**22nd September 2013**

**Psalm 136**

**Philippians 4.10-20**

Thank you for your gifts for the Food bank. I can assure you that they will be put to good use. Since April there has been an 88% increase in demand for the Food bank. It is sadly meeting a real need in our community. I have been moved and humbled by meeting some people who have been recipients of food parcels and they have been so grateful and thankful that the churches have organised this. I have been very moved when some individuals who have been recipients of food have come back to the food bank with donations of food as an expression of thankfulness.

There is something of grace going on here. We had a Trustees meeting of the Stroud district Foodbank yesterday morning. Trustees from the four centres, Dursley, Wotton, Stroud and Stonehouse met and discussed the vision and future of the foodbank in the company of the revd Stephen Gaukroger a former national moderator of the Baptist Union and high profile Christina speaker and writer. Stephen said how the work of the Foodbnanks was drawing churches together in a combined work of grace and compassion. He likened it to then early church where Christians gave food away to the amazement of the surrounding society. Apparently if you were put in prison in roman times no one fed you unless family came to your assistance. If you were away from home or had no family you could literally starve to death in prison. There are accounts that early Christians shocked their surrounding society by visiting complete strangers in prison and gave them food. Jesus of course commends this in the gospels. Stephen gaukroger suggested that the organisation of the church was the only organisation so deeply embedded in the community and so widespread and desiring do acts of compassion that could have responded in this way. The church has given an outlet and framework for other people of goodwill to express compassion.

For all this we can give thanks – that others can share in good gifts around us. In this world of great inequalities, where you can be paralysed by the need around us, Foodbanks have been a very practical response to real need. You can’t do everything, but you can do something. Please keep on doing something.

it seemed appropriate that at this time of harvest when we give thanks for all good gifts around us, for the food on our tables and those who produce it, that the Liberal democrats announced at their conference this week that the coalition government would fund free school meals for those in the infants. Naturally there has been a variety of opinions about the policy. I have asked my wife who is a teacher in the infant department at her school to see whether she would be entitled to any leftovers – I’m sure there will be plenty of greens and fruit leftover – every little helps. I only hope that they will include those classics of school diners that were on the menu when I was that age. Semolina pudding, Tapioca, prunes and custard, jam roly ploy with full fat suet. It is what nostalgia is all about!



The news of this policy came out at the same time that there were a number of news items about children who had been starved to death by callous parents. There had been a failure of caring agencies to protect these vulnerable children resulting in their horrendous deaths. Social workers had been criticised for adopting the rule of optimism – accepting at face value what parents tell them and believing that no parent would harm their child. The cases were salient reminders that parents can harm their children.

Some didn’t even feed them. At least a free school meal will be some measure to ensure some nutrition to those who are most at risk.

Parents don’t always love their children. The bible passage which is the focus for today reassures us that God’s love endures forever, god’s love never fails. The Hebrew word for “love” is hesed.  
  
The meaning is loving kindness or grace.  
  
It is used over 240 times in the Old Testament and is almost always linked with the concept of mercy.   
  
Three key aspects of the original word:  
1) strength  
2) steadfastness  
3) love  
  
A continuous theme in the nature of God is love. The entire history of God’s covenantal relationship with Israel is summarized by hesed. It is one permanent element in the covenant history of Israel.  
  
The original Hebrew word hesed is used in connection with other words to give it deeper meaning and texture.   
  
The word most commonly used in scripture to define God’s love means fidelity or reliability.  
  
God’s love for us is never going to waver or fail.  
  
God is always devoted to us.

The critique of intellectuals such as Feuerbach. Marx and Freud suggested that religion was infantile – we are so insecure that we need to project a divine father figure to control us and look after us and contain our hysteria. Those ideas have been very influential in forming society’s opinion of religion and church as something that is for children and weak people or is oppressive and controlling. As you know we try to do grown up religion in this church – we ask questions at the same time as declaring faith. We try to balance optimism with realism whilst hopefully avoiding pessimism.

Does the rule of optimism hold when we think of god. Does God’s love never fail?

Or are we being naive?

Inevitably people’s life experiences will colour their understanding and experience of God. Because of what has happened to them some people may have a very pessimistic view of God. That God is out to get them, to bring down bad things on their lives. Other people may be over optimistic about God, believing him to be some sort of Father Christmas and that the world should be full of sweetness and light and nothing will ever go wrong. And if it does then faith in that God disappears in a puff of disillusionment.

We live in a difficult world of beauty and horror. Nature red in tooth and claw.

The line comes from Alfred Lord Tennyson's In Memoriam A. H. H., 1850.:

Who trusted God was love indeed  
And love Creation's final law  
Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw  
With ravine, shriek'd against his creed

the poet used the elegy to pose questions about the apparent conflict between love as the basis of the Christian religion and the callousness of nature. If nature is purposeless and heartless, how can we believe in creation's final law? But, as a Christian, how could he not?

