The Swiss Church in London

Audio Service 20 June 2021

**Welcome**

“Heureux sont vos yeux parce qu'ils voient, et vos oreilles parce qu'elles entendent! Je vous le dis en vérité, beaucoup de prophètes et de justes ont désiré voir ce que vous voyez et ne l'ont pas vu, entendre ce que vous entendez et ne l'ont pas entendu.” (Mathieu 13:16-17)

“Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.”

“Glückselig sind eure Augen, dass sie sehen, und eure Ohren, dass sie hören! Denn wahrlich, ich sage euch: Viele Propheten und Gerechte haben zu sehen begehrt, was ihr seht, und haben es nicht gesehen, und zu hören, was ihr hört, und haben es nicht gehört.“

Dear parishoners, dear friends, dear sisters and brothers in Christ

There are many prophets in this world who claim to know the truth. They claim to know the truth and belittle others by saying that their faith wasn’t mature enough to understand. They claim that their teaching is the truth. We can meet these self-proclaimed prophets everywhere: in politics, in the internet, in religion, and in our social circles.

None of us human beings own the truth, or perhaps we do, together, each one of us a glimpse of it. The mysterious truth of life is like a giant jigsaw puzzle and each one of us holds a tiny little piece to add to the full picture. We depend on each other to grow spiritually. We need to share what we know the insights we hold, to understand more fully the meaning of life and God’s plan for us.

Some of the greatest leaders in the history of Christianity got it wrong and were seduced by the thought that they know it all, believing that they hold all the pieces of the jigsaw. We will hear of one of those leaders today: Apostle Paul, who was surprised and saddened when suddenly others came forward with their own ideas and doubted his leadership.

We are all leaders in faith, and by trusting in each other’s leadership and wisdom we will grow closer to God.

“Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.”

Let us pray.

**Opening Prayer**

Loving God

Open our ears to your word as we are gathered before you in our homes. Send your holy spirit into our living rooms so we may feel connected with you and with one another in this often confusing and fast changing world. Be our rock, be our light of hope, the quiet harbour that we can always return to.

Shower us with your peace, now in this very moment. Shower us with wisdom and confidence.

Gracious God, you have called us to be leaders in faith, each with their own unique talents. Let this be a moment to reconnect with ourselves. Give us the strength to believe in ourselves and to become the person we are meant to be, beautiful in your eyes.

Plant in us forgiveness, patience and humility so we may always make space for others to inspire and shape this world.

In the name of your son Jesus Christ

Amen

**Reading 2 Corinthians 3:1-6**

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

**Sermon**

Apostle Paul is in trouble. One of the most significant early Christian communities, the Corinthians, doubt his leadership. He is no longer the undisputed leader. Whether the criticism was fuelled from within or from people outside the community we can’t quite tell, but Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians paints a clear picture of his struggles. Paul is on the defense. He defends the way he speaks and writes and teaches, and he feels as if he had to apply for the leadership role all over again. Clearly, his authority as an apostle is under scrutiny. The fact that he is far away from the community and that travelling is not at all easy probably makes him feel rather powerless, as if losing control, and Paul does not like the feeling of losing control.

The relationship between Paul and the Christians in Corinth goes back a long way. Paul had spent 18 months with them before travelling onwards. From his first letter we can tell that Paul is a confident and trusted leader, even from afar. Passionately he explains the meaning of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the practical consequences for our lives as Christ’s disciples. But then in the second letter the tone changes quite dramatically. He speaks of a “painful” second visit, an experience he doesn’t wish to repeat. He tries to make a case for himself, to promote himself, win back the confidence of his sisters and brothers. After all, they are his family, they are his social circle, his friends. The thought of losing his place makes him anxious and tearful – hence we also call this letter the “letter of tears”.

