life a struggle? Let's be honest, we all do at times....God invites you to himself to find rest for the journey.

But what is worth noticing, is that God is not taking the burden from us; he is simply inviting us to give our lives to Him and to allow Him to share in our burden.

Jesus uses the image of a yoke, a metaphor that would have been easily understood in the eyes of the First Century Jews.

Remember that Jesus was a carpenter and he would have made yokes, someone once joked, if he had a carpenter's shop, his advertising slogan could have been, "My yokes fit well".

Double yoked oxen was often used to plough the fields and that beautiful image of both oxen pulling together, working in harmony, sharing the burden of ploughing, working hard, and when we accept God's invitation, we find new

strength, from the fact that Jesus is with us on the journey, and if Jesus is with us, God is with us and the yoke fits well!

The Apostle Paul turns to God and as he bemoans his failings, he also looks up and says *thanks be to God who will rescue me through Jesus Christ*.

If you read the Apostle's letters you will discover that the reason for his faith which is Jesus Christ.

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in Heaven and on Earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities, all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Paul could say, I can do all things through Jesus Christ who gives me strength.

You see when he looked away from his own wretched life and looked to Jesus, it transformed him.

Back in OT times, the burdened people of Israel cry out for God and the prophet Isaiah says to them.

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.

²⁹ He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.

³⁰ Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;

³¹ 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.

Bear Grylls has become known worldwide as one of the most recognised faces of survival and outdoor adventure.

Despite breaking his back in three places, he became one of the youngest men to climb Everest.

He is a human motivator is also a committed Christian and patron of the Scouts. He taken some of the world's best known people on adventures – President Obama and world leaders. One of his adventures with Prime Minister Modi of India had 3.6 billion viewers. He has now written over 90 books.

In one of his recent books, *Don't Give Up*, he tells the story of how he wrote to a really sick young boy in hospital who asked him what faith was all about, as the boy was facing a frightening and uncertain future. This is what he wrote.

“Hey buddy, you are going to be OK and I’m here for you.

So, here we go.

Some people call faith a crutch. But what does a crutch do?

It helps us stand and it gives us a weapon to fight with. And as time goes on, there is no doubt that I need that strength inside me more and more, every day.

When it comes to quietly bowing the knee and asking for God's presence to bring me peace, to strengthen my spirit, and to lead me into light – well, I have nothing to lose, and everything to gain.

Faith, to me, has been the greatest empowerment in my life. Quiet, strong, personal...and it has never let me down.

There have been times of much doubt along the way for sure – but faith and doubt are simply two sides of the same coin. Doubts are just part of life. I just try to keep focused on the good stuff.

A few times I have walked away from faith completely. And I've survived, for a while – but, alone, I somehow never feel fully alive. Time, and many adventures, have taught me that I need the life-giving presence that Christ provides.

Faith is a point of awareness. And I believe it to be the starting point of all true adventure.

So often faith in a higher power or God, or whatever we call it, has been strength to a failing body and light to a dark path.

That presence is much more than a crutch. It's a backbone.

"As I once saw written on a small wooden cross in a small mountain chapel; 'Christ beside me. Christ within me. Christ to shield me. Christ to win me.'

"Sometimes, I hold on to just that thought alone, and it helps me through the day." Beautiful words from Bear Grylls.

The Apostle Paul, Bear Grylls and countless Christians have all held onto that thought when going through struggles and troubled times, who will rescue me? who will help me? and they all instinctively know that their help comes from God's son Jesus who is indeed beside them, within them, and who will shield them, and bring them through the darkness of the soul into the light of God.

Friends, today be encouraged that even the greatest of Christians go through times of struggle, but they know that in these times, there is one whom they can depend on and one who rescues them and helps them.

Today take one look at yourself, and ten looks at Jesus, and your faith will be strengthened and your burdens will be shared.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

Amen