The wide-ranging poem didn't attempt to provide an answer, but did become part of the debate over the major scientific and theological concern of Victorian thinkers - Charles Darwin's theories on natural selection, as expressed in The Origin of Species, 1859. On into the 20th century, the enthusiastic Darwinist Richard Dawkins used 'red in tooth and claw' in The Selfish Gene, to summarize the behaviour of all living things which arises out of the survival of the fittest doctrine.

Psalm 136 is a psalm that was used in the ancient Jewish worship as they ascended the hill to the temple area. It was associated very closely with the Feast of the Passover celebrating the Jewish release from slavery in Egypt. We looked at the Passover last week and how we may understand it today.

The psalm is biblical poetry -those going to Windermere will discover more about this. There is a reiterated refrain which can sound monotonous to us. It was probably for antiphonal chanting, either between a soloist and the choir or priest and people. It is a hymn of praise to God. The first part is to praise God as the Creator.

“Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His love endures forever.   
Give thanks to the God of gods. His love endures forever.   
Give thanks to the Lord of lords: His love endures forever.  
To him who alone does great wonders, His love endures forever.   
Who by his understanding made the heavens, His love endures forever.   
Who spread out the earth upon the waters, His love endures forever.   
Who made the great lights—His love endures forever.   
The sun to govern the day, His love endures forever.   
The moon and stars to govern the night; His love endures forever

As I have already suggested in the poem from Tennyson, creation has its own laws that god seems to have set inpacve. Sometimes sufferings and tragedies occur. We had the tragedy last week of the road accident by Sandpits in which a young man still lies critically ill possibly paralysed if he recovers. In this world there is freedom and tragedies can happen. Can we still say that God’s love never fails?

We stopped our reading at verse 9 – very sanitised. The next verse reads:

To him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt His love endures forever.   
Does God love endure for those Egyptians who grieved over their firstborn? There is praise for God as deliverer from evil and slavery and oppression – but like any war there are casualties in the cause of freedom.

Abraham Lincoln famously said, "My concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side." That was probably the most important thing about religion ever said by an American president. Presidents and other politicians usually want to claim that God is on their side, their country's side, and even their political policy's side.

But Lincoln had it right. One of the biggest problems with religion is that people, institutions, and nations—all of our human "sides"—tend to try to claim God's favor. When people are sure they're right, they confidently say that God agrees with them. Claims of divine blessing for human behavior—often brutal behavior—have always undermined the integrity and credibility of religion. The much harder task, and the more important one, is to ask how to be on God's side. That often means changing our minds and hearts and taking on a new perspective. The Bible calls this "conversion"—

I know in my life I can veer from being a pessimist to being an optimist. Most of the time I try to be a realist. But I think faith can veer to the rule of optimism as far as God goes. Despite appearances to the contrary I believe you can respond ‘god’s love endures for ever. God’s love never fails. There will be blips and discouragements, even tragedies. The world is a battleground, it is red in tooth and claw, it is ravaged by sin and evil, yet good is prevalent too and there are echoes of grace. But the world is not what we should look at. For Christians we must always keep our eyes n Jesus. Our central claim is that is what god is truly like, if God took flesh. Anything else is philosophical speculation. This is the word made flesh – one who came to bring life and freedom, to love not to hate, to bless not to curse, to forgive not to condemn. Having seen the life of Jesus St Paul is able to claim in Romans 8 that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Je4sus, neither afflictions, persecutions, tragedies, sufferings, death nor life.

God’s love endures forever, god’s love never fails.

In his letter to the Philippians at the end of his life, as he waits ion a prison cell to be executed for his witness to Jesus Christ ‘I know what it is to have nothing, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have been thoroughly initiated into fullness and hunger, plenty and poverty. I am able to face anything through him who gives me strength.

There was an amazing story of the news the other day about a homeless man in Boston, in the United states Glen James, 54, spoke to police after he found a backpack containing $2,400 (£1,500) in cash and nearly $40,000 (£25,000) in traveller's cheques at the South Bay Mall.

The man who lost the backpack told workers at a nearby store and they called police, who later returned the backpack to him.

Virginia resident Ethan Whittington read media accounts of Mr James' honesty and started a fund for him on a crowd-funding website.

The fund has since raised more than $100,000, including $182 (£114) of pocket money saved up by two young children.

The Boston Police Department publicly thanked Mr James, saying his actions were "a remarkable tribute to him and his honesty".

Mr James said in a statement: "Even if I were desperate for money, I would not have kept even a penny of the money I found.

"I am extremely religious. God has always very well looked after me."

I think there is a man who would full well sing this psalm ‘God’s love endures for ever’.