I can understand Paul’s pain. His family are his brothers and sisters in the Christian communities that were popping up all over the Roman Empire. Like him, they followed in the footsteps of Christ. Paul dedicated his whole life to his mission and preached the Gospel wherever he went. He was determined to get across his interpretation of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. At the beginning, it all went quite well. Paul was the respected leader. His word had weight. But as the Christian communities grew more confident and knowledgeable, they also grew more independent, whilst Paul was cut off from them. Traveling wasn’t easy at the time. It took a lot of organising to getting around and Paul’s journeys to the Christian communities were long and exhausting. He missed out on their day-to-day life. Nothing can replace the personal contact to nurture and fuel relationships. So, when Paul returned to Corinth for his second visit, he was surprised to find an emancipating community who had their own ideas and found inspiration from other sources.

Family and friends’ reunions don’t always go the way we anticipate or hope for, especially with geographical distance and long stretches of time in between. In the meantime, every person carries on with their daily life, following certain routines, finding inspiration in new places and people. Our individual circumstances shape us in different ways. We also tend to romanticise the lifestyles of others and how life has played out for them, and we are surprised to hear when the reality is different from what we imagine. Secretly we hope that things will always be the same, always be there for us, statically waiting for us on our return. But life moves on, nothing ever stays the same and we move on with life. It’s like going to a school reunion and expecting everyone to behave in the same way, cracking the same jokes, laughing over shared memories, just to discover that we have become different people and we have to redefine our common ground.

If Paul were a religious leader today, his leadership style would probably be described as toxic. He cemented his authority by declaring the people he was leading as immature in faith. He also failed to elevate other people to visible positions and put his trust in them. Paul did not like to delegate or share leadership. He shunned people who did not follow the party line. His toxic leadership style was his downfall. He thought he was always going to be the undisputed class representative, and that his brothers and sisters were waiting for him to come back to inspire and lead and encourage them. Paul thought that it was his role alone to prepare his brothers and sisters to become good Christians and to follow the correct interpretation of Christ’s teaching – his interpretation.

Yet this is not how things work. Inspiration comes from various sources. God’s spirit blows wherever it wants. Communities excel when they are open for new developments and ideas and when they acknowledge that there are different interpretations of God’s word and that they can and should be debated. Good leadership is shared leadership. Good leadership encourages emancipation. Good leadership consists of mutual trust and empowerment.

Paul was not that kind of leader. He struggled to give up control. He saw other opinion-makes as adversaries rather than a source of inspiration. His brothers and sisters however were inspired by other ideas. The Holy Spirit spoke to them in many different ways, and they were brave enough to listen and shake up the toxic system created by Paul. Of course, Paul’s teachings expressed in his letters will always be a crucial pillar of Christianity, and we can’t acknowledge enough the role Paul played in furthering the Gospel. Yet Paul’s shortcomings as a leader should also be reminder that churches are a place for debate and ideas, for growth and change, and that the truth is ultimately in God’s hands, and not in ours.

Learning to let go and to trust in God’s mysterious way is a lifelong process, at times painful, at times liberating, yet always worthwhile. The Spirit of the living God is not written on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts, passionate, loving, spirited, expanding and contracting with the rhythm of our heartbeat. *“Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.”*

Amen

**Prayers of Intercession**

Loving God, you are the source of light in the darkness of hardship: We pray that as we struggle to navigate this world, we may always find in you our guide and our strength. We commend ourselves to you, o God, because without you we are but lost. Kyrie eleison

We pray for the world, for all those places that are troubled by divisions and conflict, and for their leaders. Liberating God, help us and them to strive for what is right and quell what is divisive. Grant peace, unity, and love to the world, so that we may all rejoice in your presence.

We pray for our communities, in Covent Garden, the UK, Switzerland, and wherever we have come from and moved to. Help us sustain, o God, our bonds with one another, and remind us all that, though we may be apart, yet we are all together with your spirit.

We pray for all those whom we know and need our prayers, for the sick and distressed, for the bereaved and the lonely, and for any who have no one who prays for them. Help us recognize, o God, all the times we have strained our relationships of love for what we may have said or done and bring us closer to those whom we may have wronged. And in silence we offer our own prayers.

Amen